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**MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- Final**  
**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting**  
**Jorgenson's Inn & Suites**  
**Helena, MT**  
**April 13, 2015 (Meeting 19)**

**Advisory Council members present:** Jay Gore, Gordon Haugen, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen, Bill McChesney, Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie, Craig Roberts, and Dale Tribby (Chair).

**FWP staff:** Neil Anderson, Jake Doggett, Gary Hammond, Debbie Hohler, Quentin Kujala, Ken McDonald, Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Mark Sullivan, Graham Taylor, Jackie Tooke, and Catherine Wightman.

**Members of the Public:** Dan Bailey, Jeff Sturm, Bob Jeffrey, and Joe Perry

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

- \* Introductions were done at the beginning of the meeting. A big welcome to Charlie Noland, Huntley, who represents the Region 5 interests of the UGBEP.
- \* Minutes accepted – no edits.
- \* Bill McChesney thanked FWP Region 5 staff for a great tour last October and for the ongoing habitat work along the Yellowstone and Red Lodge. The members of the Council who were able to attend the tour were impressed.

**2. Legislative update and review [McDonald]**

- \* HB 403 (new this year; historically HB 5) – created by the legislature for capital projects such as UGBEP, Habitat Montana, Migratory Bird, Bighorn Sheep Auction. In its current form, all spending authority has been stripped. Sportsmen and conservation groups have been contacting their legislators about this bill. If the bill continues as is, UGBEP would not be able to fund pheasant planting. For habitat projects, UGBEP would use “older” authority.
- \* HB 2 – This bill is for FWP’s day to day operations. Last session, the legislature wanted a 4% reduction in all of state government. For the Wildlife Division, had to cut 5 positions (= 4%). The Division identified 0.65 FTE from UGBEP and spread it across the 3 positions. The cut is intended to be made up with modified FTE.
- \* HB 140 – This bill is for an increase in resident licenses. The hearing will be at the Senate Fish and Game tomorrow. The bill passed in the House 70-30.
- \* SB 261 – Sage-grouse Stewardship Act. Purpose of bill is to set up a density disturbance tool to manage density of development associated with sage-grouse habitats. Funding was originally in FWP’s budget, but moved to DNRC. FTE was largely eliminated; therefore contracted services will be necessary. Montana Sage-

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Grouse Oversight Team will be developed. \$10M/year for habitat enhancement. Anticipating USFWS listing decision by the end of September 2015.

- \* SB 309 – Bill would modify unlocking state lands law to include federal lands. Last year, 2 landowners enrolled 5 parcels for the \$500 tax incentive.

Jay Gore, Craig Roberts, and Joe Perry left to testify at the Legislature on HB 403.

### **3. Overview of Council's role/Purpose of meetings [McDonald]**

- \* Ken provided the history of the Council's role with the program. The Council was statutorily created to develop the program's long term strategic plan and to provide oversight on program implementation. The Council was also instrumental with revising program rules.
- \* There are 2 meetings per year:
  - o Spring meeting: the intent of this meeting is to review the work plans for the upcoming field season. The council will confirm if the planned implementation is consistent with the direction the council anticipated.
  - o Fall meeting: the purpose of this meeting is to review program accomplishments and to provide feedback to the department.
  - o The department seeks feedback from the council during these meetings.

### **Follow-up discussion**

Dustin Ramoie: The 2 meeting approach works well. He likes seeing projects on the ground in the fall and how these projects function during the hunting season.

Dale Tribby: Would like to discuss the timing of the spring meeting. April is the prime season for lek surveys – a busy time. In odd years, the legislature is ongoing, and it would be better to meet with the legislature. It may be better to meet 1 month after the session or perhaps during the legislative break. Council will revisit the timing of the spring meeting later in the day.

Bill McChesney: The legislators are busy during the break, often spending time at public meetings and taking a break. He feels it would be better to have it after the session. In the "off" legislative years, meeting could be held in March. During the session, council could meet in May.

Ken McDonald: It would be helpful to have council input on planned implementation before the field season starts. Perhaps expansion of the fall meeting could accommodate spring planning.

Bill Howell: Feels meetings after legislature is more beneficial.

### **4. Review of the UGBEP Strategic Plan [Northrup]**

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- \* Rick provided highlights of the strategic plan

### **Follow-up discussion**

Dale Tribby: It's good to hear the database is up and running. He is concerned that the program is primarily implemented by the technicians. There may be some opportunity for biologists to help with marketing the program as they work with landowners.

Mark Sullivan: Biologists work with Block Management landowners and opportunities do exist. Many times the landowner does not want to participate in the UGBEP. One reason is that the landowner's time to establish projects is overly limited. Mike Jensen agreed. Block Management contract visits are going on now, and there may be opportunities for food plots.

Charlie Noland: If a volunteer group were nearby (e.g., Pheasants Forever), they could volunteer to help establish projects.

Gordon Haugen: Addressed the MOU between FWP and DNRC that provides a framework to deliver UGBEP on State Trust lands. Rick added that the program needs to ensure that long-term commitments to maintain the project are well defined.

Gordon Haugen: He believes there may be a change in status with Russian olive. The department will check this out and report back to the council. There was mention that silverberry and buck hawthorn are potential replacement species for Russian olive.

### **5. Program Updates [Hohler]**

- \* Program revenue and expenditures: Debbie handed out a spreadsheet with a review of the past biennium (FY13 and FY14); expenditures from other sources; and current obligations and commitments.
- \* Field manual: The new manual provides more in depth direction based on program experience. Program orientation took place in February for new staff, which largely involved reviewing the manual.
  - o Project development
    - There are standard costs and estimated costs derived from information from MT NRCS and ND Custom Farming rates. Food plots and shelterbelts use standard costs. Receipts are not required for standard costs. Maintenance activities are included in the cost list.
    - UGBEP projects and volunteer organizations: This section provides guidance addressing program rules and program delivery.
    - GIS: Staff use program geodatabase that tracks access area and project site, useful for management planning and publishing in hunter access guide.

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- Project Types, Design, and Specifications
    - Detailed guidance and requirements for each project type
    - Habitat leases
      - Open Fields – specific to CRP
      - Habitat Conservation Leases – more detail below
      - Sagebrush Leases

### **Follow up discussion (Habitat Leases)**

Discussion about applying Habitat Leases on DNRC lands, making a payment to lessee for the value of agriculture.

Bill McChesney: For fence work that costs a lot of money, we need to make sure there is a return on the investment. We wouldn't put up a permanent fence for a 3-year period. There needs to be some sideboards for adding capital improvements associated with terms of the agreement (e.g., contract length). There should be language in the manual that provides guidance.

Charlie Noland: Can look at soil type and productivity on maximum CRP payment for general signup – that information should be available to public. He likes the ND approach that is simple, fair to sportsmen, and the landowner.

Mike Jensen: He is interested in seeing an actual mock up of a potential project and how it might be structured, including pay.

Dale Tribby: Questions if we may be over thinking this scenario. There may be very limited opportunity.

- Appendices: General over view of the appendices and how often they are updated.
- \* Open Fields update:
  - 52 applications received to date
  - 11,000 acres of CRP offered
  - Contracts awarded in June
  - Question about limited to one contract per landowner. If distinct pieces that are geographically separated, would be eligible. Dale Tribby liked to hear this.
- \* Pheasant Release updates

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- Discussion about whether we would be able to spend all pheasant release dollars, given the decline in number of producers and the number of landowners who would qualify after the 5-year limitation.
  - \* Access Guides
    - Guides will undergo a revision that will include boundaries on UGBEP projects on private lands. Hunters will still need to obtain landowner's permission to hunt unless the contract specified walk-in access with no further permission.

#### **6. Report out from Legislature on HB403**

- \* Joe Perry: It was clear that the committee and sponsor received a lot of input from sportsmen and conservation groups. At the end, the discussion focused on fee title purchases. We should expect sideboards or elimination of ability to purchase fee title lands. However, pertaining to WMA lands, there may be exceptions with in-holdings. We need to reduce the savings account substantially or it will "bite us."
- \* Jay Gore: He didn't think the sponsor understood the source of funding and hadn't anticipated the interest by sportsmen. He feels confident that spending authority will be restored.

#### **7. Agricultural interests and CRP/Open Fields [Joe Perry]**

- \* Joe explained the mechanics behind potential attractiveness of open fields and CRP contracts.
  - September wheat is barely over \$5/bushel. Fixed costs \$250/acre. Producer needs 50 bushels to cover fixed costs. AT this time, cash leases are \$40 to \$45.
  - Open Fields payment is enough to sway some producers. Financially it might pencil out, and it appears opportunities are just beginning with decline in commodity prices.

#### **Follow up discussion**

Charlie Noland: Another thing to consider is that the economics of grazing are feasible for the next two years.

Joe Perry: Currently, the department pays \$150 for food plot costs. This dollar amount is appropriate at this time.

#### **8. Regional Work plans [FWP Staff]**

- \* Region 1
  - Charlie Holtz, Habitat Forever Habitat Specialist in Region1, is hitting the ground running. Focus is on USFWS WPAs and FWP Ninepipe WMA
  - It's a 5 year position, full time employee

- \* Region 2
  - o NWTF cooperative wildlife biologist position updates – paperwork is close to being finalized and the hiring process will soon commence.
  
- \* Region 3
  - o PF is providing assistance with food and cover plots at Canyon Ferry WMA.
  - o Ruffed Grouse Habitat work in Gallatin-Red Lodge NF; UGBEP will contribute \$60,000 for boots on the ground for 3 years
  
- \* Region 4 [Craig Roberts reporting on PF-HF work plan]
  - o Beckman – last shrub planting, which is a double row of silver sage.
  - o Electric fence around a project to keep deer and elk out has been very effective.
  - o Food plots are now on all properties.
  - o 500 hunter days on Coffee Creek last year.
  - o DNRC lease renewed.
  - o Will be spending time on Canada thistle and hemlock. Have been using hemlock moths as a biocontrol, which defoliates the plants.
  - o The work on the shelterbelt on Beckman near Judith River continues to have problems with livestock. This year, staff will be installing an electric fence.
  - o Mid-year maintenance requirements on CRP this year on Coffee Creek. Need to do at least 60% this year.
  - o There will be a fencing project on Coffee Creek and small grain food plots on Coffee Creek.
  - o Planted 200' wide strips of sweet clover. Maintained double row of silver sagebrush – almost 15 linear miles. Pulled some adjacent fabric off of a failed row, which is being filled with silver sage seedlings.
  - o Coffee Creek BMA – about 25% of hunters leave a survey. 500 hunter-days with birds harvested throughout the season.
  
- \* Region 4 – Jake Doggett
  - o Jake provided information on his background
  - o Presented an overview of the Region 4 strategic plan
  - o Work plan for upcoming months

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- Become acquainted with land and program
  - Review existing projects – refresh new ones, add new ones
  - Take advantage of annual enrollment periods – OF, Pheasant release, BMAs, CRP
  - Big ticket items – Lake Francis, projects along Missouri, grazing mgt plans along Front, DNRC, Open Fields, establishing relationships with fed agencies
  - Fact sheet for the program
  - STG Habitat Surveys – working with Alan Wood
  - Merriam’s Turkey Release – near Teton River, north of Carter. Up to 200 over next two years.
  - Other updates – list of current projects that are underway
- \* Region 5 – Habitat Forever Partnership
- 4 brood plots at PPNM and 5 at YWMA
  - The last 50 acres of hay production ground at PPNM is in the process of being converted to permanent nesting cover
  - PPNM: Irrigated, native shrub plantings are planned
  - YWMA: Dryland shelterbelt will be planted next to an irrigated food plot. It will contain mostly Rocky Mountain juniper with some cotoneaster.
  - The seasonal habitat technician position will be filled in the spring and run through late summer or early fall
- \* Region 6 – Ken Plourde
- Ken provided some details about his background
  - Review of R6 Strategic Plan –
    - Focus areas
    - Renewal of expired projects/monitoring
    - Complexes of enhanced habitats, rather than isolated projects
    - Review of approaches and projects for northeast Region 6.
  - Work plan
    - 2-4 shelterbelts in process of proposal, 2016 planting
    - Habitat Conservation Lease – winter cover in non-CRP areas and winter cover.
    - Winter food and cover plots
    - Review past projects for renewal

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- Monitoring – learn from past projects
  - Open fields/pheasant release
  - Outreach –
  - Open Fields – 29 applications in Region 6
  - Carry over projects from prior year
  - Review of other items around Region 6 – Buffalo Coulee CE finished, work on Hinsdale and Vandalia WMAs. Cree Crossing food plots; working with FWS on two WPAs
  - Winter conditions – mild, never exceeded 6” of snow on the flats
  - STG dancing grounds, looking to be on the rise
  - CRP loss – 58% loss in Region 6.

Follow up question from Council: What is the amount of work done south of the Missouri River? Ken stated that most grazing systems are in and around Richland County. Regional staff will be looking at opportunities to renew projects.

- \* Region 7 – Jackie Tooke
  - Jackie provided information about herself
  - Sage-grouse Core Areas
    - Leases, working with LIP leases, new grazing systems
    - Grazing systems – have 5 active and two will be expiring soon.
  - Grasslands and sagebrush grasslands
    - Expiring shelterbelts: working with landowner discussion potential for a habitat conservation lease?
    - New shelterbelt projects- basin wildrye planting
  - Dawson, Fallon, Prairie, Richland, and Wibaux
    - Open Fields marketing/conduct evaluations
    - Food and nesting cover projects approved for this year on public lands, including WMAs and Pumpkin Creek BLM lands.
  - Habitat Enhancement Project Renewal
    - 3 shelterbelts, 2 grazing systems, 1 food plot, 4 nesting cover seedings
  - Turkey transplants – currently not having problems. Working on turkey food plots, winter food source adjacent to Ashland-Custer National Forest, Sarpy Creek, Colstrip and Western Energy
  - Additional input:
    - Pheasant releases – opportunity for enhancement work.

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- Technician idea in Region 7, on and beyond the WMAs – interest also by Pheasants Forever.

Follow up question from Council: Compliance issues with Sagebrush leases or other projects?  
Staff reported that no compliance issues found yet.

## 9. Recommendations from Council

### Utilizing UGBEP dollars for sagebrush leases:

Dale Tribby: He is concerned that sagebrush leases, matched with NFWF grant funds, will only allow a small amount of hunting, assuming there is a season. He believes the UGBEP Council needs to be responsive to hunting public and hunting access. Question – is that the best use of UGBP dollars, putting into a lease, with potential for little to no public hunting? Alternatively, there may be \$10M of state dollars made available for habitat work. Currently, it is unclear how those funds might be made available.

Jay Gore: Rather than spending UGBEP dollars on nice sagebrush habitat, there will be spin-offs for other birds – maybe some other game birds. If it's possible to utilize Governor's program, that would be another source of funding.

Bill McChesney: Questions if this is the recommendation the council needs to make at this time? There would be much better information in the fall.

Gordon Haugen: He feels it's best to hold off and make recommendation when people know more.

Dustin Ramoie: There are too many uncertainties. It would be best to wait until more educated decisions are made clearer this fall.

Mike Jensen: Consider sportsmen's dollars. If there has been quite a bit of work with sage-grouse, income should match expenditures somewhat and not be too disproportionate.

Conclusion: Will table this topic for now until there is better information and will revisit this subject at the October meeting. The general sense is to hold off spending UGBEP funding on sagebrush leases.

### Council expectations on leasing habitat acres and determining valuation of leases:

Ken Plourde: Can make up own values, based on wildlife habitat soils

Jake Doggett: Can evaluate PLOTs lands. Also, consider crop prices change.

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Gordon Haugen: Price may reflect the restrictions that occur on the lease. If more restrictive, the more the program will need to pay.

Charlie Noland: The value of the habitat lease should be compared to the number of hunter days but should never exceed block management payment

Dale Tribby: The payment should be based on the habitat component that we're trying to protect.

Jake Doggett: Open Fields has a point system. Perhaps a scoring system could be developed to set the price.

Bill McChesney: He likes the idea of a point system based on habitat. It may be more complicated. The challenge is to ascertain different habitats and values based on points. There could be more equitable ways of addressing multitudes of habitats, which would be defensible and maybe best approach.

Bill Howell: Suggests the council let the department come back with proposal at next meeting.

Rick Northrup: He recommends proceeding with establishing a point system.

#### **10. Public comment period.**

Dan Bailey: May 2<sup>nd</sup> is Pheasants Forever State Meeting in Billings  
8:00 am to 5:00 pm, with reception at 6:00 pm  
Second half of day is agency focused.

Need to spend the dollars to keep land in CRP in the next couple of years.

- Interested in CRP cost share with PF funds.
- Likes habitat lease idea.

No other comments.

Next meeting – Charlo, and tour of Ninepipe WMA  
October 5 and 6 (Monday and Tuesday)  
Joe Ball and John Grant will be leading

*Tentative Meeting date a year from now: March 15, 2016, Helena.*

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Chairman Tribby adjourned the meeting at 5:00 pm. He expressed appreciation to see how much effort, interest, and knowledge the habitat specialists have accomplished in a short time.