

Spotted Dog WMA Working Group Meeting Notes

Powell County Library, Deer Lodge, Montana

February 10, 2014

Chase Hibbard of Sieben Live Stock was invited to address the group regarding his experiences working with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks on the Beartooth Game Range.

Chase Hibbard Comments:

Chase began that he was not going to offer answers to the Spotted Dog WMA Working Group, rather he was going to share experiences, and knowledge gained over the last several decades.

History – Chase is the fourth generation operating Sieben Live Stock and the general boundaries for the ranch north of Helena is the Smith River forms the eastern boundary and the Missouri River forms the western boundary. They had large bands of sheep in the past, but have converted to all cattle except for 200 head of purebred Targhee ewes.

Beartooth Game Range – 1970 the Beartooth Ranch was owned by the Milton family and was sold to the Hornady family of the Hornady Arms Company. That deal was not successful over the long term and ownership reverted to the Milton family. At that time the Milton family made the arrangements with Montana FWP to establish the Beartooth Game Range. Chase's father inquired with MWFP to graze livestock on the Beartooth and was told "no".

In 1986 Sieben Live Stock made a formal application to MWFP to initiate livestock grazing on the Beartooth and were turned down on the terms that livestock grazing was not considered to be consistent with management goals of the game range. Bill Milton, Tom Butts, and Chase walked the game range to begin looking at opportunities for collaborative management. This effort has resulted in the Devil's Kitchen working group. The group includes a diverse interest base that includes sportsman groups, livestock interests, wildlife enthusiasts, and others.

Important Highlights –

- Elk numbers were too high, but skewed to cows and small bulls. Very few if any older bulls.
- Working by consensus without voting and with effective facilitation developed desired resource conditions and were able to focus on one central theme.

- The galvanizing central theme was determined to have bull elk survival to the point that bull elk would die of old age on the game range.
- The group suggested adjustments in elk season and take guidelines. Turned down by the Commission on year one was approved on year 2. This decision aided in achieving the goal of bull elk dying of old age on the game range.
- This was a collective decision process of the Devil's Kitchen group with recommendations going forward to the FWP Commission.
- Late '80's range condition was areas of decadent rough fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. The suggestion was to utilize grazing as a resource management tool to improve range condition and renovate forage quality.
- Part of the deal was give and take in that adjacent private land was managed in a similar fashion as the game range.
- A rest-rotation grazing system was developed with the assistance of Gus Hormay. The system consisted of 4,900 acres on the game range (game range total about 32,000 acres), and 16,480 acres of Sieben Live Stock land. The entirety of 21,440 acres was placed into a three pasture rest-rotation grazing system.
- Resource monitoring is an integral part of the success of the system. Seven permanent transect were established in cooperation with the FWP along with photo monitoring efforts. Subsequently management has shifted to a short-duration high-intensity system and 2 additional monitoring transects have been established.
- Some groups that were initially opposed to grazing on the game range have become strong advocates as elk populations have demonstrated positive responses.
- Devil's Kitchen meets approximately 4 times per year and employs a combination of block management, livestock grazing management, and elk season adjustments to achieve desired resource goals.
- Trust, Trust, Trust. Chase mentioned the absolute requirement of mutual trust among the working group to achieve desirable goals.
- Sieben Live Stock had been paying \$7.50 per aum for grazing, but that arrangement has been adjusted to reflect the value to game range goals contributed from adjacent private lands.

Question and Answer

- Access – Access for hunting varies among adjacent landowners. Sieben allows access on established roads and off road travel is restricted to game retrieval only.
- Sieben/game range hunting averages between 500 – 1,000 hunter days per year.
- Established relationship with game range may in fact add to property value for a specific clientele group.

- Fencing is an important management tool to achieve grazing goals. Sieben uses about 30 miles of portable electric fencing to achieve grazing management. Cattle are moved every 3-5 days and the same crew that irrigates and harvests hay moves the fence.
- Weed Management – Chase mentioned that sheep were the most effective weed management tools, but they lack enough numbers now. However, They do employ an active weed spraying program to control invasive species.
- Devil’s Kitchen aided in developing 9 – 10 springs and utilized some pipelines to assist with grazing distribution. This works well with the portable electric fencing.
- Riparian health issues – Beartooth Game range is all upland and the adjacent private land riparian areas are in good shape.
- Membership for Devil’s Kitchen consists approximately of: 7 or 8 ranchers, 10 sportsmen, 6 FWP representatives, and a lot of onlookers. Usually attendance is 30 – 40 at each meeting. Usually a guest speaker addresses an issue of importance.
- Access – Readily subscribe to and support Black Management. Sieben Live Stock would allow public hunting anyway because it is consistent with ranch values.
- AUM numbers – 3,500/ yr with 1,750 occurring after seed ripe on the game range 4,900 acres. Equates to 1.4 acres/aum or .7 aum’s/acre. Utilization varies from 40 – 70% of available forage. Note: averages to 55%

Additional Considerations:

The Working Group determined that to maintain positive momentum that time had come to make some recommendations to FWP regarding specific resource management direction.

Discussion also covered the need for consideration of diversity in opinion about domestic livestock grazing as a resource management tool. It was noted that those opposed to livestock grazing had not had an opportunity to address the Working Group.

The working Group came to consensus that beginning with the next meeting Thursday, March 20, 2014, specific recommendations to FWP would be the goal. It was suggested that developing guidelines on a method to progress in the future is a good place to start.

Any specific suggestions can be provided to John Hollenbeck or Mike Thompson.