MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- DRAFT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Ninepipes Lodge
Charlo, MT
October 5-6, 2015 (Meeting 20)

Advisory Council members present: Joe Ball, 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, John Grant, Debbie Hohler, Ken McDonald, Rick Northrup, and Ken Plourde.

Members of the Public: Dan Bailey (PF Pheasants Forever), Ben Deeble (Big Sky Upland Bird Association), Charlie Holtz (PF Habitat Specialist), Karen Peterson (*Valley Journal*), and Art Soukkala (Wildlife Biologist CSKT)

Monday, October 5

1. **Dale called the meeting to order at 8:00 am.**
   - Introductions were conducted.
   - Dale addressed this meeting's focus, emphasizing the importance of providing feedback to the department at each of the meetings. He is particularly interested in the habitat leases, field manual, and an update on partnerships. He asked for a discussion on ways the Council might gear up for the upcoming legislature.
   - Council reviewed some of the topics from the past meeting, including Council's testimony at the legislative session.
   - Minutes accepted – no edits.

2. **Updates on Sage-grouse [Northrup]**
   - The birds were not listed.
   - Montana Sage-grouse Stewardship Act
     - 10M allocated for conservation grants (mostly conservation easements) and compensatory mitigation team/program. Conservation easements do not require public access – not compatible with FWP programs. FWP is prohibited from partnering on grants.
     - Regulations could dictate how oil and gas are placed relative to sage-grouse leks.
     - Carolyn Sime, DNRC Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program Manager, was recently hired to coordinate the SG Oversight Team (SGOT)
     - FWP did not receive any FTE.

- Jay recommended that the Council keep pace with the SGOT. Carolyn Sime will be invited to the next council meeting.
- Bill McChesney hoped that the SGOT will rely on science. He's glad the bird was not listed and felt that the work done by the advisory council plus the work from other western states worked.
- Rick pointed out that UGBEP will be instrumental for sage-grouse conservation through grazing system cost-share and leases.
- There are a total of 6 FTEs. Only Carolyn's position has been filled; the wildlife biologist position has been recently announced.

3. **Overview of Ninepipe Project Area Habitat Tour [John Grant, Charlie Holtz]**
   - John gave an overview of FWP's history in the Ninepipe area. The State started buying land in the 1950s through the 1970s. The department started out with considerable crop sharing arrangements but later on in the years, the demand for share farming declined and even idles over a period of years.
   - In 1983, the legislature instructed FWP to deal with the weeds or lose ownership of Ninepipe. FWP began a greater effort to address the weeds. Nearly 700 acres were allocated to share farm contracts (up to 12 contracts at one time).
   - John started in 1990. Currently there is no contracted farmer.
   - Recently, the Region completed a management plan for the WMA that includes the management of specific parcels.
   - The valley no longer has much grain. Providing grain fields on the WMA is an important component for wildlife habitat.
   - Private lands are generally less than moderate habitat. Farms are gone, and lands have been heavily grazed or converted to and hay lands. The FWP and FWS lands are the best remaining intact lands for wildlife habitat.
     - USFWS: 9 WPAs encompassing 3,200 acres
     - Ninepipe WMA: 4,200 acres
     - Tribal lands: 4,000 to 5,000 acres in the vicinity. CSKT is also interested in managing productive habitat
   - Charlie Holtz was hired 6 months ago – a welcome addition to the area. His position is made possible through a five-year agreement. In addition to habitat work, Charlie will also spearhead communication and use of different equipment on the various ownerships.
     - Many lands need revitalization/enhancement through periodic disturbance.
     - Brome grass monocultures are a problem in many areas. The partnership will seek opportunities for a more diverse mix of grasses and broadleaf plants. Much of the enhancements will occur through disking, spraying, and no-till drilling.
     - Question: For 2016, how may acres and what is the scope of work? Currently, the partnership will look for the most strategic way to get work

done on the ground, given the variety of landownership jurisdictions and project area goals.

4. **Council departs for habitat tour at 9:30.** Karen Peterson, reporter with the *Valley Journal*, accompanies the council on the tour. Tour concludes at noon and Council breaks for lunch.

5. **Wildlife Division Updates [Ken McDonald]**
   - Legislature
     - Fee increase will occur in 2016
     - 4% cut in FTE, which means a loss of 5 positions in the Wildlife Division. Vacancies have been used to help make the 3 UGBEP positions whole; the other option would have been to use a modified FTE.
   - Second Governor's Executive Order (EO) for Sage-grouse
     - EO Initiates state agencies to implement Governor's plan.
   - Montana Sage-grouse Conservation Act
     - $10M for conservation; unsure if the amount needs to be spent during the biennium.
     - Compensatory mitigation
   - Habitat Programs
     - Originally zeroed all of them out, but were amended back in. Programs can't be used for fee acquisitions.

6. **2015 UGBEP Accomplishments [Debbie Hohler]**
   - Review of revenue, expenditures, and obligations for FY15
     - Obligations are true commitments. Council would like to see obligations annualized based on contract lengths.
   - Summary of UGBEP Habitat Projects initiated during Fiscal Year 2015
     - Mike Jensen would like to see the less expensive projects that provide greater access, recognizing differences in contract length.
     - Jay Gore prefers investment in hard cover, winter habitats
     - Council would like to see the full list of projects, rather than a summary.
     - Charlie Noland recommends a full complement of habitats.
     - Jay Gore noted that leaving standing grain isn't as productive as a mix of winter food and cover.
   - Summary of Open Fields for 2015
     - 68 applications and 39 contracts.
     - Charlie Noland stated that hunters love Open Fields; he personally hunted some of the project areas and harvested birds
   - Pheasant Releases Summary

- 8,442 pheasants were released and 56 contracts were awarded in regions 6 and 7. Region 4 had some applications but local pheasant raisers did not participate with the program. Pheasant raisers in regions 6 and 7 are very proactive with the program.

- Lease Grants Updates
  - NFWF: Sagebrush leases: Charlie Noland – recommend a minimum of 10 hunter days/half section. Council will revisit this topic next morning.
  - VPA-HIP #2: Would extend eligible SGI grazing contracts to 30 years.
- Access Guide
  - Provided an overview of changes on the way projects are depicted in access guide. In the past, access guide provided only general location points. Currently, access boundaries are depicted as polygons unless the projects are located on public lands or enrolled in Block Management. In these cases, projects are represented as a point.
- Overview of the 3 UGBEP Habitat Lease options - as described in the Program Manual.
  1. Open Fields: A general overview was provided on how Open Fields has been implemented. No questions from Council.
  2. Management Lease: Leases target smaller project areas (<160 acres) and are intended to conserve high-value upland game bird habitat. Focus areas might be mature shelterbelts, old farmsteads with idle cover, etc. The lease would be managed for wildlife and may exclude grazing. Lease terms are 3 to 20 years. Compensation will be made annually and walk-in game bird hunting is required.
  3. Conservation Lease: These types of leases are intended to provide long term basic protection for maintaining priority habitats, protecting against cover conversion that would negatively impact upland game birds (e.g., plowing, herbicide treatments targeting shrubs, prescribed fire, etc.). These leases are typically larger than 160 acres and are mostly restricted to pre-defined priority areas with a focus on native habitats (e.g., sage-grouse core areas). Habitat Conservation leases are generally secured through special sign-ups using a combination of UGBEP leveraged with outside funding.
  - Dale offered the following considerations:
    - Some sagebrush leases are not in an open season. Do we want to be involved in projects such as these that do not offer recreational opportunities?
    - If there is a season, what becomes reasonable?
  - Dustin Ramoie wondered if there were better opportunities that provide more access, perhaps that's where we would we enroll these dollars.
  - Dale asked if dollars are better spent to hire another habitat technician. Perhaps aspen treatments?

- Dale urged the department to use great caution where there is low return. He doesn't feel it's our role to protect habitat, and we need to trust the responsibility to people who provided the dollars.
- Charlie made the recommendations to remove the first sentence, which speaks to "minimum access" on page 57 of the program manual. There is no advantage for publishing a minimum as that is what the landowner will shoot for – best to leave the negotiations to staff.
- Jay feels there is value in spending dollars where access is limited. We need to do something to support that habitat. Obligated to do that for the conservation of the upland game bird.
- Dale feels strongly that there needs to be a component that offers reasonable access.
- Council will provide review and send comments to Dale for consolidation.

7. **Public Comments**
   - Dan Bailey asked about the unspent funding for pheasant releases. Any unspent funds are rolled over for future use.
   - Joe Ball said that most PF members are very enthusiastic about what is going on with Charlie Holtz's work with John Grant and the USFWS.
   - Jens Geran – He has lived in this area for 50 years. Has the program considered taking care of egg eating predators? Dale answered that the program is not involved with predator control. If there is good habitat, predation can be minimized with high quality habitat. Joe Ball added that predator control appears to help nesting ducks but uncertain about nesting pheasants. Shrubs and trees in particular benefit predators, particularly avian predators. Predator control can be socially and economically and politically costly. In addition, certain forms of predator control can work against the goal. Killing coyotes result in foxes moving in, which are greater in number and more likely to predate nests. Craig said that reducing raccoons and skunks during the nesting period might take the numbers down during the prime nesting season. Ken McDonald said that people need to be aware that there is a ballot initiative that would prohibit all trapping on public lands.

8. **Council meeting concludes for the day**. A "Surf and Turf" dinner is planned at Leon Hall, hosted by Joe and Sue Ball and the members of the Mission Valley Chapter of PF.

Tuesday, October 6

1. **Continuation of program updates. [Debbie Hohler, Rick Northrup]**

- Program marketing: Debbie described a postcard that has been developed by FWP's Communication and Education division. The postcard will be sent out to private landowners and describes opportunities to partner on habitat enhancement projects. The Habitat Bureau will also seek opportunities to have marketing materials created by a professional company.
- Cooperative positions: Rick provided the council with an overview of FWP's current cooperative positions.
  - National Wild Turkey Foundation position: David Nikonow was recently hired (9/28/2015) and will be located in the USFS Regional Office in Missoula. He will be involved with multiple ranger district offices. David will work with NWTF on work plans and develop a scope of work. Areas of accomplishment will focus on: 1) designing and facilitating forest treatments that restore effective cover; 2) stewardship projects that leverage outside funds; 3) promote outreach education; and 4) seek opportunities to enhance habitat on adjacent, private lands. David will be invited to the next Council meeting in March.
  - Montana Association of Conservation Districts: Through a variety of funding sources (NRCS, Mule Deer Foundation, NWTF, PF), positions located in Forsyth, Glasgow, Malta, and Ekalaka (new) focus on sage-grouse conservation on private lands. Positions started in 2011. FWP (not UGBEP) contributes $18,000 per year (2015 – 2017) for the Glasgow position.
  - Habitat Forever positions - the focus is on farming, and FWP invests in all 3 of these positions. Work areas are:
    1. Denton: Coffee Creek CE, DNRC lands, PF Wolf Creek, and Beckman WMA. Craig Roberts, along with the Central Montana Chapter of PF, and Virg Gluth are the "boots on the ground."
    2. Billings: Yellowstone WMA and Pompeys Pillar are the principle areas of work. Dennis Yurian is the Habitat Specialist, and the partnership includes BLM and the PF Chapter in Billings.
    3. Ninepipe WMA and USFWS Bison Range (WPA). Charlie Holtz was recently hired as the habitat specialist. The habitat focus will primarily be native range land restoration and enhancement.
  - Farm Bill Biologist positions – positions are funded by NRCS (75%) and PF chapters. The focus of this partnership is to promote CRP and mid-contract maintenance. PF did get FWP director's permission to contribute $45,000 for 3 years. After 3 year, not clear about the funding mechanism. This money will not be coming from UGBEP because access requirements are not necessarily pursued. The positions will be located in Conrad, Chinook, and Scobey. Their offices will be located in the USDA field offices. Kenny and Jake will participate in the selection process.

2. **Review of Regional strategies, work completed toward those strategies, and upcoming opportunities.**

- Region 1 – John Grant, Neil Anderson, and Charlie Holtz provided a recap of the tour. Charlie was impressed with the cooperative nature of the work done through FWP, USFWS, and CSKT. Dale asked about FWP's work with the USFS. Neil reports that staff have a good working relationship with the agency and frequently attend meetings related to forest management.
- Region 2 – Debbie referenced back to the NWTF Cooperative position.
- Region 3 – Habitat enhancement work continues on Poindexter Slough FAS. This year, pen-reared pheasants were released from a Townsend pheasant raiser. Pheasant Forever chapters have assisted with work on Canyon Ferry WMA by providing seed mixes developed by Tom Pick. Seed was used in an irrigated food plot.
- Region 4 – Craig Roberts provided an overview of work accomplished this past season.
    - Beckman WMA project area – Craig showed aerial images of the ongoing work. Basin wildrye stands 5 to 6 feet tall, more silver sagebrush was planted this spring, and it's blooming this fall with considerable growth. Skunkbrush sumac was planted among the silver sage. This past spring, nesting cover was planted. Weeds (field bindweed and Canada thistle) continue to be problems. Roundup will be used this fall in the shelterbelt plantings. Craig reported on Seascape, a patented plant that is a cross of silver buffaloberry and Russian olive. The planting is 6 years old, and plants are 12 feet tall. The plant is sterile with a mature height of 8 to 10 feet. Craig said it put on 5 feet of growth this year. Maintenance work continues on the shelterbelts.
    - Wolf Creek and Beckman project areas – Sharp-tails are wintering in the food plot and shelterbelt that surrounds the facility. Most of the shrubs are over 9 feet tall.
    - Coffee Creek – Food plots are comprised of mostly wheat and barley. The 14-year old shelterbelt has a lot of bird use. This year, oats were planted with a sweetclover undercrop. Next year, the sweetclover will grow up. This planting enhances brood cover by providing some good overhead cover but is open enough for broods to get around. Craig has seen some good use. A few years ago, a 30-year old CRP field was diversified with renovation strips to improve cover. Three glycophosate treatments were conducted in spring and fall. Later, a no-till drill was used to establish cover. Sanfoin established well – the deer like it as well. Craig said that Transline works well on Canada thistle. Most shrubs are safe but the chemical does kill legumes. Craig said hunter use was about 400 to 500 hunter-days on 2,000 acres (enrolled in Block Management).
- Region 4 – Jake Doggett reviewed the region's strategic plan and upland game bird hunting outlook. His focus area is primarily in Toole, Pondera, Teton, Chouteau, and Cascade counties.

- Jake provided the council with the results of this past field season. He focused on previous Open Fields enrollments by adding signs, particularly in areas where access boundaries were not clear. A majority of his time was spent updating the guide book and program geodatabase. Jake also conducted a lot of monitoring and entering monitoring reports in the database. Jake also shared results from monitoring older projects. Jake met with many FWP and other staff, local PF chapters (Helena, Great Falls, and Missoula). He likely spent time fielding over 200 hunter phone calls, landowner calls, and distributing letters and fact sheets. Some of the projects Jake has in the works are a shelterbelt in CRP, DNRC property opportunities, and Marias River WMA food plots. Gordon asked if the DNRC mapping tool has been put to use. Jake wasn't aware of this effort but expressed an interest. Dale asked about the percentage of projects that were non-compliant. Jake reported that he did not find any compliance issues other than the need to put up signs that were no longer there.

- Region 5 – Debbie provided an over of the enhancement work done in regions 5 and 7.
  - Region 5: 100-acre site was prepped for seeding native habitat to benefit sage-grouse. Custer National Forest (Regions 3 and 5) has expanded efforts to enhance 150 acres of ruffed grouse habitat through clear-cutting conifer-dominated sites. The partnership has been expanded by another 3 years. Enhancement and maintenance work continues on the Habitat Forever/FWP/BLM/PF partnerships on the Yellowstone WMA and Pompeys Pillar.
  - Region 7. Debbie provided a recap of the work implemented in the spring. Seven Sisters WMA and Elk Island WMA nest cover and food plots were seeded. Isaac Homestead WMA also had cover and food plots seeded in addition to a prepped brood strip. A food plot on private land (enrolled in Block Management) was also seeded this year. Jackie has been working on other projects, including 3 grazing systems.
- Region 6 – Kenny provided an over of the enhancement work done in Region 6.
  - Much of the enhancement work has focused on food/brood plots, shelterbelts, and Open Fields. Joe Ball suggested that program staff figure out a way to document findings/outcomes so as to reinventing techniques. Charlie feels landowners really like perennial food plots. Different species persist for various periods of time. Kenny participated in the pheasant releases and feels that the birds were especially healthy this year. There are 2 years left in the 5-year cycle. Kenny also spent time monitoring projects. For upcoming work, Kenny has been working on shelterbelt negotiations and management leases. Craig emphasized that shelterbelt failure was more often than not a result of improper preparation and maintenance. He suggested the manual reflect this point first and foremost. During the winter months, Kenny plans to continue to talk to landowners and generating program interest for next year. He is looking forward to Open Fields and CRP seed cost-share and re-enrolling expired projects. Habitat

enhancement work continues on the WMAs throughout the region: shelterbelt, food plots, and nesting cover. Kenny continues to work closely with NRCS field offices. The Sheridan County MOU didn't work out as well as intended. The MOU will expire this year. He will look into other options for getting work done. From a regional standpoint, CRP continues to decline in NE Montana. The hunting outlook indicates that 2015 will be another good year for UGB.

3. Comments from the Council

- Gordon Haugen would like the program to hire a contractor to investigate interest in work on accessible DNRC sections. He suggested Lanny Walker from DNRC and Pheasants Forever could do the contracting. Shelterbelts have long-term maintenance needs and likely would not be a good focus point. Perhaps nesting cover would be an appropriate focus. Dale is reluctant to contract out this work at this time.
- Jay Gore expressed regret that a year was lost before fully staffed, but glad the program is now operating with all staff on board.
- Mike Jensen feels that we need to step back and take a look at what we are doing relative to the work that benefits hunters – the "Bang for the Buck." It's always good to keep this in mind when pursuing projects. He appreciates the landscape concepts for big projects, but how would hunters respond to this concept? Average hunter can look at the smaller projects and see direct benefits. Would hunters see similar, direct benefits for larger-scaled projects? For example – sage brush leases. He would like to see more effort on project types such as Coffee Creek, Ninepipe.
- Dale added that when more properties are opened for hunters, the more pressure is spread out over the areas. He also pointed out that the access guide shows more effectively what has been done over the years and what is available to hunters.
- Gordon suggested the program focus on maintaining projects rather than creating new one.
- Mike Jensen pointed out that CSP has resulted in a lot of opportunity for projects, especially food plots.
- Bill Howell suggested putting more information on the program signs. Currently just "FWP" and its logo are on the Open Fields signs. The program logo will be added to the Open Fields signs.
- Charlie feels that the work done in Regions 6 and 7 are a bargain, based on his experience in these regions.
- Mike Jensen mentioned technicians in other states. In Tennessee, the technicians have equipment and conduct "hands on" farming.
- Craig suggested that if we were to expand farming efforts, a core area needs to be identified. Expansion of the efforts is possible if good opportunities show up. Partnering is essential. Mike asked if there was an exit strategy with Coffee Creek. Craig there is none at this time. Craig would like to reassess partnership issues. The contracts are complicated, and it's impossible to "share" equipment. Need to make it a true partnership.

4. **Dale Tribby highlighted upcoming topics that require a status review.**

- Hunter days – look to how they are tied to different agreements
- Upcoming year
- 2017 legislature
- Next fall's meeting – suggested returning to Plentywood area. What project types should be viewed?

Dale asks the council to provide input on hunter-days associated with conservation leases.
Council Recommendations

- Need to take out the "minimum" statement from the field manual – general agreement form council
- Do not get rid of the conservation lease concept, keep as an option.
- Need to look at opportunities that will give the most value for the expenditure.

Dale stated that the number of sage-grouse hunters has gone down. If hunter-days are left up to negotiation, are we really serving the public need for hunting opportunities? Don't know if that is best serving the public need. Would the DNRC funding be a better use for this effort? Reasonable public access is a requirement through the UGBEP; are we achieving this through long-term sagebrush leases? We need to consider that the season may not be open. Landowner controlled is minimal access. It was also noted that the $10M allocation does not require access.

Charlie Noland pointed out that there are three options for landowners. (1) Lease to outfitting, (2) go with DNRC funds, or (3) go with UGBEP. May not be dealing with many big landowners.

Mike Jensen compared taking same amount of funding for work at Ninepipe versus spending it sagebrush grassland. He feels there is a lot of funding for sagebrush.

Dale stated that there is general recognition that UGBEP has already committed $200K for match for the NFWF grant. Council needs to look beyond.

Motion – Replace the reference in the field manual regarding a minimum number of hunter days with negotiated reasonable public access as part of conservation lease agreements (Bill McChesney moved, Gordon Haugen seconded). Passed

Motion – Advise FWP defer expenditures for sagebrush habitat leases on hold after the department fulfills funding requirements associated with the current NFWF Grant (Mike Jensen moved, Bill Howell seconded). NO VOTE, SEE BELOW

Discussion – Bill McChesney suggested there may be better information after MSGOT has time to help implement the $10M grant program; we may want to see if those funds can be applied to long term leases. Respectfully ask withdrawal of motion. Mike Jensen and Bill Howell agreed.

Carolyn Sime will be invited to attend the meeting in March. Rick noted that the potential to spend NFWF funding between now and next meeting is minimal.

5. **Debbie provided the Council with an outlook to 2016 program implementation.**

- CRP Seed Cost Share and Open Fields – detailed review of both opportunities and associated layout/payments/rules
- Charlie Noland suggested considering paying different cost share levels with different Conservation Practices (minimal for DNC and considerably more for pollinator practice)
- Craig provided his experience with 3 pollinator plots. After planting, forbs disappeared after about 3 years. Even Maximilian sunflower fizzled after 3 years.

6. **Dale opened up discussion on the upcoming 2017 Legislative session.**

Beginning this January, FWP will gear up for next legislative session. Are there items that the council wishes to pursue relative to the laws that guide the program?

- Mike Jensen stated that given the demeanor of the legislature, it likely isn't a good time to make adjustments to the program.
- Ken McDonald pointed out the funds for pheasant release carry forward and are only available for that purpose. It would be nice to be able to tap into that funding in the future.
- Jay Gore wanted clarification of House Bill 5, which prohibits purchasing of land. Ken confirmed that it is only tied to the biennial funding authority.
- At this time, Council recommends to maintain status quo for UGBEP statutes.

7. **Other items.**

- Gordon recommended Tom Pick, who has expressed an interest, for a seat on the council; Gordon will step down.
- Jay noted that we will also need to fill one legislative position – a republican senator.
- In the past, Ben Deeble sat on an UGBEP committee. He expressed his thanks to the committee for their dedication to the UGBEP.
- For the next meeting in March 2016, we will invite the following people:
    - Carolyn Sime, to discuss MSGOT
    - David Nikonow, to provide an overview of the NWTF cooperative position
    - Heidi Brewer, FSA Chief Program Specialist, and Alison Hoffer, FSA Agricultural Program Specialist, will provide USDA-FSA program information to the Council.

2016 Meeting dates:
March 15 – 16 (half day), Helena.
October 3 – 4, Plentywood

Chairman Tribby adjourned the meeting at 2:30 pm.