
MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- Draft
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Montana WILD
Helena, MT
March 14-15, 2016 (Meeting 21)

Council Members: Jay Gore, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen, Bill McChesney, Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie, and Dale Tribby (Chair).

FWP Employees and Conservation Partners: Dan Bailey, Jake Doggett, Debbie Hohler, Charlie Holtz, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Brad Schmitz, Graham Taylor, and Jackie Tooke

Guests: Bob Jeffrey

Monday, March 14

1. Dale called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m.
 - a. Introductions were made.
 - b. Rick provided a recap of the Council's beginning with the UGBEP and the development of the long-term strategic plan. The Council was created in 2009 through HB 499 and has been invaluable to the program. Now that the program is in operational mode, the meetings are held twice a year (spring and fall). Our meeting today is to review plans for the upcoming field season. The Council's role is to provide recommendations and monitoring program activities.
 - c. Dale identified topics he wants the Council to consider during the meeting:
 - i. Council membership: We have vacant positions. Council members should let Dale know if they want to leave.
 - ii. Dale wants to discuss legislature-related topics.
 - iii. Open Fields and the cap on acres (currently 160 acres per landowner). Dale wants to know if there is opportunity to expand acreage.
 - iv. Are there properties that may not be able to tap into UGBEP funding because of the funding cap.
 - v. We are 5 years (mid-way) into the strategic plan.
 - d. Dale reviewed the previous meeting's minutes and highlights of the tour at Ninepipe with John Grant and Charlie Holtz.
 - i. Discussion on habitat leases, field manual, and partnership positions

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- ii. Discussion on sagebrush leases and the minimum hunter-days. We did away with specifics about hunter-days as they will be an item to negotiate. There shouldn't be a minimum number of hunter days.
 - iii. Jay would like to see more work at Ninepipe as that's where Missoula hunters go to hunt. Charlie's work is starting to move forward and is a real accomplishment. Big Sky Upland Bird Association has given some funding toward that effort. It is similar to work east of Billings. Dale agreed that it is good to see UGBEP funds go to Ninepipe WMA; it is a hunter destination. Joe added that the locals were excited about the work being done at Ninepipe.
 - iv. Council had updates on Sage Grouse Conservation Act and MSGOT.
 - v. At previous legislature, the Habitat Programs were zeroed but amended back in. There are no fee acquisitions.
2. Debbie Hohler provided a review of the program's Strategic Plan Implementation. Council provided the following comments:
- ❖ Bill McChesney questioned the value of retaining pheasant releasing.
 - ❖ Mike Jensen stated that pheasant releases are a cheap way to open up access. He recommends the department look at how we plant versus "should" we plant. He still believes there is some validity to releasing birds.
 - ❖ Bill Howell said that pheasant releases brings people to a community.
 - ❖ Charlie stated that it's mandated to have this funding set aside for pheasant releases; it is a tremendous "door opener" for working with landowners.
 - ❖ Jay Gore feels it may be more useful to hunters if older birds are released, closer to the start of the hunting season.
 - ❖ Mike commented that there was some success related to a quail surrogate with feed. The birds were plenty wild when released.
 - ❖ Dale pointed out that this is a very diverse committee—neither a right nor wrong answer.
 - ❖ Bill Howell asked if the department doesn't use the funds for emergency feeding, should funds be used for turkey transplants instead? Dale doesn't see a substantial need beyond current allocation.
 - ❖ Mike asked the department why access guides can't be distributed to other communities.

Motion (Mike Jensen) – Council recommends the department print additional copies of the hunting access guide to allow the regions and habitat specialists to place booklets strategically at locations as they see fit. Seconded by Bill Howell. Passed unanimously.

Council had additional discussion about guide distribution. Charlie agrees the guides should be available locally and channeled through habitat specialists. Perhaps the department should do on a trial period for 2 or 3 years.

- ❖ Jay Gore asked if there was a “reset clock” for pheasant releases. Debbie confirmed there used to be a winter reset however new ARM refers now to significant habitat improvements, which would allow another 5 years.
- ❖ Per Mike Jensen’s suggestion, the Council wants a **Cash flow statement** for the next five years. The statement would show obligations and anticipated revenues. Income would be estimated at \$600,000 per year and referenced alongside expenditures. Dale stated it would be helpful to take the 5-year average income and project alongside known expenditures and obligations. This would give everyone a better idea of where the program balance would likely be in 2020 or beyond. Are we seeing a steady trend in what we have on hand and into the future? Suggested that Debbie make general assumptions of costs related to staff salaries.
- ❖ Dale stated that now that we have the three positions filled, we would expect to see an increase in number of dollars spent on the ground.
- ❖ Mike Jensen emphasized the need for Habitat Specialists get in touch—and remain in touch—with FSA offices.

Council discussion of Open Fields sign-up:

- ❖ Charlie wanted to know if Open Fields was aligned with the general CRP sign-up. Debbie confirmed it is.
- ❖ Should we consider larger blocks of CRP, beyond 160 acres?
- ❖ Charlie asked if the enrollment cap was lifted to 320 acres, would the increase deplete the funding?
- ❖ Jackie said she had a producer with 640 acres of CRP, but because he was only able to enroll 160 acres, it wasn’t enough of an incentive.

Motion (Charlie Noland moved): Council recommends raising the Open Fields cap option up to 320 acres, to include new and existing enrollments, if the current VPA-HIP grant allows for such an increase. Jay Gore seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

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- ❖ Mike Jensen was concerned about the pheasant release 5-year limit. Landowners will not provide access if they can no longer participate.
 - ❖ Jay Gore stated that the objective in the strategic plan is different than simply providing access.
 - ❖ Ken Plourde pointed out that the current rules require significant habitat enhancements to participate in the pheasant release program another 5 years. This year will be the test for how well this works to encourage landowners to make habitat improvements.

3. Jake Doggett – Report on Region 4’s strategic plan and work plan

Jake spent time visiting the USDA offices during the Open Fields enrollment period. Oftentimes found that access can be a hard sell with some of these offices. Jake has several projects in the works, including habitat management leases, BMA projects, Marias River WMA conversion, Open Fields, and pheasant releases.

Questions and comments from the Council:

- ❖ Mike Jensen wanted Jake to elaborate on what was meant by not being able to get work done on the ground? Jake reported that one of the limiting components on public and private land is the lack of farming operators.
- ❖ Charlie Noland pointed out that Don Schweitzer does shelterbelt work out of Lewistown.
- ❖ Charlie would also like to hear more about the crested wheat grass conversion.

4. Ken Plourde – Report on Region 6’s strategic plan and work plan

Kenny is focusing on project renewal and monitoring this field season. He pointed out that increased frequency for haying and grazing options may be a reason for low interest in Open Fields sign-up. In terms of project renewals, the project expenditure cap could affect existing grazing system renewals.

Questions/comments from the Council:

- ❖ Charlie would like to see pollinator plots, perhaps on the tour.
5. Rick provided an overview of the cooperative positions. There are a lot of people in Montana doing great things for conservation!
- a. SGI Biologists: The Department helps fund the Glasgow position. There are also positions in Malta, Forsyth, and Ekalaka.
 - b. Farm Bill Biologists in Conrad, Scobey, and Chinook. FWP does contribute funding but not through the UGBEP.

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- c. Farming positions: Billings, Denton, and Charlo areas. UGBEP contributes funds towards these positions.
 - d. Hi-Line Migratory Bird position (Great Falls)
 - e. Migratory Bird position in Bozeman – an administrative position
 - f. Dave Nikonow: NWTF cooperative wildlife biologist funded by USFWS and UGBEP. His focus is on mountain grouse and wild turkey habitats.
 - g. There are 5 Partners for Fish and Wildlife positions in Montana (USFWS)
 - h. Nature Conservancy (3 positions)
6. Charlie Holtz, Ninepipe PF Cooperative Habitat Specialist, provided updates of his work.
- ❖ 423 acres herbicide treatments, focus was on monotypes.
 - ❖ Smooth brome was eradicated in some areas and manipulated in others via interseeding

Questions and comments from the Council:

- ❖ Mike Jensen questioned about fertilizers and other additives. He recommended using urea via a small spreader to help get the seedings going.
 - ❖ Dale Tribby wanted to know if there was a plan in place that lays out a long-term management plan. Charlie stated that the Ninepipe WMA plan is the long term. On WPAs, he looks for permission to proceed in a certain fashion when conditions allow.
7. David Nikonow – NWTF Cooperative wildlife biologist through a partnership funded by USFS, NWTF, and UGBEP. His focus is on the Bitterroot and Lolo National Forests. Some of the projects he is looking at as potential habitat enhancements for mountain grouse and turkeys are:
- ❖ Sweeney Creek: a fee title purchase through the USFS. Dave is working with partnerships to pay for purchase for USFS.
 - ❖ Swamp Eddy Timber Sale: a 9,200 acres, thinning and understory burns low to high slope
 - Focus is to tweak units to benefit upland game birds
 - Provide NEPA assistance through preparing wildlife reports
 - ❖ Murphy Creek – commercial and pre-commercial thinning
 - Help with design and prepare wildlife report for NEPA
 - ❖ Frenchtown Face
 - Ponderosa pine restoration
 - Treating 6 units totaling 668 acres; burning to benefit birds

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- Coordinate monitoring – vegetation and some wildlife monitoring via help from U of M students and remote cameras
 - ❖ Redd Bull
 - 12,500 acre timber sale
 - Walking units and tweak to improve habitat, help resource specialists make decisions
 - Benefit all three species of forest grouse
 - ❖ Blackfoot Community Conservation Area
 - Collaboratively managed area
 - Lots of ruffed grouse and some wild turkeys
 - Aspen enhancement will help with brood production
 - ❖ South Fork Ecosystem Maintenance Burning
 - Helping design fire
 - Oversee monitoring using U of M students
 - ❖ French Gulch/Madison Gulch
 - ❖ Johnson Creek/Slowery Gulch
 - Focus will be on maintaining and growing small aspen clones

8. Public Comments

NO COMMENTS

9. Dan Bailey: Discussion on Farm Bill Biologists. Three positions have been hired, funded by a 75/25 split supplemented with \$15,000 from DU. Dan acknowledged there has been some concern raised about overlap with other positions. Dan feels there has been open dialogue between all involved. Currently, the FB Bios are actively working with contacts and landowners.

Questions from Council:

- ❖ Is there capacity to do work on the ground? Dan replied that the biologists will not be working on the equipment. However, the intent is to be a “one stop shop.”
- ❖ Dale asked Dan to extend an invitation for one or more of the PF bios to possibly attend the next meeting in October. Dan feels it’s important for them to meet the Council members and want to be part of the team to help with FWP efforts.

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10. Jackie Tooke: Jackie acknowledged that she works with a great group of people in Region 7. She described the focus areas of her region and the 2 primary goals of R7's strategic plan: conservation of sage-grouse habitat and grazing systems.
- ❖ Veebaray Company – 16,000 acre ranch south of Enid. FWP staff are working with the landowner to develop a three separate 3-treatment rest-rotation grazing system. Dave Haverkamp, NRCS Soil Con, is also providing technical assistance. Total estimated expenditures are \$370,000. The land has historically been outfitted. The hope is to eventually get the land into Block Management. Proposal is still under negotiations.
 - ❖ Open Fields – Jackie marketed Open Fields with staff at FSA and NRCS offices. Only received 3 applications for this round. Much of the CRP doesn't qualify because the CRP is enrolled in BMP.

Questions/comments -

- ❖ Dale stated that the costs of renewing grazing systems that are largely functional wouldn't cost the same as initial costs. What would it take to renew these systems, particularly if there are minimal needs?
- ❖ Mike Jensen recollects the Russell ranch, which had rotational grazing. The project was great for landscape improvements, but access was limited and benefits to game birds were limited. The return to upland game bird hunters was minuscule. We need a measure to determine the return to hunters given the considerable expense.

11. Debbie Hohler updated the Council with the work plans from Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5.

- ❖ Region 1 will focus efforts on Ninepipe WMA – Establish and maintain nesting cover, brood cover, and winter cover. For the Northshore WMA – work to enhance habitat for UGB, focusing on food plot establishment with the lessee.
- ❖ Region 2 - Continue to apply UGBEP incentives and technical expertise toward forest management projects through the efforts of the cooperative wildlife biologist.
- ❖ Region 3 – Will continue efforts to enhance UGB habitat on Canyon Ferry and Poindexter Slough.
- ❖ Region 5 – A new HF Specialist was hired in the Billings area. His name is Ben Hoesl. Maintenance of the existing enhancements will continue. Aspen regeneration is planned along the Beartooth Face and the north end of the Pryor Mountains.

Questions/comments-

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- ❖ Jake Doggett asked how involved other regions are in program. The other regions are engaged to varying degrees. The level of participation may be influenced by workloads and when opportunities present themselves.
 - ❖ Dale wanted to know if there are projects in Helena being reviewed at this time or are we waiting for projects coming in? There are about 8 under review right now.
 - ❖ Dale wanted to know if it is an impediment to send proposals through the process? Is it efficient or should the region have more latitude to reduce review for food plots or other simple project types?
 - ❖ Dale expressed the need to have the legislators participating on the Council. We need support for the upland game bird program through the legislature. He encourages the department to prioritize one or more of the people named and get them engaged.
 - ❖ Charlie added that the legislators are also helpful in giving feedback to the council on legislative issues.
 - ❖ Tribby – interested in knowing if there are council members who have put more thought into leaving the council? Intent to leave in the near future?
 - a. Jay Gore plans to leave after the October 2016 meeting.
 - b. No one else indicated they wanted to leave.

12. Regarding the \$100,000 cap: if the council wanted to increase to 200K cap, what would it require? Dale added there should also be a timeframe. What happens if the project expires? Is it considered a new project during a period of time? Jay recommended FWP come back in the fall with an operational definition for the project regarding the \$100K cap. Dale stated if there are items that need to be run by legal, do that before it comes to the Council.

Day 2 – March 15, 2016

1. Dale convened the meeting at 8:30 and reviewed the agenda for the day.
2. Carolyn Sime: Montana Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy Overview and Update
 - a. Carolyn technically works under Tim Baker and is housed in DNRC
 - b. Lack of regulatory mechanisms was primary focus of USFWS when making listing decision
 - c. A review of the timeline for USFWS and state of Montana processes was conducted.

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- d. Sage-grouse was not listed due in part to amendments to federal land planning and commitments for conservation. There is now a great need to demonstrate functional success.
 - e. Executive Order (EO) implementation: Carolyn provided an overview on the core area strategy. This mirrors Wyoming and guides activities in designated habitats where state agencies have permitting authority. EO only applies within designated habitats.
 - f. January 1 - March 1: They have reviewed 188 projects and responded to about 160 projects. If a project exceeds a threshold cap in the EO, it will be reviewed to recheck math and/or visit with project proponent to identify flexibilities to reduce impacts.
 - g. Mitigation is very early in development and is based on “Avoid, Minimize, Restore/Reclaim, Replace (compensatory mitigation)”
 - h. Stewardship Act: Establishes a Marketplace
 - i. Habitat exchange or conservation bank
 - ii. Credits created by habitat conservation
 - iii. Debits created by impacts to habitat
 - i. Habitat Quantification Tool Mathematical way to calculate credits, debits (mirror image?)
 - j. Kick starter fund
 - i. Create credits to sell to developers
 - ii. Grant application process – try to get a good look at all of the projects
 - k. Goal is net conservation gain, more or better
 - l. Mitigation is for making up a loss; conservation is for its own sake. Leverage both? Make them work well together.
 - m. Habitat Exchange or Conservation Bank will hold credits for sale
 - i. Likely a third party entity, which will hold all liability.
 - ii. Colorado and Wyoming are working on developing habitat exchanges.

Questions

- ❖ Jay asked if there was a timeline for the bank. Carolyn stated there will be work through Western Governors’ Association and it will be developing a timeline at end of this month.
- ❖ Concern was raised about the possibility of pulling funds from FWP habitat programs to support compensatory mitigation program.
- ❖ Quantification tool – how is it put together? Hired consultants have helped put this together in other states. Recognize the need to make Montana-specific layout of debits and credits. Carolyn would like to develop a technical group to review work of other states.

3. Heidi Brewer, FSA, Chief Program Specialist

❖ Heidi.brewer@mt.usda.gov

❖ 406-587-6875

Heidi provided an overview of CRP in Montana

- a. CRP Continuous Sign Up: 1093 offers, 189,000 acres were submitted for funding (Daniels was the highest), Roosevelt, Choteau, Hill, Sheridan. 69,000 acres will be expiring; next year, 385,000 acres expiring. Unclear how rankings will prevail nationally.
- b. CRP Grasslands – CRP for Cowboys – can do anything on CRP. Annual payment \$15/acre; Ravalli \$16.
- c. Continuous CRP is part of the cap.

4. Catherine Wightman – Conservation Leases for Working Lands Overview

- a. Focus is on native habitats/native habitats CRP – grasslands, shrublands, wetlands
- b. Incentive, long term protection, limit potential for ESA listings
- c. Sagebrush Leases (200,000 acres) exceeded what SGI was able to accomplish
- d. Two focal areas tied to two pots of funding
 - a. National Fish and Wildlife (NFWF) Prairie Pothole Region includes priority areas involving grassland birds, sage-grouse, and wetland complexes. UGBEP and Mig Bird Wetland Program serve as match.
 - b. Prairie Pothole Region NFWF Grant Access:
 1. UGBEP minimum 10 hunter-days per quarter section.
 2. Mig Bird – 1 hunter-day per quarter section.
 3. NFWF – 1 hunter-day/quarter section minimum.
 - c. VPA HIP Sage-Grouse Initiative
 - i. Targeted in sage-grouse core areas that have been enrolled in SGI
 - ii. 30 year lease to follow through
 - iii. Minimum 3 hunter days per quarter, minimum 3 recreational days per quarter section

Questions/Comments

- ❖ Bob Jeffrey: Regarding access, he wonders about putting all programs that have access combined on one page for linking to the various sources. The Department has the Hunt Planner, which does show an overview of access and other recreational information (camping, etc.)
- ❖ Graham: Asked about the timing of sending letters. We will want to consider the best time.

5. Council Summary on Dept's Work Plan

1) Open Fields Clarification – wants FWP to look at capacity to increase capacity 320 acres.

Council wants to use a **mix of dollars**, not funding exclusively with UGBEP.

2) Direction for Department to look at \$100,000 funding cap. Provide a recommendation at October, to include review by legal staff.

3) Sagebrush leases usually have minimal access days. A high area of interest for a couple of regions to pursue sagebrush leases.

Mike Jensen: He is concerned about sagebrush leases due to lack of benefit to hunters.

Charlie Noland: Hunter days per dollar expended. Dollars per quarter section per year, would that be a formula for access? Hunters are consumers, and so need return on investment.

4) The Department made a commitment to communicate with Council if a grant opportunity shows up in the interim.

5) Dale Tribby: In the future, as presentations are made, would like to see specificity on individual projects. Actual properties anticipate working on, opens up for more feedback from council. It was helpful for Council to hear back from staff on project proposals that had a lot of upfront planning time yet fell through for some reason. Staff should continue to make council aware of why opportunities disappeared.

6) Mike Jensen liked the input from specialists. If they are doing a project, what method are they using to actually get the project done? How difficult was it to get the farming aspect done?

6) Jay Gore: Regarding the evaluation of habitat quality for pheasant releases. What are the staff looking at?

7) Jay Gore: Where are we at with filling vacant council positions? Need letter to Pete Husby ASAP and the two Legislators worked with ASAP. Rep. Cook and Sen. Coenhour.

8) UGBEP Access Guides: Council recommends increasing the number and distributing beyond regional/field offices.

9) **Next meeting: Plentywood, 10/3 – 10/4.** Meeting on front end, then spend at least half day or more looking at different sites in NE corner of MT.

10) Charlie liked hearing the presentations today.

11) Dave Nikonow and Farm Bill Biologists will be participating in October meeting. If we need to go into middle part of the afternoon on second day, should make sure to have enough time to hear from those responsible for program implementation. Would like to hear what they are doing to advance the program and upland game birds in general.

12) Charlie Noland: There is equipment available through FSA, NRCS offices, do the specialists know where they are located and available?

2:00 pm: Meeting adjourned