
MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Montana Wild Outdoor Education Center
Helena, MT
December 9 and 10, 2013 (Meeting 16)

Attendance was down due to extreme winter conditions.

Advisory Council members present: Joe Perry (Chair), Joe Ball, Jay Gore, Gordon Haugen, Dustin Ramoie, Craig Roberts, and Dale Tribby.

FWP staff: Steve Atwood, Debbie Hohler, Quentin Kujala, Ken McDonald, Ray Mule', Rick Northrup, Mark Sullivan, Graham Taylor, Mike Thompson, Jay Watson, Catherine Wightman and Ryan Williamson.

Members of the Public: Dan Bailey, Pat Howe, Wayne Schottler, and Randy Pearson

Monday, December 9.

1. Joe called the meeting to order at 8:00 am.

- * Two new members were appointed to the Council: Dustin Ramoie, East Helena, and Dr. Joe Ball, Charlo. Council members, FWP staff, and the audience introduced themselves. Joe informed the Council that the director appointed Senator Llew Jones, (R) SD 14, Conrad, to the UGBEP CAC. Senator Jones was unable to attend this meeting because of a prior commitment.
- * Jay Gore moved to accept the April 2013 meeting minutes as presented. Dale Tribby seconded. All approved - motion carried.

2. Legislative update to the Council. [McDonald]

- * HB 170 was passed (3-day nonresident upland game bird license). A table provided by the Licensing Unit shows Upland Bird Licenses sold 2011 through 2013. The table does not include any upland bird licenses sold as part of a combination license (see page 2 below).
- * A bill drafted by Sen. Fielder would have stopped all transplants. This bill died in standing committee but would have impacted pheasant releases and wild turkey transplants.
- * The legislature clearly didn't support the department buying land. Habitat Montana and overall habitat conservation effort were challenged by various bills (not passed).
- * Last week the governor announced the members appointed to the Private Lands /Public Wildlife (PL/PW) council. Joe Perry is serving as the chair and FWP Commissioner Stuker is the vice-chair.

- * The governor also appointed members to the Sage-grouse Habitat Conservation Advisory Council. Jay Gore also serves on the council. Public comment on the draft strategy closed Dec. 4.
- * Sen. Brenden has drafted a bill for the 2015 session to prevent hunting of sage-grouse.
- * It's possible to see more bills drafted to prevent acquisition of conservation easements or fee title. If enacted, these bills could impact UGBEP because up to \$100,000 of UGBEP funds may be spent on easements.

Upland Bird Licenses Sold 2011-2013*			
	2011	2012	2013
Resident Upland Bird Adult	25,466	26,011	26,554
Resident Upland Bird Youth	1,209	1,304	1,283
Total Resident	28,686	29,327	29,850
Nonresident Upland Bird Season	5,568	6,373	5,090
Nonresident Upland Bird Youth	99	126	142
Nonresident Upland Bird 3 day	0	0	1,805
Nonresident Upland Bird 3 day Shooting Preserve	568	526	469
Nonresident Native Upland Bird Season	0	418	591
Total Nonresident	6,235	7,443	8,097
Total	34,921	36,770	37,947

*These totals do not include any of the combination/sportsman licenses.

3. Brief history of UGBEP and functions and responsibilities of the UGBEP Advisory Council. [Northrup]

1987: UGBEP began as a pheasant release program.

1989: Program diversified, more money went to habitat enhancement.

2001: Changes in rule requiring cooperator contribution (in-kind or financial)

2002-2003: UGBEP council formed to address all things upland game bird, including regulations, management, etc. Craig Roberts was the chair.

2005: A smaller council was formed. Dr. Ball, Craig, and Senator Ed Smith were members.

1999-2009: A 15% administrative cap was in effect. It was difficult to attain full program potential with no dedicated staff in place.

2009: Legislative session came on heels of a legislative performance audit. The audit had fundamental recommendations:

- Remove administrative cap
- Department to work with a citizen-led advisory council to (1) help develop a long-term strategic plan, which was completed in July 2012, and (2) continue to monitor department's work.

2012: The UGBEP Strategic Plan was finalized and put into implementation. The council now meets 2x a year (spring and fall). During the spring meeting, the council advises the department on work plan priorities. For the fall meeting, the department provides the council with the year's accomplishments.

4. Statewide summary of FY13 budget and accomplishments. FY13 = July 1, 2012 through June 30, 2013 [Hohler]

- * FY13 Budget information: The beginning balance of UGBEP funds in FY13 was \$3,188,244. The balance at the close of FY13 was \$3,187,811. When including unobligated funds at the end of FY13, the ending balance was \$3,044,233.
- * FY13 Pheasant Release: A total of 8,981 pheasants were released in Regions 4, 6, and 7. Total expenditures were \$79,568.
- * FY13 Habitat projects initiated: The UGBEP obligated \$119,125 for a combined total of 76 habitat enhancement projects that comprised over 10,386 project acres. New projects consisted of food plots, nesting cover, Open Fields for Game Bird Hunter sites, and shelterbelts. As a result of these projects, approximately 56,359 acres of land was opened to public upland game bird hunting, providing for an estimated 9,245 hunter-days of hunting opportunity.
- * Habitat Forever – Denton: The UGBEP contributed \$56,761 to enhance 139 acres on 30 project sites that provided a combined total of 10,868 acres of public access for upland game bird hunting.
- * Habitat Forever – Billings: The UGBEP contributed \$40,160 to enhance 291 acres on 31 project sites that provided a combined total of 4,830 acres of public access for upland game bird hunting.

5. Statewide summary of field season accomplishments based on the 2013 calendar year. [Hohler]

- * **2013 (FY14) Pheasant Releases:** 8,652 pheasants were released; \$75,452 expended.
- * **UGBEP Habitat projects (since January 1, 2013):** 58 contracts totally 7,957 project acres encompassing 57,752 access acres that offer approximately 14,000 annual hunter-days.
- * **Open Fields:** 42 new contract, conservation of 5871 CRP acres, and a total of 16,507 acres open to public hunting. Total expenditure in 2013 (FY14) was \$244,820.

6. UGBEP Database summary. [Hohler]

One of the many duties Kristina performs is to check and reconcile UGBEP contracts with the program database. Out of 2,045 UGBEP contracts, Kristina has checked 1,210 habitat contracts, including 952 expired contracts. Nearly 737 expired pheasant release contracts still need checked. Other duties have commanded much of Kristina's time, but these contracts will be reviewed and entered at a later date. **Council advised the department to develop a position statement on the current status of the database.**

7. Region 4 UGBEP accomplishments. [Taylor]

- * Graham provided insight into Diane's position, which included 7 counties (about 150-mile radius). Experience shows that the most effective workload occurred in a 50-mile radius. Not for a lack of trying, the number of project acres has been waning.
- * Much of Diane's time in 2013 was spent monitoring existing contracts (~ 47), marketing, and organizing tours.
- * Other upland game bird enhancement efforts in R4 include 3 conservation easements (UGBEP contributed funding), and developing a proposal for an additional easement acquisition.
- * Open Fields comments: CRP is dwindling, and this program has been beneficial. At the same time, 2 months of Open Fields consumes 2 months of work to get other projects on the ground. Noted that there were no applications coming from Fergus County.

8. Habitat Forever – Denton accomplishments. [Roberts]

- * Craig provided an overview of the project maintenance occurring on Coffee Creek, Wolf Creek, and Beckman WMA. The Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever provides most of the equipment for project maintenance.

9. Habitat Forever – Billings and UGBEP accomplishments. [Watson, Mule']

- * Jay provided an overview of the project maintenance activities conducted on BLM Pompeys Pillar and Yellowstone WMA. Habitat efforts have ceased on Sundance Lodge because of the high diversity of recreational use. There has been a great deal of support from the Billings Rod & Gun club and the Yellowstone Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever.
- * Ray provided an overview of work done on Forest Service lands in Red Lodge. In addition to other conservation groups, the UGBEP has contributed funds for habitat work to benefit primarily ruffed grouse.
- * Ray updated the Council with the research done on evaluating sage-grouse and grazing strategies. The UGBEP has contributed 3% of the annual budget for the past 3 years (\$14,000 annually).

10. Region 6 UGBEP accomplishments. [Williamson]

- * Ryan provided an overview of projects contracted in 2013. Noted that there more food plots planned, however some landowners withdrew their interest so that they could farm instead. Based on discussions with the Road Department, the Sheridan County MOU will likely not have any work for the next few years. The primary reason is shortage of staff and impacts from the oil fields.

11. Region 7 UGBEP accomplishments. [Atwood]

- * Steve provided an overview to the Council on the work currently on the ground (e.g., grazing system) and projects with PF chapters working on establishment. Open Fields has been quite successful on R7 and helps to expand future opportunities for habitat projects.

12. Farm Bill Positions. [Northrup]

- * Rick provided other Farm Bill related accomplishments. There are 4 positions dedicated to implementing the Sage-grouse Initiative. Funding comes from a multitude of partners:
 - o Glasgow, Malta, and Forsythe (funded by Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) and FWP)
 - o Dillon (funded by NRCS and FWS)
- * 2 Wetland Conservation positions in Great Falls and Bozeman focus on advanced conservation easements through the Farm Bill (funded by Ducks Unlimited and FWP).

13. PF/UGBEP role in improving public lands. [Bailey]

Dan pointed out that Montana is becoming a destination spot for upland game bird hunters. Potential areas for enhancement work in public lands have been identified through the Montana State Land Trust Pheasant Enhancement model. There are other opportunities also on fishing access sites and other FWP-managed lands. To reach its full potential, Ninepipe WMA needs additional workers. It is also the same scenario for the Habitat Forever work in Billings. Dan provided a map of Farm Bill Biologist (FBB) positions throughout the US. Montana does not have any FBB, and PF would like to revisit this area with the department. Rick pointed out that there are functionally FBB positions in the MACD positions. FBB cannot do work on private lands. PF would also support work done on sage-grouse habitats.

Gordon asked if the department would consider a large proposal in the next 2 years.

Department noted that a contractor with the State cannot use state-owned equipment.

Joe Perry asked Dan to come up with specifics –while also working with the department - and bring a plan to the Council. Joe added that PF should always work with the department first and not initially with the Council.

14. Evaluating staffing and program implementation on the ground. [McDonald]

Ken provided a brief history of the dedicated UGBEP biologist positions. The 3 positions are the same as a management biologist position. The program has a 3-year history where staff leave the UGBEP positions for management biologist positions. The department now has the opportunity to re-evaluate these positions.

Referring to 2013 (calendar year) accomplishments: 58 projects, 42 Open Fields. 16 general enhancement projects were contracted this year with 9 being food plots. Department has not increased capacity but has substituted general projects for OF. Department wants input from Council on other staffing alternatives.

Mark Sullivan gave information on region's attempt to hire 2 biologists for Plentywood and Circle, each having 0.5 FTE UGBEP. Difficult to fill Circle position because of pay and housing.

Joe Perry: Recognized positions are viewed as stepping stones. Department and Joe were hoping management biologists would view habitat biologists as more preferable. Also consider that the best and easiest projects may likely have been done. May want to consider an R4 UGBEP Habitat position in Lewistown. Joe also pointed out that the council did not intend for the 3 UGBEP habitat biologists to "carry the ball."

The program's vision for these positions was to build blocks of projects to a landscape level. Open Fields has helped to set the stage with that effort.

Each time a position becomes vacant, new person needs to rebuild positions and relationships.

Different options discussed:

- * Take the 3 FTE and create 6 FTE split with FBB positions. However, FBB can only work on private lands.
- * Position requirements moved from a Masters degree to a bachelor's degree requirement.
- * Split 1 FTE into two 6-month seasonal positions.
- * Contract work – need to see if the State has a Preferred Vendor List.

Joe asked how vacancy savings would impact filling the positions – sees a lot of red flags for 2014 with trying to get work on the ground. Joe asked if the director could do anything to help fill these positions quickly. Ken explained the mechanisms of vacancies savings. He responded that quite a few biologist positions have been vacant for quite some time. It's difficult to fill these latest vacancies first while other positions have been vacant for some time.

Pat Howe from Pheasants Forever pointed out that the chapters could provide work on the ground as well. The department may be overlooking relationships among PF chapters and the network of people who have relationships that cover the state.

Council Recommendation to department: Council recommends the Department try a minimum of a bachelor's degree, recognizing if a person with a master's was a better candidate, that person would still be the one to hire. Also, it is time for the Department to consider options for accomplishing farming work through partnerships or contracted services.

Joe to Dan Bailey: Work with the department and Gordon as he develops his plan and come back to the council with a report.

15. UGBEP Licensing. [Perry]

Joe asked the council to form a response to the licensing committee on the (1) 3-day NR ugb license and (2) breaking up the NR combo licenses. The UGBEP receives \$10 and \$23, respectively, for each license sold. While it's too early to tell, the 3-day NR license may negatively impact NR ugb license sales. As for the potential breakup of the combo licenses, this action may also impact UGBEP funds as most NR hunters may buy only big game licenses. Discussion points:

- * Montana licenses are cheap compared to other surrounding states.
- * For the 3-day shooting preserve license – leave as is.

Joe to Council: There appears to be little direction to licensing committee. Joe wants recommendations from UGBEP council on 3-day NR ugb license and shooting preserve. Information needed by the council:

- a. License info from 11 western states (will check with Hope Stockwell, too).
- b. Revenue income from license sales, particularly as it relates to UGBEP income
- c. Expand information on the two different 3-day licenses as per conversation between Joe and Hank
- d. The original fiscal note for the new 3-day NR UGB license
- e. Number of discounted licenses (e.g., senior, youth, etc.) and associated impact on UGBEP revenue.

16. Council input on 2013 program implementation. [Perry]

Council would like to see more enhancements on the ground but understand that the most uncomplicated projects have already been done. Council also understands that Open Fields have also impacted general UGBEP projects. Craig suggested that the department focus efforts on WMA geared to ugb.

17. Council input for 2014/Recommendation by Council:

Regarding Open Fields: Council discussed 160-acre cap and whether that restricted opportunity or potential enrollments. The cap does provide a means for involving multiple landowners and appears to have supported “donated” acres of access as part of the contract. Decision was to leave cap as is.

Council recommended the department allocate another \$300,000 for 2014 to continue funding Open Fields projects. This should continue particularly during the big years of expiring CRP. Haugen moves, Roberts seconded. Carried.

18. Update: Governor’s Sage-grouse Task Force. [Wightman]

- a. Presentation by Catherine Wightman on sage-grouse listing status, core area concept, the nexus between an executive order and state permitting/state lands management, Wyoming’s strategy, recommended restrictions and stipulations, and process here forward and options the Governor’s office could take.
- b. Question by Dan Bailey about further restricting Montana’s hunting season. Catherine – Hunting hasn’t been identified as a primary issue by the USFWS. That said, the Department is taking seriously the concerns expressed by the public over hunting. FWP has already identified 3 zones that can be managed separately if needed. Further season setting process with the FW Commission will take place this spring.

19. Public Comment Period - NONE during the scheduled comment time

20. Next meeting: Helena, June 9-10, 2013. Travel day is June 8.

21. Joe adjourned the meeting 11:00 am.