

Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes
Jan. 8, 2013
Fort Peck Hatchery

CAC members present: Mark Peterson, Terry Stoppa, Connie Iversen, Jason Holt, Steve Schindler, Henry Gordon, Jim Carver, Carla Hunsley, Bernie Hart, Mark Azure

CAC members absent: Steve Harada, Bob Waldron, Bryce Christensen

FWP staff present: Mike Herman, Mark Sullivan, Steve Dalbey, Heath Headley, Drew Henry, Ron Selden

Guests: Aaron Johnson, Fort Peck station manager, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR); Patrick McGuinness, St. Marie hunter and angler.

Dalbey welcomed new member Mark Azure, director of the Fort Belknap Tribal Fish & Game Department. Open R6 staff positions were reviewed, and the state's vacancy savings policy was explained.

Dalbey noted that the FWP Commission recently approved the 10-year statewide fisheries management plan. He also reviewed findings from the latest Upper Missouri River basin snowpack surveys.

Headley presented data from 2012 Fort Peck Reservoir sampling. At least 12 feet of reservoir level was lost between last summer and now, he said, which could result in adverse impacts to a number of different fisheries this year.

Cisco production was very poor in 2012, Headley said, but yellow perch production continues to be very high. Last year was one of the highest netting surveys ever for walleye.

For 2013, expect walleye and northern pike populations to be near all-time highs again, he said. But also expect a continuing decline in water levels.

Johnson asked whether the aquatic invasive plant Eurasian watermilfoil provides good nesting and rearing cover. Headley agreed that it did, but only up to a point because it get can get so thickly matted at the height of summer.

Sullivan went over the timelines and procedures for setting big game quotas each year. Hart said he's still concerned that Region 6 is selling too many white-tailed deer licenses, especially for does.

Stoppa asked if antelope licenses will be decreased any further because of the recent private land closures north of Havre. Sullivan said that there is still plenty of access for antelope hunters in HD 600, so that will not be a factor.

Peterson asked how predator numbers fit into the big game season-setting process. He said folks in the Bears Paw Mountains report seeing fewer and fewer deer each year, potentially due to an increase in mountain lions and other predators.

Sullivan said predator impacts show up during annual game population surveys, when actual numbers of animals are counted. Holt noted that low deer numbers prompt shrubs and other vegetation to thrive.

Sullivan and Henry also presented details of the upcoming elk study in the Missouri River Breaks.

Dalbey gave updates on several recent and pending FWP land acquisitions, including the Milk River Ranch property northwest of Havre. A long discussion followed.

Selden gave a brief overview of pending legislative bills related to fish, wildlife and land issues.

FWP PROGRAM UPDATES

Region 6 program managers submitted written updates to members prior to the meeting. Holt said it will be good to get some hard data from the elk study, because there's a lot of conjecture about where the animals go and how much they're using private lands versus public lands.

Holt also suggested that FWP contact area ranchers to determine their stock turn-out dates. He said that's because some past research has indicated that elk follow domestic cows around fairly frequently in some areas. He added that it would be good if FWP could conduct the study for longer than the planned two years.

Holt asked about the use of hatchery-raised pallid sturgeons that are used to augment natural stocks. He asked whether the survey methods FWP currently employs give solid population estimates. Headley said they do. The department also uses computer modeling to help determine actual numbers.

Holt also had several questions about the testing of former Yellowstone National Park bison on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and related bison losses from last summer's wildfire.

CAC ROUNDTABLE

Steve Schindler, Glasgow – He'd still like to see elk licenses in Hunting District 620 also be valid in HD 680 and would like the CAC to issue its support for this proposal. He said bighorn sheep hunting used to include several different districts in the area, and he'd also like to see that offered again. Sullivan said he'd discuss these topics with FWP biologists and other staff.

Jim Carver, Malta – Fishing was excellent all fall in Nelson Reservoir and on Fort Peck Reservoir. Lots of anglers and lots of fish were caught. He noted that every campsite at Fourchette Bay was being used on the first day of the big game hunting season. He asked if it would be possible to build an overflow parking area at the top of Reynolds Hill. Johnson said the site is run by the Army Corps of Engineers, not by CMR staff. But he'll ask his counterparts about the idea since it's within the refuge.

Carver said there seems to be a lot of cow elk being harvested that didn't have calves with them at the time or were dry.

Bernie Hart, Hinsdale – It was a fair-to-good year for pheasants in his area. White-tailed deer numbers are still way down, however, and lots of folks in the Hinsdale and Saco area still wonder why FWP is selling so many deer licenses.

Connie Iversen, Culbertson – The Bakken oil boom is causing a lot more traffic in her area. With that comes lots of folks shooting all the game they see. There's definitely an increase in the number of dead animals along the roads. Some landowners are putting no-gun restrictions on their oil and gas leases.

Hart asked if FWP has gotten more wardens to help deal with the increase in activity. Sullivan said there hasn't been any money for any new hires, wardens or otherwise. He added that habitat fragmentation is one of the biggest impacts from increased oil and gas activity.

White-tailed deer numbers are still down, Iversen said. There are lots of cottonwood saplings from the 2011 flooding. They create good wildlife habitat. They're also seeing a lot more eagles this year, both bald and golden.

Terry Stoppa, Havre – Quite a few folks in the Havre area are still concerned about the Milk River Ranch sale, and FWP is going to have some work ahead of it repairing relations with some of the local landowners who have closed their lands to hunting. He praised FWP wardens for doing a "great" job. But, he added, "we need more of them."

Stoppa asked why there never seems to be any jail time imposed in game-violation cases. When he was a justice of the peace, he'd hand out jail time whenever he could in these types of cases. Overall, he'd like to see harsher sentences for all fish and game violations.

Schindler said the costs of misdemeanor fines aren't a deterrent for a lot of people, especially outfitters. It's up to local people to elect good local judges, he said.

Mark Peterson, Havre – There have been three sightings of swift foxes in his area this year, including one dead on a road. A lynx was also spotted. Deer appear to be coming back a little, but the overall numbers are still low.

Peterson had questions about FWP hunting licenses for disabled military veterans. Herman explained the program and sent Peterson the Montana code descriptions.

Henry Gordon, Chinook – He sponsors about 15 hunters on his land each year. He saw almost no game anywhere during a recent range tour that went all the way to the Canadian border. That’s very unusual. He added that there were a lot of road hunters last fall. Pheasant numbers are still good after the 2012 season.

Carla Hunsley, Fort Peck – It was good to see Chinook salmon in the Duck Creek area this fall. That popular fishery brings people in. She’s glad FWP is considering a new potential fishing access site at the mouth of the Redwater River.

She’d also like to see the state parks program be formally reinstated in Region 6. The area is increasing in population, but we only have one state park. We also need other new types of outdoor recreation to be made available to folks – visitors and residents alike.

Mark Azure, Harlem – They also saw a big drop in whitetail numbers on the Fort Belknap Reservation, but not so much with mule deer. Their elk season open’s before the state season and runs until Jan. 31 each year. About 90 percent of their hunting is subsistence.

There are many coyotes on the reservation. Bird populations are good, and bird hunting licenses provide important revenue for the tribes. There isn’t enough money, though, to hire their own biologists. One idea being looked at is to potentially share biologists with other area reservations.

He gave an update on the Fort Belknap tribal buffalo herd and efforts being made to improve pasture fences. The tribes also recently received a grant for an eagle aviary. Azure also explained the “marginal” lands issue off the reservation as it pertains to tribal member hunting.

Jason Holt, Hinsdale – The CMR is drafting a memorandum of understanding with the Bureau of Land Management over BLM water developments. The BLM’s local resource advisory council will discuss this issue later this month in Lewistown. These ponds are important for waterfowl and amphibians, he said.

Holt agreed with Stoppa that FWP needs to do a lot of fence-mending when it comes to landowner relations. He added that he thinks the new administration should issue a formal apology for the past FWP “screw-ups” of trying to push wild bison on the landscape when locals don’t want them and buying the Milk River Ranch.

“There are a lot of relationships that have been damaged out here,” Holt said. “We’ve been ignored, and it’s just not right.”

The next CAC meeting is set for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on June 11 at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Please submit suggested agenda items to either Steve Dalbey or Ron Selden.

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