

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC
Meeting Notes & Summary -- Draft
September 8-9, 2025**

Meeting Location:

Best Western Plus Havre Inn & Suites
1425 2nd St NW, Havre, MT 59501
Zoom participation available

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Scot Brown, Rep. Tom France, Jay Hanson, Scott Kanning, Tom Keegan, Trent Kleppen, Kerry O'Connell, and Art Soukkala.

FWP employees, conservation partners, and members of the public: Al Aiden, Jake Barnes, Stephanie Berry, Mitch Carpenter, Brett Dorak, Sen. Butch Gillespie, Doreen Gillespie, Scott Hemmer, Josh Hobbs, Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes, Sen. Gregg Hunter, Ethan Kalinowski, Kellan Karch, Bridger Line, Ali Marschner, Shawn McCabe, Ken McDonald, Kirk Miller, Laurel Ruport, Robyn Parker, Larry Peltz, Ken Plourde, Matt Strauch, Cole Stumpf, Sen. Russ Tempel, Scott Thompson, Neil Vruno, Crystal White, and Hunter VanDonsel.

Monday, September 8

Trent called the meeting to order at 8:30 am. He went over the agenda for the 2-day meeting. Notable open statements:

We lost Tom Condon earlier this summer, and several council members attended his funeral. If anyone would like a funeral pamphlet, let Trent know.

Public comment is open as it does not interfere with UGBEP business with the council and FWP representatives.

Trent reviewed the meeting minutes from March 24 – March 25.

Motion to accept the minutes as presented. Tom Keegan moved; Doug Bonsell seconded to approve. Motion carried.

Fall 2026 will be Trent's last meeting. The new chairman will begin the afternoon of the March 23rd meeting.

Ken Plourde welcomed the Council and provided insight on the history and purpose of the Council.

Trent recommended that Council members read the statutes to gain understanding why council was created.

1. Division/Department update (McDonald)

- HB 146 increased migratory bird license fees, raising the standard license from \$10 to \$150 and added new fees for swan and sandhill crane permits. The bill is projected to generate approximately \$243,000 in additional revenue for the migratory bird program and associated habitat work, which also provides overlapping benefits to UGBEP.
- HB 264 allows FWP to protect sensitive data on wildlife. FWP does receive a lot of requests for lek locations, some for research and others for birdwatching). FWP cannot release information for at least a year after it is collected. If publication is added, FWP cannot release until 1 year after publications on animals that can be hunted or trapped.
- HB 372 increased funding amount to UGBEP (\$500,000 per year additional) and increases habitat MT and maintenance. Not effective until March 1, 2026 (License Year). Additional funds will be collected but the program won't have the authority to spend until we request authority in the 2027 legislative session. Council will be looped in on how to spend that money.
- HB 450 requires bird training licenses to report the number of dogs they intend to train. This allows FWP to know the impact training has on birds in certain locations. Commission may use this information to limit or extend license allocations. No intentions currently on restricting nonresidents or residents or dog training licenses until data is gathered.
We may see an increase in dog training before season by nonresidents because of the bill that delays nonresident hunting start day by 10 days.
- HB 568 requires department to study nonresident impact on game animals. Study includes hunter-days, harvest reporting, pressure, population trends, and licensing information. Department will post report on nonresident impacts on a regional basis and methods used. Nonresidents make up 73% of FWP overall budget (primarily for deer/elk).
- HB 932 redirects marijuana tax revenue into several conservation-related funds, with specific allocations and timelines. \$10 million total, 20% of total is put into legacy account, and 75% of that goes into Habitat Montana fund. For the next 8 years, 4 million per year goes to DNRC for water projects and then the rest goes to public access or Habitat Montana. There's uncertain what this part of the statute means. The next 20% (\$2 million) will go to Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP). It will be available for grants and contracts to improve and conserve terrestrial and aquatic habitat, range conditions, drought resistance, mitigate conflicts between livestock and wildlife, etc.

The IRS will collect the money, and FWP will collect it in in the next fiscal year.

Surveys went out to partners that could apply for these grants to see what they may want to do with the grants. Tribal partners may be involved. Currently, there is an information-gathering phase on how we want to set up this grant opportunity. A new 5-member WHIP council will be established to approve grants. 5% (\$500,000) will be set aside for wildlife highway crossings. Wildlife crossing license plate to generate revenue will also go into this account. Contest for the design of that plate is live and non-FWP people can submit designs for a prize of \$1000.

- SB 514: 2026 upland season, nonresidents may not hunt for the first 10 days of the season on private lands enrolled in FWP access programs, specifically Block Management and UGBEP. Mountain grouse is exempted.

2. UGBEP Fiscal report & Annual Updates (Hohler)

This report is appended to the minutes.

Depart for Tour (10am)

Box lunches provided

Dinner will be at the 40 Below Public House 415 1st St W, Havre, MT 59501 (6pm)

Tuesday, September 9

Trent gave an overview of the tour, expressing gratitude on behalf of the Council:

Trent noted we had the most legislators that had ever participated in these meetings: Sen. Russ Tempel, Sen. Gregg Hunter, Sen. Butch Gillespie, and Rep. Tom France. Sen. Hunter will likely be appointed to this council and should let us know soon.

1. Debbie continued her presentation.

2. Regional field season updates – Matt, Mitch and Justin. (Presentations posted on UGBEP web page)

Appreciation and thanks given to Region 6 biologists who were able to get projects done while the Habitat Specialist position was vacant.

Matt was able to attend and gave an R4 UGBEP regional update.

Migratory Bird Wetland Program, Habitat Conservation Leases (Plourde)

- 45 active agreements with completed work, 8 more pending and construction underway
- 15 contracts shared with UGBEP in high production waterfowl areas. Some contracts in the works.
- 8 projects where proposals were not finalized.

- \$250,000 unallocated and able to spend before next leg session, ideally getting it spent down before next session.
- Wetland work is not fast, and we have a good threshold for costs before we empty to zero.
- Currently, HCL has 26 projects approved by the commission: 68,000 acres and 2 million total. Almost all going to Land Board in October or December. There are a few more projects coming to commission later this year.
- All land projects that cost more than 1 million or involve more than 500 acres need to go to the Land Board for final approval. All but a few are 40-year contracts rather than 30-years.

3. NWTF updates (Bridger Line)

The Forest service has undergone numerous structural changes. Bridger has assisted USFS Lolo biologists and is splitting time with FWP on Blackfoot/Clearwater game range. He has done trainings and courses to boost skills for this first year. Met with USFS at ranger district level and evaluated projects for assistance. He participated in goshawk and mountain grouse surveys, flammulated owl, and lynx surveys in the Seely and Missoula/ Lolo areas. When fire season is over, he will work with ranger districts focusing on fire mitigation and habitat features for forest ecosystems.

4. Contracting from Start to Finish – Presented by Justin and Debbie

5. Discussion: Expanding the capacity of the UGBEP through additional funding

6. Timeline overview – planning for FY28 (July 1, 2027) up to \$3M may be available

- Ken P. will be submitting budget proposals in January 2026. The database is a need but IT folks won't prioritize this. The structure of contracts could be worked on to speed up the timeline. Increasing capacity by hiring staff administratively may be a priority to speed up timelines. Partnerships help move along the timeline to spend dollars more effectively and work faster.
- Council revisited past discussions:
 - o Database
 - o FTE
 - o VPA-HIP
 - o Expanding partnerships
- Grazing Systems and cost-share opportunities: Prioritizing these project types for future allocations. Costs often exceed \$100,000, making them costly and capable of consuming a significant share of the UGBEP budget. With additional funding, UGBEP could expand its support for grazing management projects. In previous years, UGBEP had less authority to spend funds and the program stopped seeking these valuable yet expensive projects.

Trent noted that with the bill passing, the Council hopes the program can invest in meaningful projects rather than allowing the fund to accumulate as it had in previous years.

Department response: Spending money shouldn't be a problem, but it is not always clear in budget reports to the legislature. With VPA HIP grant funds, we are allocating about \$2 million every biennium. While available funding will increase for project enrollments, it may just take some time to spend down. Fully allocating funds is not an issue.

Trent asked if we can still spend the fund even with current staffing.

Department response: Yes, it is certainly possible with the number of annual contracts we have been working on. Getting FTE remains a challenge, but it's possible to work with PF and using money for partner positions that can aid the program.

Trent asked if FWP is comfortable with cost-sharing and expanding staffing in that manner (NGO partnerships).

Yes, we should have no problem, but it will require some work to determine how best to expand the capacity through partnerships. The Denton and Pompeys Pillar partnerships/habitat specialists are good examples of this concept.

Jay asked if a new FTE is unlikely. He feels that employees are very important for success.

Department response: Not likely as it depends on the legislature. The Governor gives final approval and certainly the legislature. The request can get cut at any point. The FTE is set for a very specific purpose that is voted on.

Rep. France: With a PF partnership, government approval is not required because it's a contract?

Department response: Correct.

If we cannot get FTE, then we will likely want to start looking to partners. An FTE is very specific.

Trent asked in other FWP personnel were available to help with the more "menial" tasks. The Block Management tech in Plentywood is working through Parks, is that normal?

Brett Dorak stated tech positions are usually not full-time, only temporary. We struggle with low wages, timeframes, and work duties. All projects come to the head person (Debbie, Heather) and plates become very full. If there are more people selling these contracts it could serve as a pinch point that would slow things down.

Scott T. wondered whether the contract issues across programs are similar enough to justify hiring shared administrative support. Handling contracts collectively rather than program-by-program could ease the bottleneck.

Rep. France noted that sometimes legislators would prefer consolidating some of these programs to make outcomes more efficient – likely lowering costs and increasing productivity.

General discussion on the other FWP councils for Mig Bird and WHIP. Both councils are in statute. These programs are earmarked, and we don't want to touch statute because we may risk losing the earmarks.

Tom K. questioned whether the program is paying Justin to do work that a technician could handle. He asked if technicians could take on routine tasks, allowing him to focus on higher-level work.

Justin said he still values doing the work himself, but he doesn't need to handle every task. There are access techs who can take on some duties, but proper delegation requires being at an FWP location.

Jay thanked the Helena staff and shared his thoughts on Region 4. During past meetings, council talked about doing more on state ground but it didn't appear to go anywhere. We may want to spend some money on state lands if appropriate. R4 should be another good bird year. Consider that Lewistown is in a "land grab situation" with lots of access being lost. Western R4 is promising. The APR is having an impact on R4 lands, and they are participating in access and grassland conservation. They can potentially become a partner because of how much land they are beginning to own.

Ken M. noted that the specialist positions can be funded with PR dollars, so they don't all need to come out of the earmarked funds. However, technicians or other support roles may still need to rely on that earmarked funding. There's also a possibility that an initiative on DNRC lands could draw from the same funding pool.

Tom K. emphasized prioritizing the "lowest-hanging fruit" to make the system more efficient or productive but also pointed out that it's difficult to form a strong recommendation without being able to quantify where the funding is most needed.

Trent added that requesting additional habitat projects would strain the administrative workload.

It was clarified that the maximum amount that can be spent on (water) projects without commission approval is \$100,000.

Tom K. then asked whether multiple parcels of land would be considered a single project—thus requiring commission approval—or whether they could be separated into smaller, less expensive parcels that fall below the approval threshold.

Ken M. clarified that the process isn't impossible, it simply adds an extra step and requires waiting for commission approval. He noted that partnering through cost-share arrangements with NRCS, Pheasants Forever, and similar organizations can help keep individual projects under the spending cap. While UGBEP can contribute up to \$200,000, any additional costs beyond that amount can be covered by participating partner organizations.

Trent: Another discussion item not on the agenda is the ongoing talk and rumors about the prison program and its potential eastward expansion into the Miles City area. The topic resurfaced when we reviewed legislative reports showing that expenditures from this program were transferred to the prison program.

In the interest of transparency, FWP should provide the council with both expenditure reports as part of a public-comment discussion. That would allow the public to understand when and why funds from this program were redirected.

Trent noted that as Chairman, he's made a deliberate effort to keep a clear separation between the two programs. There has been a lot of back-and-forth about whether we should weigh in, and we've consistently chosen not to insert ourselves into the operations of other programs. Most of us have our own private opinions, but we've intentionally kept those out of our formal discussions.

Ken M. stated that the other program is not a wildlife program, which is why we've generally stayed out of its operations as well. The release program is defined by the agency as a hunter-recruitment effort, and certain subsections of PR funding allow put-and-take activities under the hunter education and recruitment category. None of the money funding these releases is coming out of PR wildlife-management funds.

Regarding the Miles City component, the current setup requires significant time and resources to transport birds across the state. The idea behind the Pine Hills facility in Miles City is to establish a rearing site in eastern Montana so releases can occur locally. This isn't an expansion of the program; it's an attempt to reduce inefficiencies—specifically travel time and transportation costs—while keeping the program's scale the same.

Trent reminded the council that its role is not to intervene in other programs; the goal is simply to ensure clarity and transparency.

Spring meeting dates: March 23-24 in Helena

Fall/Tour meeting for 2026 will be in R4. It will be helpful to discuss where it can be hosted now as it's usually a harder meeting to coordinate.

Lunch provided at 12:30pm

Public comment period 1:00 pm and Meeting wrap-up

Kirk Miller: Very impressive to see the presentation from specialists on how to manage their projects. He wanted to know if there is a number to call if you encounter issues when you are out hunting?

Larry Miller: very interesting meeting and good to see problem solving.

Council's input on meeting

Scott Kanning: Technology-wise, those items need to be addressed. Meeting has been going well and very informative. Missed the field tour but wish I could have been there. He misses the comradery and wants to come back. We have funding, encourages FWP to get rid of roadblocks, build better infrastructure, be ready to be twice the size we are without burden.

Scot Brown: One of the main points would be keeping more grass upright and having a \$10 rental fee. We have 1 million more extra dollars, possibly increasing the rental rates is a consideration. He's heard at both meetings that describing allocated funds (versus expenditures) to the legislature isn't always received. Is there a better way to describe that to our legislators? He enjoyed Justin's presentation and as a former farmer/rancher and always a hunter, those parking areas are very important.

Rep. Tom France: I thought the tour was terrific, and it was great seeing the country. Jeff was a great local informant on the program and the struggles. We have asked the department good questions and input. The battlefield is a powerful place to see.

Tom Keegan: He has wrestled with the same issue with describing allocated funds. He also enjoyed seeing some new country and appreciates the PF cooperative putting together the field tour. He recommends cutting some slack and be patient to see the work come to fruition. There are constraints on time and deadlines. He appreciates the work they do.

Art Soukkala: The field trip was fantastic, and he was glad we got into the country more. Timing could not be better to show how valuable partnerships are. In any one time span, one entity can do more.

Jay Hansen: see prior comments

Doug Bonsell: He has left already

Closing:

Trent: Thank you, PF team, for the tour and showcasing partnerships. The life of a contract PowerPoint was informative and probably took away good time from the department. We should be aware of the "asks" and taking away valuable time. Thank you to the public, FWP, PF, NWTF and other groups in attendance. There is a comradery that you miss when not in attendance, so thank you for coming out to these meetings.

Trent entertains the motion to adjourn.

Tom Keegan moves, and Scot Brown seconded
Meeting is adjourned at 1:20pm.