

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Minutes & Meeting Summary -- Draft
Mar 29, 2021 Teleconference**

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Rob Brunelle, Jeff Cornell, Sen. Jason Ellsworth (absent), Trent Kleppen, Tana Kradolfer, Rep. Marilyn Marler, Charlie Noland, and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Heather Brower, Howard Burt, Aaron Clausen, John Ensign, Erin Fairbank, Tim Hiller, Debbie Hohler, Pat Howe, Justin Hughes, Quentin Kujala, Ken McDonald, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Liam O'Connor, Matt O'Connor, Ken Plourde, Evan Rodgers, Rick Sodja, Mike Thompson, Hunter VanDonsel

Monday, March 29

Charlie began the meeting at 9:00 am and took roll call. Trent moved to accept the September 14, 2020 minutes as presented and Rob seconded. Motion passed.

Charlie noted changes in the landscape are occurring, CRP is disappearing, and commodity prices are high. Everything is cyclical.

Legislative/Department Updates

Ken thanked the Council for continued support and input. The Program has benefited from council's engagement. Ken's updates:

1. HB 637: Department-sponsored bill includes appropriation for pheasant stocking on public land. The director is interested in R3, especially involving youth. Appropriation is \$500,000/year from fish and game account and \$500,000 PR dollars. For the first year, FWP will utilize about \$150,000 from the UGBEP bird planting fund. Approximately 20 WMA will receive 6,600 adult pheasants, purchased from raisers. In subsequent years, birds will come from the State Prison if appropriations go through.

HB 637 proposes to increase the Block Management cap to \$25,000 per year (currently \$15,000). An increase would affect about 70 landowners.

Tana asked about releasing other bird species, expressing concern about Arthun Ranch BMA that receives heavy use early in the season. The program can release wild turkeys under statute to sustain or establish populations. Statutes may limit FWP on the release of other species.

Rep. Marler: HB 637 is specific to pheasants, using \$1M per year. She introduced an amendment to HB 637, where \$500,000 would go to releases, and \$500,000 would go to habitat and access. Amendment did not move forward.

Future funding for R3 pheasant put and take can be established by next legislature.

Trent asked if UGBEP will be only funding this activity this year. Ken said yes, unless the program builds a surplus again. Additionally, the proposed statutory revision to the 15% set aside is not supported by influential legislators.

Jeff asked about lessons learned when pheasant production was done in the past at Warm Springs. It seems as though we're going in circles. He feels there should be more focus on Block Management in R3 to reduce pressure on areas such as Arthun Ranch BMA.

2. HB 2, the State Operations budget is going through at this time. Wildlife Division asked for money to increase funding of CWD management. Wildlife also requested funds for grizzly bear conflict management and WMA maintenance.
3. HB 5 is the capital budget for programs such as UGBEP, Habitat Management, WHIP, and the Forestry Program. Requests are going through well. The bill is going through well.
4. Marijuana bill, there is language for funds to go to Habitat Montana, nongame wildlife, and State Parks.

Tana inquired about SB 180, a bill to establish soil health task force. She asked why it was voted down. Ken will find out why.

Charlie announced he is rotating off as the Council chair and will pass the chairmanship to Trent Kleppen.

UGBEP Fiscal Updates

Debbie provided an update on program balances and obligations plus the biennium outlook. The presentation will be attached to the minutes.

- For habitat and bird planting balances, refer to pages 2 and 3.
- For Dec. 2020 habitat obligations, see page 4
- For current, proposed projects for spring 2021, see pages 5 and 6

Program Updates and Statuses: VPA-HIP, pheasant releases, cooperative partnerships

- Debbie provided an overview of VPA-HIP grant status, related expenditures, and enrollments. Refer to pages 7 through 10.
- Public interest in pheasant releases continues to decline. For 2021, the program has 2 contracts to release pheasants in R4 (non BMA) and R6 (BMA enrolled). See page 11.
- Discussions with partners continue, with the goal of determining how much the program can allocate in support of the cooperative positions. Proposed allocations for all partnership is 25% of the annual habitat capital amount. Partners are working on measures to fill the funding gap, and conversations are on-going.

Overview of Projects - 2021 Field Season

- Justin provided an overview of the work habitat proposed in R7. Focus is on Habitat Management Leases (HML), grass stand improvements, and food plot renewals. There are many good relationships with current cooperators. The HML using UGBEP funds are renewals. There are 3 proposals to enhance grass stands. Justin noted that while CRP acres are down, there are benefits to enhancing stands using UGBEP funds.

Tana asked about landowner interest in Precision Ag. Justin said there's interest, and some people have the technology and feels interest will increase in the future. General discussion on Precision Ag. Rick Sojda went to John Deere to see if they know cooperators. PF just obtained a grant to do yield analysis.

Tana asked if pheasant releases are appropriate for R7. Justin pointed out that available habitat for pheasants will only support so many pheasants. Releases would not be appropriate given the current available habitat.

- Ken reported that R6 is focusing on nesting cover and winter habitat, as detailed in the strategic plan. Priority habitat work will continue to focus on the Milk River Valley, Northeastern R6, Sage-grouse habitat, habitat project renewal, and monitoring current habitat projects.

Proposals for the spring include 8 UGBEP habitat projects, 3 grant funded projects, and 1 Migratory Bird project. Ken provided an in-depth review of all projects.

Game bird populations were strong last fall, hunters reported good success. Spring surveys are starting now, anecdotally lots of sharp-tails and pheasants around. Drought is a concern, all R6 now moderate to extreme. Moisture during May through July will help.

- Evan provided R4 habitat work updates, referencing the region's focus areas. The region has a diversity of land cover that benefits from enhancements on public lands, foothill-grassland, native habitats, sagebrush-grasslands, agricultural lands, and forested mountains.

Evan provided an overview of current habitat projects, including Wood Bottom (BLM) and a private land, cropland conversion to productive grass and forb cover.

A large-scale proposal for a multi-project enhancement is proposed for UGBEP funding. Additional updates included current OF application status, the planned pheasant release, and conservation easement projects.

Jeff asked about future opportunities, and Evan feels there's great opportunity for additional habitat enhancements with existing cooperators. Jeff mentioned Foster Creek WPA, an area that had excellent bird hunting and cover for waterfowl. Habitat has declined through trampling by cattle.

11:30 am – Break for a 30-minute lunch

Partner Updates

- Dave Nikonow, NWTF Cooperative Biologist, provides technical assistance to USFS to promote forest health through activities that enhance habitat for mountain grouse and wild turkey populations. Dave saw more hunters in his area of Montana. Dave went over his work plan for this upcoming field season. He provides technical assistance for USFS, integrating details into projects for increasing quality for mountain grouse and turkey. During this upcoming field season, R2 plans to continue to focus on forested habitats on public lands.
- Aaron Clausen, PF Farm Bill Biologist, provided an overview of the PF positions in Montana, including a new position in Billings filled by Tori Chulyak. This position is a result of an agreement with local the Billings PF Chapter, NRCS, and Audubon. Other positions are located in Malta, Winnett ACES (Agricultural and Community Enhancement and Sustainability), RSA (Rancher's Stewardship Alliance), Forsyth. Council requested to include an agenda item in September to discuss more about the PF Call of the Uplands and the PF State position, which will be different than Chad Harvey's position.
- Erin Fairbank, PF Farm Bill Biologist in Conrad, reported that CRP enrollment has been pretty slow. The low rental rate and extended enrollment period may be reasons for slowness. Erin receives a lot of calls from landowners about shrub plantings. Likely a good indication for a TIP. NRCS doesn't currently have any robust programs for shrub planting. Teton River Wildlife Area is open to public year round. Through an UGBEP project, 75 acres transitioning to diverse upland nesting.
- Heather Brower, PF Farm Bill Biologist in Scobey, noted there weren't many CRP applications compared to last year. Heather reviewed Daniels County TIP – Smoke Creek. The focus is on planting croplands to grass. There is opportunity for integrating with precision ag. There is a TIP proposed for trees outside of Peerless. So far there are 7 applications. TIP came about as a fully written idea from 5 producers.
- Hunter VanDonsel, PF Farm Bill Biologist in Chinook, reviewed some of the work he's accomplished since he began his position 4 years ago. A current TIP Hydration for Migration uses EQIP dollars to set up infrastructure to improve grazing management. To help benefit Pronghorn movement, producers raise bottom wires and remove sheep fences. Currently, 30 miles of fence modification; TNC and RSA have conducted another 20-30 miles of fence modification; 50k or more acres will be intact as a result of this collaboration. Conifer encroachment is a concern. We're losing as much grasslands through conifer encroachment as tillage expansion. Encroachment impacts sage-grouse leks. Treatments would include cutting down conifers and prescribed fire. Mechanical treatments are more likely.

A newly proposed TIP--Big Game HIP (BIG HIP) is pending approval. Seeking 8.7M for improving big game habitat. USFWS, FWP, other grassland conservation groups will collaborate on new grassland seedings and big grazing systems.

- Liam O'Connor was recently hired as the PF Habitat Specialist in the Ninepipe Area. His position is funded through 2023. Current focus is on perennial seedings this spring, brood strips, and pollinator plots. He is also testing out some strip with a high forb mix but little grass. Charlie Holt with PF will also seed alongside DNC this spring and fall. Work will continue fallowing and small grain cover crops. Weed maintenance/spraying/mowing is ongoing. Plantings will include high diversity food plot mix. Partners are looking to improve low woody cover, but it's often challenging with deer.

Art Soukkala added that shrubs can be winter cover and food. Partners want to make sure that with irrigation projects, lands are covered, promoting a wet meadow habitat for insect production.

Presentation on TIP, Hunter VanDonsel

Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist has rebranded how EQIP will be expended, guided by Montana Focused Conservation. Conservation Districts and other partners prioritized resource concerns and developed a long-range plan over the next 5 years. Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs) are developed to address specific concerns. Once resource concerns are addressed/resolved through TIP, planning moves to new issues to address. The PF biologists can help planning and address wildlife concerns.

County Plans are living documents and adaptable. Local working groups meet to identify local resource concerns. Hunter encouraged staff to participate. Tana also expressed interest in participating in local working groups.

Group of projects/applications could be a ready-made TIP.

Setting aside funds for UGBEP and Mig Bird funding for TIP is a strong possibility. If partners allow access, they may get additional cost share, which could be a great incentive for access component.

Trent asked how one might find when meetings occur. Hunter recommended following the local NRCS website or get on email list.

Question on overlapping TIPs-- is this possible? TIPs need to have different resource concerns. Once there is a TIP, it is not possible to do a same TIP in the same area because those concerns should have been addressed.

Department update: Progress with State and regional strategic plans

- Debbie provided an update on parts of the state’s plan that need updating. These sections include harvest, hunter days, and economic impact, which have changed compared to earlier plan. Other sections needing refinement include: project types, project definition, removing some objectives that have been met.
- Region 1 Ninepipe area. Strategy remains the same, to continue enhancement focus on the grassland/farmland/wetland complex of the Ninepipe area, particularly areas that correspond to public access opportunities.
- Region 2 strategy will remain the same. Mike Thompson shared that upland game bird hunting is really limited to public land, and there is a lot of it. That is the opportunity for the program in Region 2.
- Region 3 -- Most work with UGBEP funds is on Canyon Ferry; Dave Nikonow has done work with USFS in the region as well.
 - Tana noted that many places in the region’s plan need updating, including the lack of staff dedicated to program, because of competing priorities and removing sections on beetle kill. Focus should be the public land. For example, dogs train on FAS. Tana expressed concern on the Fairweather on Missouri River. Tana said that PF presented a plan for habitat and access. The lease was given to an existing landowner, who doesn’t follow through on promises. The area could be awesome, but it isn’t. There are other sites, such as FAS, that could be improved. Rick Sodja pointed out that FAS are not managed by the wildlife division.
 - Tana added there could be projects implemented to benefit hunting. “Focus has to come off of CRP and onto other things. CRP is gone and it’s not coming back.” FASs and WMAs – should be part of the plan. Tana stated that Canyon Ferry gets hammered, it’s just too small while the population around Region 3 is ever growing.
 - Tana expressed interest in putting birds onto FASs – Grey Cliffs, for example.
 - Amsterdam, Belgrade, Manhattan farms have pockets of state land where habitat enhancements can be done.
- Region 5 plans to revise the region’s plan to keep pace with change and to focus more on opportunities as they become available. There’s been a long-standing history of ruffed grouse habitat enhancements on public lands. These enhancements remain a high priority with the region. The section on sage-grouse will be updated to mention uncontrolled development of wind farms and potential impacts on local populations. As sagebrush-grassland conservation programs become available, continue conservation when possible. Conservation of CRP remains a priority, and enrollments in Open Fields are a priority. Pheasant releases have declined in the last 10 years, with the last release in 2010. The region will continue to implement releases if interest presents.

- Region 4 overview. Evan stated that the current plan had low priority for forest grouse. Refocusing revised plan to provide an equal priority as the rest of the species in the region. The current plan separates ag lands between riparian and dryland farming. The revision will be combining into one priority. There will be 5 priority areas instead of 6.
- Region 6 – Ken Plourde provided background updates to the plan, noting distribution and focus areas will be added. For example, including more focused attention on McCone and Richland counties. The region wants to zero in on some specific goals, making program implementation more strategic for work planning. Currently, the draft has been sent out info to the region for input.
- Region 7 – Justin Hughes provided an update that the region is good with the plan as is. Not many updates are needed. Doug added that he'd like to see pheasant release in areas where there is habitat.

DRAFT TIMELINE

- Draft to Council by August 2.
- Sept. 13-14 council meeting. Hear recommendations from Council and update plan with recommendations.
- Public comment, 30 days, around Nov. 1-30.
 - Correspond with council after review with updates in December.
 - Finalize in January/February 2022.

Public Comment

Tana previously sent the council with letters of concern from 3 hunters. Ken Barrett's letter had comments on Block Management, his letter is representative of many hunters. Christopher Hyle's letter stated it would take a few projects to make a difference. Tana read the 3rd letter from Pat Howe.

Pat was able to join the meeting and added some thoughts. He thanked the program for work done. He was encouraged by things heard at today's meeting. Additional comments from Pat.

- If you are a bird hunter, when bird numbers and hunter numbers are down, it is often hand in hand.
- Simple things that can be done. There was a sainfoin field at Freezout, but not nothing was done to manage it.
- Region 3 could be much better.
- Concerned about "put and take". We are spoiled by the size of areas we can hunt here...in NY, could do a lot on a small area...all components need to be there.
- Would like to see more money on private lands also...potential is huge for what we have.
- Pat also recognized it is a dryer environment.

Jeff Cornell

- R4 has been primary bird hunting area for 30 years. He has witnessed a decline in numbers, directly attributed to loss of CRP.

- Freezout is bigger, a system by itself almost. Pat's suggestions could be implemented on Freezout, expanding out to other opportunities such as WPA and adjacent landowners.
- Jeff noted that there is need for more acres to have a good hunting experience. If we can work on these areas, there will be a tremendous asset.

Council Members – Final Thoughts

Art – Regarding the letters, it is about scale. Fragmentation is a big part of the problem. The bigger the better. We will never see the same number of birds, but there is need to keep building partnerships, including nonconsumptive users.

Tana – She is encouraged about the working groups. It's a great way to hook up with landowners.

Jeff – He is looking forward to the next meeting.

Rob – We're fortunate in our area. FWP does a great job with partnerships and hopes it continues.

Doug – Habitat is the biggest hold up with birds. Right now, birds are on the rebound and look good. FWP does a great job with the hunter-landowner relationship.

Charlie – Hunters concentrating on small habitats will disperse game, and there is need of good habitat. Looking down the road, there is need to provide input to the 2023 Farm Bill. Commodities are increasing.

Trent – Feeling blessed in R6. He spent the last 2 months in Texas guiding private individuals on their own land. It's possible to see this impasse coming to Montana. This council, the partners, and FWP have a vital role to play in wildlife habitat and upland game bird hunting. He observed that even with all the habitat work in the world, it's possible to still have bad years, it happens.

Meeting Wrap-Up

Rick thanked the council for their continued efforts. Council provides a lot of legitimacy and promotes public input. Charlie's efforts as the council chair are much appreciated. He brings a lot of amazing insight to the benefit of the program. Thank you, Charlie!

Next meeting is scheduled in Missoula Sept 13 and 14. FWP will keep council up to date on any changes.

Meeting adjourned at 4:20 pm.

Meeting Links and text comments next page

09:23:05 From Aaron Clausen - Pheasants Forever to Everyone : This is PF's stance on the issue of stocking, which I know I've shared before: <https://www.pheasantsforever.org/Habitat/Pheasant-Facts/Pheasant-Stocking.aspx>

12:37:17 From Aaron Clausen - Pheasants Forever to Everyone :
Regional Conservation Partnership Program – Northern Great Plains Grassland Conservation Project
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/mt/programs/farmland/rcpp/7c3125a8-db18-403b-b1f1-5d801fa73163/>

13:47:21 From Hunter.VanDonsel to Everyone :
MT Focused Conservation: What’s in my County
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/mt/programs/mfc/7e9ebe20-0de4-4e69-8ef6-e2baba4e9517/>

15:03:46 From Aaron Clausen - Pheasants Forever to Everyone : CRP in Region 3 is pretty minimal relative to other regions...specialty crops and mountains, enrollment has never been high from what I’ve seen

15:05:41 From Aaron Clausen - Pheasants Forever to Everyone : I think there is potential though, for continuous practices mostly

15:06:45 From Trent Kleppen to Everyone : Continuous practices seems to be what the new normal is everywhere, as far as CRP is concerned — would you agree with that?

15:07:06 From Aaron Clausen - Pheasants Forever to Everyone : I totally agree