
**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Notes & Summary -- Draft
March 23-24, 2026**

Meeting Location:

DoubleTree, Elkhorn Room
22 N Last Chance Gulch, Helena, MT 59601

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Scot Brown, Rep. Tom France, Sen. Gregg Hunter, Scott Kanning, Tom Keegan, Trent Kleppen, Chris Merkle, Kerry O’Connell, Matt Smith, Art Soukkala, and Tristan Veverka (absent). A Quorum was established.

FWP employees, conservation partners, and members of the public: Stephanie Berry, Mitch Carpenter, Director Christy Clark, Brett Dorak, Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes Bridger Line, Ken McDonald, Ali Marschner, Jesse Mae, Kirk Miller, Dave Nikonow, Ken Plourde, Sawyer Reagan, Brad Schmitz, Matt Strauch, Nate Tavaglione, Scott Thompson, Hunter VanDonsel, and Crystal White.

Participants: 31

Presenters’ PowerPoints will be available on the program’s web page.

<https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/commission-councils-committees/upland-game-bird-enhancement-advisory-council>

Monday, March 23

Trent started the meeting at 9:00 am. Introductions were made, and two of the three new Council members were present: Matt Smith and Chris Merkle. Trent recapped the Sept. 8-9, 2025, minutes.

Motion #1: (Bonsell/Keegan) To accept the September 2025 minutes as presented.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Ken Plourde outlined the Council’s history and purpose, highlighting key milestones such as supporting the hiring of program staff, advancing legislative updates on pheasant releases, and, most recently, securing increased program funding beginning in FY 2028.

UGBEP State-wide (Hohler)

Debbie presented the biennial budget, current obligations, and available balances for habitat and bird planting. She also provided a summary of the program’s state-wide enrollments from November 2025, including enhanced habitat acres, access acres, and obligations. For the 2026 field season, we have approximately \$60,000 in VPA-HIP to put on the ground.

Additional program highlights included proposed enrollment activities (e.g., 2026 CRP Add-on Leases) and anticipation for a VPA-HIP funding announcement *hopefully* in 2026. Additional information shared:

- Working with FWP Budget Bureau, we are exploring ways to revert bird planting funds

to the habitat fund. Note – the bird planting funds are from “old authority” from 2019. Bird planting is still possible using the program’s common fund.

- September 2025, staff began to work on updating the Field Manual to reflect the revisions in the 2024 Strategic Plan.
- Debbie provided a status of the Partner contracts. Funding sources are uncertain currently because of some changes in deliverables.

Council requested a table be added to the presentation that provides an overview of UGBEP’s contribution to partnerships.

Division/Department updates (McDonald)

Ken expressed his thanks to the Council for their work to help increase revenue to the Program by increasing license contributions to the program.

Effective March 1, 2026, license contributions to UGBEP were updated:

- Resident upland game bird license increased from \$2 to \$4.50
- Nonresident upland game bird license increased from \$23 to \$40
- 3-day nonresident upland game bird license increased from \$10 to \$20
- Combination sports increased from \$2 to \$4.50
- Nonresident big game combination increased from \$23 to \$40

FWP will need to request authority during the 2027 Legislative session. The potential increase may bring an additional \$1M to the program, for a total of approximately \$2.9 million available the next biennium.

Additional highlights:

- The general fund is in the red, approx. \$200 – 300 million. FWP will not have any “asks” during the session.
- Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) will receive \$2.5 million annually.
- HB 2 (Operations) – will not be asking for more staff
- Governor’s Office - high priority for access with a goal of increasing acres through Block by 250,000 additional acres.

A question was asked if there’s any potential vulnerability to UGBEP capital that might be used to offset the general fund. Ken replied that there is no vulnerability. If there is any push to change the earmarked money, it would make the program’s fund vulnerable. FWP can’t do any diversions.

Discussion on WHIP funds and UGBEP. There may be opportunity to leverage funds through cost-shares but WHIP won’t help increase capacity per se. We don’t know how competitive the WHIP grants will be but will gain a better understanding once the program rolls out.

Rep. France emphasized the importance of program dollars going to access.

Council’s discussion on FWP’s councils and project approvals. Regarding the Mig Bird Program – the direction for projects less than \$50,000, is to fund them if eligibility is met. This process is easier to get work done. Otherwise, the Director still approves the projects.

Clarification: FWP can't give authority to outside interests (e.g., councils) to decide funding. By doing so, it may remove FWP's authority.

Communicating UGBEP budget balances to the legislature remains challenging. For example, a 10-year lease contract sets aside funds for annual disbursements during the term of the contract. The funds are still reported as unspent, causing misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the program's balances. Wildlife staff continue to try and educate the difference between obligated balances and expended dollars.

Discussion on WHIP funds and DNRC. At the time of the meeting, it was noted that rules were under development. WHIP Council may be able to consider funding DNRC. We shall see.

Discussion on pen-raised pheasants at the prison. Trent stated there were ongoing talks within and outside the Council. **The Council requested they receive FWP reports on this topic.**

General discussion on UGBEP

Budget – to enroll as many eligible projects as possible, contract terms may be shortened to make room for as many eligible contracts as possible.

Contract renewals vs new contracts. The Strategic Plan addresses the importance of renewals (e.g., maintaining projects and cooperator relationships). Staff collaborate to seek balance while operating within a defined budget. See the above discussion point.

A question was asked about cooperator satisfaction and retention. Cooperators leave the program generally because land has been sold. Practically all land sales results in the continuation of the project with the new landowner.

Discussion on carbon credits and UGBEP.

Discussion on partnering with CSKT. CRP leases and an ongoing irrigation project with NRCS may have opportunity. Hiring challenges are realized because cost of living in the Mission Valley is high. There is strong interest in filling the partner position vacated by Liam O'Connor.

Council breaks for lunch at noon.

Director Clark's meeting with the UGBEP Council

Director Clark expressed appreciation to the Council for their dedication to the UGBEP and their support of staff.

The Governor's office routinely evaluates state-run councils to determine which ones should remain in place. There are no plans to dissolve the UGBEP CAC. The Director couldn't be happier.

One of her primary goals is to continue strengthening the connection between agriculture, FWP, and producer relationships.

Discussion on the challenge of "allocations vs expenditures" as it relates to reporting the UGBEP balances. Director Clark was receptive and noted that continued communication is the best tool.

Discussion on increasing funds for UGBEP by increasing authority. Director Clark pointed out that there are tough decisions to make in the future, specifically department cuts and which license fees to increase. She plans to have a constituent meeting to discuss these issues. Rep. France noted there will be fiscal concerns going into the next session. He requested that conservation funding remain a priority during fiscal discussions, especially with solid investments close to the urban/rural divide that also promote landowner and FWP relationships.

Bed tax and marijuana money will always come up in every session. The director stated we need strong talking points here.

Director Clark met with landowners whenever she could. FWP frequently hosted open public meetings, mostly in Eastern Montana. Landowner meetings focused on policy and procedures, and the public could voice their opinions. She encouraged the public to be active through the commission process and other public meetings.

Director Clark believed the one criticism the public has with FWP was that they don't feel heard. Promoting organic relationships between landowners and FWP biologists has been key. Brad Schmitz has observed that relationships can break down over time. Many relationships need ongoing nurturing. Brad voiced support in building landowner relationships but noted the ever-increasing workloads on biologists makes time for relationships challenging. We need to refocus efforts back onto the landowner. He felt it was a big plus that Christy comes from the ag community.

Council thanked Director Clark for coming to the meeting and responding to Council's questions and comments. Director Clark stayed for Justin Hughes' presentation.

UGBEP Habitat Specialists' Presentations (presentations will be located on the UGBEP Council webpage)

1:40 pm: Justin Hughes

Discussion on virtual fencing – will be an agenda item at next Council meeting

2:10 pm: Matt Strauch

Follow-up questions

- If Matt had an extra \$100,000, he could put it on the ground.
- Is R4 trending up like R7? Matt feels historical project areas like Conrad may be plateauing. In the eastern part of the region, there is more interest in grazing management and there's good potential for projects.
- Do colonies (largest landowners in the region) have interest in the program? Yes, if economic incentives. Most colonies are in Block Management.

2:33 pm: Mitch Carpenter

- Rep. France asked if "door knocking" was a part of his strategy? Mitch's primary focus is to learn the program, but door knocking will be important in the immediate future.
- Mitch stated he could get an additional \$100,000 on the ground through project renewals and new contracts.

Matt Smith mentioned there are projections that interest in CRP will increase in the upcoming years.

Partner Presentations

Pheasants Forever is looking to FWP and MSU to model sharp-tailed grouse (STG) populations. There is a National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) proposal to get funding to model grasslands related to STG. Modeling will be tied back to the Grassland Initiative.

Rep. France asked how we can get more UGBEP projects on the ground through PF funding. Hunter responded that it is critical to overlap/leverage FWP and PF programs. He wants to help move projects.

Montana Outdoor Legacy Foundation may be able to donate to UGBEP, but we need to explore this more.

Kirk Miller stated that he thinks PF lobbyists could help with the program.

Trent asked how PF can identify projects that do result in access for FWP.

Discussion on sage-grouse conservation

Conservation is managed by DNRC, not FWP, although funding comes from FWP. There is very little relationship between FWP and Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSCOT).

NWTF

Bridger Line provided updates on his work plan. He has worked closely with Liz Bradley and staff in Region 2, working on weed management, upland game bird records and data management, and surveys.

Dave Nikonow worked mostly on federal lands but also coordinates with DNRC. There might be additional opportunity for Bridger. Good Neighbor Policy also has possibilities.

Additional updates: National Forestry Initiative will be terminated by NRCS effective April 2026. 31 foresters across the country will be terminated.

Monday meeting recessed at 4:10 pm.

Tuesday, March 24

Trent began the meeting at 9:00 am and provided a brief recap of yesterday's meeting highlights.

- UGBEP is at a funding threshold – maintaining current projects, adding new projects, and supporting partnerships have strained the funding available to the program. Staff have been creative to fund eligible contracts by adjusting contract lengths.
- The 3 Habitat Specialists have confirmed they could each put an additional \$100,000 on the ground.
- Director Clark was here to answer questions and see Justin Hughes's presentation.

Trent congratulated Art Soukkala, who received the Distinguished Service Award at Montana's TWS this year.

Council asked if there is a way to break up UGBEP funds to see specific activities.

Mike Lewis, FWP Human Dimensions Program Supervisor provided an update on the survey efforts for HB 568. The legislature required 4 surveys – initially nonresidents (NR) but now includes residents (R). Now there are a total of 8 surveys. His surveys don't replace the annual hunter harvest statistics. They are supplemental to the harvest surveys.

The primary question is where do R and NR hunt. Categories include public lands, BMA, private (non-Block), private (not owned by the hunter), private (guided), private (with access fees). Additional questions include number of hunter-days and harvest success.

5,000 survey participants were selected randomly across the state and were at least 18 years old. Thus, surveys were sent to 5,000 R and 5,000 NR upland game bird hunters. One thing to note is that hunters get UGB licenses as part of a combo but don't always hunt birds.

1st mailing – letter sent with a QR code that takes participant to the online survey.

2nd mailing – sent to nonrespondents.

3rd mailing – mailing includes a business reply envelope.

Mike anticipates a 30% return rate, likely higher for NR.

Rep. France asked if it was possible to receive the survey data and report prior to the session. Mike responded that it is likely possible. He also just hired a temporary worker and could likely get close to finalizing in the next 2 top 3 months.

Discussion continued with good questions. Council thanked Mike for presenting the survey info at the meeting.

Block Management Update, Jason Kool

Jason provided Block Management Program updates to the Council.

Representative France requested total budget and other sources on Block Management. Jason will provide the info.

Rep. France stated he would promote and support marketing for Block Management.

Trent and Council provided summaries for discussion points during this meeting:

- Discussion on capacity. Council recognizes the need for administrative help. Brad recommended that council make note of the issue in minutes. A letter to the Director's Office would also help, including acknowledging that legislators worked diligently to get the program more money to increase capacity. Brad added that their recommendation is well within the purview of the Council.

Rep. France recognized there will be state-wide cuts but that license dollars should not be cut. He didn't imagine growing the program didn't mean not hiring people.

Council and department discussed FTEs (modified and temp).

Council Action Items

1. **The UGBEP Council advises the Department to address the administrative bottleneck.**
2. **Advise the chairman to establish communication with Ken McDonald, Quentin Kujala, and Director Clark to help resolve the administrative needs.**
3. **Council to write a formal letter to the Director's Office regarding the ask for administrative help.**

Motion #2: (O'Connell/Brown) To accept the Council Action Items as presented.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Tom Keegan pointed out that increasing UGBEP capacity will further the governor's goal to increase access acreage.

Kerry recommended communication begins with Ken McDonald first. Council discussed the most effective way to request that Ken McDonald clarify the process and strategy for moving forward with their advisement.

11:30 am Public Comment: none

Council discussed options for the Region 4 fall tour.

1. Conrad area to visit historic projects, then go north to Sweet Grass Hills
2. DNRC site and challenges
3. Lewistown and Denton areas

Motion #3. (France/Hunter) To tour the Conrad area during the fall Council meeting.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Meeting dates will be Sept. 14 and 15 (Monday and Tuesday). Travel day is Sunday, Sept. 13.

Guest List:

- Erik Eneboe, DNRC
- Dir. Clark
- Legislators
 - Sen. Llew Jones, Conrad
 - Sen. Butch and Doreen Gillespie
 - Debbie will reach out to Rep. France and Sen. Hunter for additional suggestions.
- Jeff Cornell – Matt will reach out to him

Potential presentation topics from the following ag-industry groups:

- Stockgrowers
- Farmers Union
- Grain Growers

Council and FWP discussed UGBEP presenting at AG associations. Matt Smith stated it's important to get

promotional items to hand out at conventions. These items help sell the program.

Council Closing Remarks

Trent nominated Tom Keegan to the chairmanship, beginning fall 2026. Trent's last official term as a council member will be this fall, but he plans to continue his support by attending future meetings as a member of the public.

Tom shared some of his background and perspective with Council. He is an avid duck hunter and enjoys hunting with his labs. Tom is a lifelong wildlife scientist and holds 3 degrees.

Trent reflected on his chairmanship. Achieved milestones include:

- Bird planting fund statute revised – program no longer required to meet a minimum expenditure annually.
- Increased program revenue through statutory change by increasing license dollar contributions to the program.
- Fostered light and passion to the program through meeting with program constituents and supporters.

Rep. Tom France was pleased with meeting Trent and for his leadership. He was glad Trent plans to stay involved.

Sen. Gregg Hunter expressed that he was impressed with the Council, noting that it had been demonstrably engaged and productive.

Scott Kanning felt this was a great meeting and wanted to continue working on unblocking bottlenecks. The program has been growing, and he liked that's happening.

Art Soukkala looked forward to getting more funds.

Kerry O'Connell has been involved for some time and felt this meeting has been the best so far. The information was excellent, and she learns something new every time. She thanked Trent and expressed support for Tom.

Tom Keegan thanked Trent for his service.

Matt Smith came in with a blank slate. He used to raise pheasants alongside his grandfather. He is impressed by the program's focus on habitat.

Doug Bonsell stated that the habitat specialists "knocked the socks off" with proposals. He gave thanks to Trent, stating he's been a great leader.

Scot Brown expressed his thanks to Trent for doing a great job. He looks forward to working with Tom. He's pleased the Council has been very productive and fun. Chris Merker is excited to be on the Council.

Trent Kleppen thanked everyone and thanked Kenny Plourde for telling him about the Council. There

were lots of things he didn't know. The program takes a lot of work, both from staff and legislators. Council is a network of a diverse group of people and interests. He continues to want success of the program by putting habitat on the ground for hunters. His participation in the Council has been a great personal experience. He observed there seems to be more Council applications. He thanked all FWP staff members.

Motion #4. (Keegan/Bonsell) To adjourn the Helena meeting at 12:00 pm.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Meeting Motions

Motion #1: (Bonsell/Keegan) To accept the September 2025 minutes as presented.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Motion #2: (O'Connell/Brown) To accept the Council Action Items as presented.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Motion #3. (France/Hunter) To tour the Conrad area during the fall Council meeting.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Motion #4. (Keegan/Bonsell) To adjourn the Helena meeting at 12:00 pm.

10 in favor/0 opposed – Motion Carried

Department action items:

- Council requested a table be added to the presentation that provides an overview of UGBEP's contribution to partnerships.
- The Council requested to receive FWP reports on Roosters for Recruitment program.
- Discussion on virtual fencing will be an agenda item at next Council meeting
- Council asked if there is a way to break up UGBEP funds to see specific activities.
- Rep. France asked if it was possible to receive Mike Lewis's survey data and report prior to the session.
- Representative France requested total budget and other sources on Block Management. Jason will provide the info.
- Work on guest list and prep for tour. Consider presentation topics given by Ag-industry groups.