

Wetland Protection Advisory Council

Meeting NOTES

July 8, 2015

FWP Headquarters – 1400 S. 19th Avenue, Bozeman

Participants: Jim Moreland, Henry Gordon, Steve Laufenberg, Gary Moses, Jim Hansen, Rick Northrup, Catherine Wightman, Megan O'Reilly, Bob Sanders, Rob Bundy

General Program Updates:

- Outreach efforts – At the last Wetland Protection Advisory Council meeting, the group discussed several ideas for better marketing of the Migratory Bird Wetland Program (see February 2014 notes). Catherine reported on the progress of following up on those ideas.
 - The Migratory Bird Wetland Program Guidance Document has been finalized and printed. Council members reviewed the document prior to finalizing. Hard copies were distributed at the meeting. The document has been distributed to FWP biologists and other partners working with Montana's landowners. There was a request to make the document available on-line; Catherine will follow up.
 - Catherine and Abby Dresser (Ducks Unlimited) organized a Conservation Programs Workshop in Lewistown on June 23, 2015. The workshop targeted FWP and NRCS field practitioners. The intent was to provide updates to field staff on multi-agency programs and opportunities so that field staff can suggest the programs that are the best fit for a particular landowner, based on the landowners needs and objectives. At the workshop, Catherine presented on FWP's wetland program and distributed the guidance document.
 - We created and posted on FWP website a webpage for the Migratory Bird Wetland Program. It includes general program information, an accomplishments page, advisory council members and meeting notes, and a pdf overview document.
<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/habitat/wildlife/programs/migratoryBirds/default.html>
 - The program was also featured on Montana's "Outdoor Report". The ~3 minute profile of the program featured landowner Henry Gordon. We will make a link to the video available on the program website.
 - At the last meeting, Council discussed putting a link to the Program webpage on the Migratory Bird hunting regulations with the caption "See where your license dollars go..." or something similar. Jim Hansen reviews the draft regulations and will try to make sure it gets incorporated in the 2015 regulations.
 - Additional ideas for program outreach include:
 - Continue to stress the program internally within FWP
 - Advertise in statewide newspapers
 - Farm Services newspapers
 - Stockgrowers Association and grazing district publications
 - Electrical co-operative publications
- 2015 Legislative session
 - Thanks in large part to sportsmen's groups and conservation organizations FWP's funding for habitat projects was ultimately authorized by the 2015 legislature.
 - Funds authorized by the 2015 legislature cannot be used for fee-title acquisition. Other traditional uses are allowed.

Project Updates:

Benton Lake NWR wetland enhancement – Rob Bundy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Manager, presented on the Benton Lake Wetland Enhancement Project. Rob discussed the management challenges on the Refuge, primarily high selenium levels in some units and the lack of independence in the units making water management difficult. The Migratory Bird Wetland Program partnered with the Fish and Wildlife Service and Ducks Unlimited to install a new water control structure that allows for greater flexibility in how water is moved across the Refuge. This flexibility allows Rob and his team to dry certain units to volatilize selenium and enhance wetland plant growth, while putting water elsewhere to maintain habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for Montana’s hunters. This is the first of a series of projects. The Migratory Bird Wetland Program funding in phase 1 was used to successfully leverage a NAWCA grant for phase 2. Rob continues to work on enhancing waterfowl habitat at the Refuge. The Advisory Council may see additional requests for partnership support in the future.

Big Lake WMA Wetland Enhancement - Jim Hansen and Megan O’Reilly discussed some changes to the Big Lake WMA wetland enhancement project. After acquiring 1,100 acres of wetland habitat on the east side of the WMA in 2013 using Migratory Bird Wetland Program funding, FWP received funding from the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture to install fencing to exclude cattle which allowed for better wetland management. FWP was then successfully awarded a small NAWCA grant for repairing a leaking water control structure. DU Engineer Roger Smith visited the WMA and discovered that dam erosion was a more immediate need than repairing the water control structure, which he estimated could function for another ~10 years. Jim and Megan have received approval from NAWCA to switch the grant funding to protecting the dam from additional erosion and are now requesting support from the Advisory Council to change the project. A proposal for the change will be forthcoming from Jim and Megan.

Flatt Conservation Easement – Bob Sanders with Ducks Unlimited gave an overview of DU’s Montana Program and an update on the Flatt property conservation easement. DU currently owns this 1,700 acre parcel of prairie wetlands and ranchland south of Dodson in Phillips County. They are currently working with FWP on a conservation easement, to be funded by the Migratory Bird Wetland Program. Scott Thompson, FWP biologist in Malta, is working with Bob on a grazing management strategy for the property which will be attached to the easement. DU intends to place the easement on the property, install the grazing management, and then sell the property to a local rancher at a competitive price. A timeline for closing on the easement is to be determined.

Fox Lake WMA – This wildlife management area provides 1,545 acres of high quality wetlands important for breeding and migrating waterfowl. The levees were damaged in the 2011 floods and FEMA has agreed to pay partial costs of the repair. The Migratory Bird Wetland Program and Habitat Montana are supporting the remaining costs. Repair is in progress summer of 2015.

Canyon Ferry WMA – This project is to create 2 10-acre wetlands on the eastern side of Canyon Ferry WMA to provide additional brood-rearing habitat for waterfowl in proximity to existing ponds. A water rights change of use agreement has been filed with DNRC but the final agreement has not yet been approved. The project is ready to proceed once the water rights issue is resolved.

Box Elder Conservation Easement – This project is suspended indefinitely due to a change in landowner corporation status. If the project is revived, the Council will receive an updated proposal.

Proposed New Projects:

DU revolving lands interest near Malta – DU is working to acquire ~1,200 acres of high quality wetland habitat on the southeast corner of Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge. The Fish and Wildlife Service is interested to place a conservation easement on the property, restricting conversion of the property to cropland agriculture. DU may approach FWP and the Wetland Protection Advisory Council about a management easement to layer on top of the Service's easement which will ensure good management in perpetuity.

Benton Lake NWR Wetland Enhancement Phase III – Rob is working with FWP and others on a “basin-wide” strategy to address selenium inputs in to the Refuge system. This strategy may require additional funds and the Wetland Protection Advisory Council may see proposals in the future. The Council may also see funding proposals for additional water control structures at the Refuge.

Conservation Leases – FWP has requested grant funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to offer 30-year conservation leases to private landowners in priority wetlands/grasslands and shrub-steppe systems. In exchange for a one-time payment of \$15/acre an enrolled landowner will agree not to plow, burn, spray, or otherwise eliminate native vegetation for 30 years. This option is modeled off of FWP's successful Sagebrush Initiative that currently has ~200,000 acres of private lands enrolled in 30 year conservation leases. It is a good tool for addressing the biggest threat to wildlife in Montana's grasslands – conversion to cropland agriculture. The grant funding requires matching funds. FWP would like to use up to \$100,000 of Migratory Bird Wetland Program funding as match for leases in areas where there are significant wetland and migratory bird benefits. FWP's Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program will also contribute matching funding for leases in areas that provide upland game bird benefits and hunting opportunities. Catherine will prepare a proposal for Council review.

Other Project Ideas

- Jim Hansen suggested we could be looking at ponds in need of repair. At some point we might want to use some program funding for a contractor to evaluate existing ponds. Jim is willing to take a look at some projects. Bob Sanders offered to help. The group agreed that it is important to support original program investments with additional maintenance where needed.
- Jim also discussed a project near Alzada that he ultimately decided it was not a good fit for the program. The quality of bird habitat was marginal and he wasn't confident dam repairs would ultimately remain fixed.
- Gary Moses suggested there is value in smaller projects that are near populous areas, e.g., North Shore of the Flathead, Bridger project. Working near Montana's larger cities may build support for the program among citizens.
- There was additional discussion about involving local communities and marketing the program. One idea was to produce simple signs crediting the Program that can be put up at restoration sites across the state and to engage local communities to erect the sign up as a volunteer project.

Project tracking and budget:

Catherine distributed a project tracking update and budget summary. The existing program balance on June 30, 2015 is mostly allocated to on-going projects and is expected to be spent with completion of those projects. The authority to spend an additional \$845,000 of Program Funds, as approved by the 2015 legislature, became available on July 1, 2015. The Program will not see any new funds until July 1, 2017 at the earliest. Thus, the Program has funds available for new high quality projects, but we must be selective to spend funds wisely and maintain a program balance.