

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC
Minutes & Meeting Summary -- Draft
Sept 13-14, 2021, Missoula-hybrid meeting**

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Rob Brunelle, Jeff Cornell, Rep. Tom France, Lynn Glock, Jay Hanson, Sen. Jason Ellsworth (absent), Trent Kleppen, Tana Kradofer, Charlie Noland, Rick Sojda, and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Heather Brower, Ben Deeble, Erin Fairbank, Trenton Heisel, Josh Hobbs, Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes, Ken McDonald, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Dustin Ramoie, Steve Rockhold, Evan Rodgers, Matt Strauch, Mike Thompson, Hunter VanDonsel,

Monday, Sept. 13 (Day of tour)

We had technical difficulty and began the meeting at 9:14.

Trent welcomed everyone to the meeting, and everyone introduced themselves. We have 4 new council members: Rep. Tom France (R2), Rick Sojda (R3), Jay Hanson (R4), and Lynn Glock (R5). Debbie went over the expense sheet.

Minutes: Charlie moved to accept the March 29, 2021 minutes as presented and Tana seconded. Motion passed.

History of UGBEP and Council purpose (Northrup)

Legislation passed in 1987 for both UGBEP and Habitat Montana. Through 2008, the program was under-utilized, no dedicated coordinator position or program staff in place. In 2008, the program went through a legislative audit, with recommendations to draft a long-term strategic plan with recommendations from a newly formed council. A bill sponsored by Rep. Julie French was enacted in 2009, ensuring the development of a strategic plan and the formation of a citizen-led council. Since then, the council has been instrumental with program success, effectively providing recommendations on program direction and delivery. The principle roles of the council include:

- Develop/maintain strategic plan
- Provide ongoing oversight, meeting 2x a year with a field tour. Spring meeting to review plans for field season, fall meeting to follow up field season accomplishments.
- Provide important feedback to legislature and public. The council is the program's champion.

The program has flourished, having spent down the large buildup of revenue. Now, the program is operating within its capacity.

Department Updates (McDonald)

1. The department is undergoing a reorganization effort. The access program has moved to a new division, Parks and Outdoor Recreation. UGBEP is not likely affected. The department hired Hope Stockwell as the administrator. Hope has much experience with Legislative Services, EQC, and comes to the department well-versed in wildlife issues.

2. Pheasant Stocking. Initially, the department planned to release approximately 8,600 mature pheasants on select WMA (n = 19). The numbers have been winnowed down to 2,700 on 7 WMA, primarily due to timing with most pheasants spoken for by raisers. Approximately \$50,000 from the UGBEP bird planting fund will be used this year only. Roosters will be predominately released, with stocking taking place as close as possible to youth pheasant opener.

Next year, it's anticipated that the State prison will be raising approximately 50,000 pheasants annually. Funding will come from Pittman-Robertson (promoting recruitment) and general license.

Council Comments

Rep. France: The budget came in late this past session and will be under scrutiny in the 2023 legislation. There was an amendment proposed to invest \$500,000 to promote habitat and access. The amendment did not pass.

Tana: If the prison is putting up flight pens, is there a possibility to raise and restock huns? Ken replied that the legislation was specific to pheasants. The main emphasis is to increase hunter recruitment. We need to be cautious about how big a stocking program could become.

Rick S.: How many programs will be affected fiscally by the youth pheasant release? Ken replied given PR dollars is the primary funding source, not many at all.

Jeff: Does the council have an opportunity to comment? Ken stated yes, likely to legislature. Rep. France will have insight.

Tana: Can UGBEP partner with habitat enhancements? Ken said there are ongoing habitat enhancements occurring on the WMAs already. Where it's appropriate to use funds (to enhance populations), UGBEP funding is eligible. Rick N. added that WMAs were selected with some pheasant habitat. As this is a "put and take" activity, habitat isn't a primary concern.

Tana: Is there a way to make releases youth only? Ken answered that this might be a consideration, but right now the focus is on the opener.

Rick S.: Was there an EA on this pheasant release? Ken replied there was a high level, check list EA. The public process occurred with comments before the August commission meeting.

Doug: The purpose of the strategic plan, starting on page 1, states that everything goes against put and take. Ken agreed, these different programs are run by 2 different areas of the agency. UGBEP focus is on habitat and access. The youth pheasant release is focused on recruitment and retention. Ken referred to the statute that directs 15% earmarked for bird releases. Of the 15%, the department must use 25% for pheasant releases. The release funding does not shift to habitat.

Tana: We need to follow the science as stated in the strategic plan. Hunter recruitment is out of the scope of the UGBEP.

Rep. France: Appreciates the retention and recruitment focus; however, the prison's dairy contract was lost. This is a replacement opportunity.

Jeff: 30 years ago, the state already raised pheasants at Warm Springs. It could take us many years to relearn something we already know.

3. FWP is required to publish annual sage grouse population counts and present them to the EQC each year. In 2021 there were 1,063 leks surveyed at least once. The estimated 2021 population is 70,583 (\pm 8,264), down slightly from last year's estimate of just under 78,000.

FY 2021 Program Summaries, balances, expenditures, enrollments, VPA HIP, Partnership statuses, Pheasant Releases (Hohler)

FY 2021 Fiscal Summary

The FY 21 program revenue (license, interest) was \$777,443. Program expenditures (habitat, admin, bird planting, overhead) was \$694,563.

Current balances (through the biennium ending June 30, 2023)

- The unallocated habitat fund balance is \$1,013,722.
- The unallocated bird planting fund balance is \$368,228.
 - Activities funded are pheasant releases, wild turkey transplants, and emergency supplemental feeding (Sheridan, Roosevelt, and Daniels counties only.)

2021 UGBEP-funded Projects Summary

Projects: 20

Project Acres: 13,407

Access Acres: 92,271

UGBEP Obligations..... \$142,741

Cooperative Obligations \$759,605

Other Obligations \$601

2021 VPA-HIP-funded Projects Summary

Projects: 48 new enrollments (11 Habitat Management Leases, 37 Open Fields)

Project Acres: 10,161

Access Acres: 22,904

VPA-HIP funds: \$467,134

UGBEP Weed Payments \$12,987

Combined UGBEP & VPA-HIP Projects Enrollment Summary

Projects: 68

Project Acres: 23,568

Access Acres: 115,175

UGBEP Obligations..... \$155,728

VPA-HIP Obligations \$467,134

VPA-HIP Balance (grant expires March 31, 2023)

\$1,894,060 Initial Fund Balance

-\$300,000 30-year Long-term Access Lease (set aside)

-\$100,000 Indirect Costs (set aside)

-\$86,847 2020 Open Fields/HML Enrollments

-\$467,134 2021 Open Fields/HML Enrollment

\$940,079 Unallocated as of September 2021

UGBEP Partner Position Support --Status

Position (n=8)	Region	Term	UGBEP Obligation (\$)
Habitat Forever	1	6/1/2021 – 6/30/2023	26,000
National Wild Turkey Federation	2	7/1/2019 – 6/30/2022	120,000
Habitat Forever	4	7/1/2019 – 6/30/2022	192,000
Habitat Forever	5	7/1/2020 – 6/30/2023	180,000
Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists – 4 positions	R4 (1) R5 (1) R6 (2)	9/1/2021 – 8/31/2024	58,500
UGBEP OBLIGATIONS July 2019 through September 2024 (5 years).			576,500

2021 Pheasant Release Summary

County	# Pheasants	Access Acres	Obligation (\$)
Teton	100	174	1,050
Phillips	100	324	1,200
Totals	200	498	2,250

Overview of the habitat tour (Nikonow)

Dave Nikonow, NWTF Cooperative Biologist, was hired in fall of 2015 to partner with the USFS and FWP to provide technical assistance with project identification, planning, design and development, and outreach efforts.

The tour will focus on one project areas – Frenchtown Face. After a brief overview of the different sites, the council was ready to embark. At 11:25, Doug moved to adjourn the meeting and Jeff seconded. Motion passed.

Tour Notes

This tour is a showcase of Region 2's strategy to implement UGBEP in a way that benefits forest grouse and wild turkey. Through Dave's efforts, the region is represented at the table when forest management activities are developed. Collaboration with the US Forest Service and national/local conservation organizations leverages UGBEP dollars to go further, affecting over 160,000 project acres. All habitat enhancement projects are done on public lands and depicted in the UGBEP Projects Access Guide annually.

At the first site, the members of the tour met up with Collin Smith (NWTF), Tammy Fletcher (USFS), Erin O'Loughlin (USFS) and 3 fuels staff.

The French Town Face Project goal is to bring the forest structure back to pre-settlement state described as a pine savanna, which is characterized by open, fire-dependent plant communities dominated by well-developed ground cover and some low-growing shrubs with only scattered trees. Prescribed fire is used to mimic historic fire frequency and intensity to manage the forests. Without any treatments (fire, thinning, harvest) Doug and Ponderosa Pine encroachment occurs. Harvest results in a decent shrub response, but prescribed fire produce even better growth in shrubs, grasses, and forbs.

1st stop; Souldier Buttler Unit 2. The tour observed a pre-treatment phase (no fire or thinning). Understory was minimal, with Doug fir dominating the forest community.

Stop 2 – Frenchtown Face Unit 46 - Observed a commercial harvest unit. Council broke for lunch. Discussion about the various changes in response with different mechanical treatments.

Stop 3 – Frenchtown Face Unit 123 - This site was commercially harvested in prior years then received prescribed fire the fall of 2018. Dave thought it was a hotter burn than was intended, but overall saw good shrub diversity. Browse from ungulates obvious. Discussion on prescribed fire implementation and how it's applied ensued.

Stop 4 – Frenchtown Face Units 64/49 - Observed a burn treatment earlier in 2021. This site was commercially harvested 8 or so years ago. Overall, the timing and implementation of these treatments help the forest community be productive for wildlife species.

Tuesday, September 14

Trent began the meeting at 8:30, thanking Dave for a great tour. The council was very complimentary of Dave's work. Thanks also to Pheasants Forever to hosting a dinner.

UGBEP Statute and Rules

Debbie provided highlights of some of UGBEP's statutes and rules, including the Council's recommendation to revise the statute that addresses pheasant release funding. Full statutes and rules can be found on the Web.

[UGBEP Statutes](#): 87-1-246 through 87-1-251, MCA

[Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program rules](#): 12.9.7, ARM

[Upland Game Bird Release Program rules](#): 12.9.6, ARM

Council discussion followed:

Rep. France requested a list of licenses that contribute to the UGBEP, including a breakdown of resident/nonresident licenses sold. Debbie will get that information. He also recommends putting together a chart of funding available for UGBEP to have a greater understanding.

- Charlie added that nonresident hunters provide a large amount of program funding, contributing \$23 per license sale.

Discussion on recommended revision to the bird planting statute:

Trent said that the council pulled back on carrying the bill because it was felt that it would not be successful. Rep. France commented that getting AG groups together to support change in statute would be beneficial; he would be willing to co-sponsor a legislative revision of this statute. Rick N. added that council has the latitude to revise this statute, more so than the department. Trent stated that he has begun relationship-building with republican senators. Jeff asked if funds can be appropriated to another source. Rep. France stated they can.

Council Discussion on Draft Strategic Plan

PURPOSE: The goal of the plan update is to get the plan ready spring 2022, recognizing that input from the council is ongoing. Trent asked council members, by region, for their input on the draft.

Region 1: Art Soukkala

- Maps of habitat and bird distributions don't include reservations, these areas need to be included.
- Mention habitat and hunting on reservations. There's a substantial gray partridge on tribal lands. There's also extensive riparian habitat.
- Extend aspen regeneration (project type) to include benefits for forest grouse.

Rep. France noted there's a tremendous amount of public hunting and private parcels, some of which are over-grazed. Is there opportunity to do habitat work on private tribal land? Art responded that

there is some with NRCS office, but there is not a position that can help coordinate these efforts. Rep. France suggested adding opportunities to partner FWP, PF chapters on tribal lands—Art said conversations have started.

Dave Nikonow mentioned that wild turkey hunting in the Plains, Troy, and Libby areas provide good opportunity.

Region 2: Dave Nikonow

- Strategic plan as written focuses on mountain grouse and wild turkey. No further edits recommended.

Region 3: Tana Kradolfer and Rick Sojda

- Issue with program delivery and priority.

Staff are over-allocated with other duties, and the region is more elk-centric. There is quite a bit of public lands where efforts can be focused to enhance habitat. Gallatin Chapter of PF is funding projects outside the region. R3's plan will be edited to emphasize potentials with willing landowners, public lands, and focusing on partnerships through UGBEP, FAS program, and PF chapters.

Region 4: Jeff Cornell

- Increase opportunities for CRP. Focus on opportunities on State lands and precision Ag, when opportunities arise.

Region 4: Jay Hanson

- There are 5 outfitters in Lewistown area. State lands have most potential. The region should continue to work with PF chapters. The American Prairie Reserve may be a willing partner on habitat projects.

Rep. France suggested breaking out a separate State lands strategy with a facilitation meeting to include stockgrowers, grain growers that builds toward a more concrete implementation.

Rick N. added that it's important to remember that lessees need to be heading conservation efforts, rather than a global approach.

Hunter also added that it's important to recognize that hunting on private land is a privilege. Providing access is always voluntary.

Discussions often were directed to Block Management. Trent reminded the council that Block Management is outside the scope of the council unless is directly related to an UGBEP project.

Debbie was asked to reach out to DNRC and Commissioners, inviting them to the spring council meeting.

Region 4: Evan Rodgers

- There is effort ongoing on State lands and private land. We recognize there are conditions that can't be controlled.

Region 5: Charlie Noland and Lynn Glock

- Plan was well-written and captures the program priorities and delivery, although opportunities are understandably limited.
- Lynn suggested there are opportunities along the Clark Fork near the Pryors, where access is good for waterfowl hunting. There may be opportunities for UGB hunting.

Region 6: Trent Kleppen and Rob Brunelle

- Plan looks good and represents R6's strategy well. Figures will be updated with current information when and where available.

Region 7: Doug Bonsell

- Plan looks good for R7, no recommended edits suggested.

Additional Discussion and Comments:

Hunter VanDonsel: The program needs more funds to meet the demands of landowner/cooperator interest.

Rick S.: He wants to quantify program components to justify increased funding.

Jeff: Concerned about pheasant release emphasis in the plan, referring to page 9 in the draft. Council needs to make their opinion known, where habitat is emphasized when there is minimal demand on pheasant releases.

Tana: Regarding project types, Tana recommended adding Precision Ag as a project type, which may be used at a landscape scale. Trent added that precision Ag is a partnership within the framework of strategy.

Debbie will provide the minutes with Council's Strategic Plan input within 2 weeks of the council meeting. Council and staff will review the minutes and respond with clarifications within 2 weeks.

Opportunities with Fishing Access Site Program (Dustin Ramoie, FAS Coordinator)

Council has expressed interest in learning about habitat enhancement and hunting on Fishing Access Sites. Dustin sent Council a list of sites that have the potential for UGB opportunities (hunting and habitat work). See email with attachment from Sept. 13. Dustin said funds are available for material, but not available for labor or equipment.

Regional Updates:

Region 4: Evan provided an overview of accomplishments for the field season, including overseeing continued efforts on previous projects such as BLM's Wood Bottom. Habitat projects on Freezout are going steady. R4 enrolled several new Open Fields projects and 1 Habitat Management Leases with a Colony in Liberty County. Evan anticipates great potential with expanding work with neighboring landowners. 1 pheasant release occurred in Teton County. Monitoring is ongoing. Evan has put up program signs and fielding many calls from hunters.

Region 6: The region has been busy enrolling new Open Fields projects and HML's funded by VPA-HIP. Another 30-year Conservation Lease Agreement (CLA) on over 2,000 acres was finalized in Roosevelt County, making this a total of 4 CLA in the region. A shelterbelt was planted on property enrolled in Open Fields with the local chapter of Pheasants Forever partnering on the project. Ken described the current drought conditions, which have been grim. Ken will monitor the CRP projects to check the haying status. UGB hunter calls have been nonstop. One pheasant release (100 pheasants) occurred in Phillips County this year.

Region 7: Justin summarized the region's UGBEP enrollments, noting that the limited CRP acres doesn't provide much opportunity for Open Fields. His focus has been to identify new HML projects that provided public access for game bird hunting. VPA-HIP funding was used for those projects that met the criteria. Diverse food plots and grain food plots remain an important part of program delivery in R7, and several projects were enrolled. 3 of this year's projects involve interseeding. Justin noted that he has interest from cooperators that exceed available funding. He often has cooperators "on the back burner."

Update from Partners

Region 5: Steve Rockhold summarized the habitat work done on Pompeys Pillar. Yellowstone WMA, and Grants Marsh. He felt there was need to do prescribe burns on Yellowstone WMA in the future.

Pheasants Forever: Hunter is the new state coordinator for PF (WY and MT). There is a new PF Access Position going to Miles City. PF partners are engaged with local communities, bringing sportsmen and landowners together. Erin is now the Senior Biologist and supervises the Farm Bill Biologists. She also functions as the main point person for NRCS programs and the Farm Bill Biologists. She shared updates on her continued work on the Pondera County Pollinator Habitat Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP). Heather is continuing to work on the Daniels County Sharp-tailed Habitat Targeted Implementation Plan (TIP). For more information on these TIPs, please visit:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/mt/programs/mfc/7e9ebe20-0de4-4e69-8ef6-e2baba4e9517>

New PF biologists were introduced:

- Joshua Hobbs: Coordinating Wildlife Biologist in Winnett, for Winnett ACES (Agricultural and Community Enhancement and Sustainability).
- Trenton Heisel: Partnered with BLM, Trenton will focus on sage-grouse habitat management and future public access agreements.
- Matt Strauch: He recently started in Chester, MT.

Other PF partner biologists, not in attendance.

- Martin Townsend: He works with the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance in Malta. (Not at meeting).
- Tessa Wilson: She is the Range and Wildlife Conservationist and located in Forsyth.

Public Comment

1. Jay Gore, Missoula

- Jay stated that we have spent more time on the discussion of bird planting, including pros and cons. We would have “died” to have \$1M on habitat versus pen-raised pheasants.
- Jay emphasized the importance of critical winter habitat. We need to ensure we have areas that are dense with woody cover. He urged the Council to emphasize shelterbelts, woody cover, and food plots.

2. Ben Deeble, Missoula, Big Sky Upland Bird Association (BSUBA)

There are 200 resident and nonresident members of BSUBA. He noted that he will be trapping sharp-tails tomorrow (9/15). Ben was on the first UGBEP Council. He recommended that management biologists be assigned UGB work. He would also like a position hired for regions 1, 2, and 3. Ben’s comments:

1. There’s been a long history of opposing hatchery released pheasants. These birds are inferior and not desirable. He is a proponent of youth recruitment and wild pheasants. The wild pheasants are already there, and it makes sense to improve habitat.

2. Put & Take has a place in training, but it is not fair chase. It fits in the private sector and commercial hunting preserve.

3. It’s a source of pride that Montana hasn’t depended on released pheasants.

4. He asked, will Deer Lodge prisoners produce an effective pheasant?

Jeff Cornell responded: Regarding pheasant stocking, he has already fielded questions. The public already thinking that UGBEP is coordinating this put and take. Looking down the road, it’s hard no not think there will be more conflicts.

Council Comments and Discussion

Trent: If there is additional need for Council to convene prior to the next scheduled Council meeting, do Council members prefer a phone call or email?

Art: The cooperative is important and will look how to build it up over time. There is synergy.

Rep. France: Appreciates knowing people here. Going forward, he is glad to be a legislative liaison.

Tana: She is leaving the Council and thanked everyone. She feels like she has learned a lot. Regarding pheasant releases from the Council’s standpoint, she would like to see a letter written for the record. It’s an overreach to take UGBEP funds for pheasant release for the purposes of hunter recruitment.

Trent said that Council will revisit this recommendation at the next meeting.

Rick S.: Great work being done by biologists across the state.

Jeff: Regarding pheasant releases, a follow-up via email is ok. He welcomed Rep. France and liked his idea about funding.

Jay: Email dialogue is okay.

Lynn: Didn’t know anyone but glad to be here. There’s a lot to know.

Charlie: He has been involved with many FWP councils—Brucellosis, CWD, and UGB Council. Serving on this Council has been most fun and most productive.

Trent: Thanked everyone for their input at the meeting. Council will get together with Debbie as we gear up for the final revision.

Rob: Thanked everyone, all good points have been touched.

Doug: Email is preferred—includes more people at once. Regarding pheasant releases, as long as it’s in statute to use money, he is okay with that, as long as that money isn’t moved to another fund.

Jeff: If use pheasant release dollars because of use it or lose it, it’s still an endorsement.

2022 Meeting Dates

March 28 – 29	Helena
Sept. 12 – 13	Malta

4:40 pm. Art moved to adjourn the meeting; Doug seconded. Motion passed.