

Meeting notes from March 20, 2014

Elk Club, Deer Lodge

Members present: Dan McQueary, Neil Horne, Bill Pierce, Louis Smith, Bill Mosier, Jodi Pauley, Liz Smith, Bill Lombardi, John Hollenback, Jim Flynn, Jason Swant, and Donna Young. Others present: Rick Northrup, Mike Thompson, Pat Hansen, Fred Staedler, Jacob Anderson, David Dziak, and Dan Lucas.

John Hollenback called the meeting to order and introduced Paul Hansen an ecologist that did some riparian and upland inventory on the Spotted Dog WMA.

Paul Hansen highlights:

Paul discussed the riparian zone inventory that they did on the Spotted Dog WMA.

Paul said when they evaluate a riparian zone they do not take into consideration what caused the disturbance. They do not look at wildlife interaction, grazing, livestock, etc.

He said the more deep root mass you have the more healthy a stream is. He said streams have fine materials, some have rocky materials and they often determine how much disturbance you might have on a stream.

He said there are some invasive weeds on these Riparian areas. He also said they did an inventory list on these riparian areas. He said 81 percent of the plants were native to the area. 15 percent are introduced. He said the dominant species 70 percent is natives and 30 percent is introduced. A lot of them are weed species. He said almost 30 percent of the riparian zone is dominated by non native species. He said the most abundant species is Kentucky bluegrass along that corridor.

He said they also look at health assessment factors and they are given a score, the higher the score the less disturbance.

He said humans are the problem to management schemes on riparian. It is not the cow or the elk but the humans that manage them. He said there are a lot of human caused issues on streams in Spotted Dog. He said he also looks for different types of plants, what are the most palatable plants, are they there, are they not, have they been browsed or grazed or not. He said he always looks for Red Osier Dogwood as it is highly palatable.

He said they also took into consideration beaver dams, many of them had been abandoned they only found one active dam in their evaluation. Dan McQueary said he did not think there had ever been many beavers in the Spotted Dog. He did not think there was ever trapping they simply ate themselves out of house and home. Paul said in some areas Ranchers are moving beavers back into some streams situations to bring back the health of the stream.

He said they also look at a special species of concern. He said buttercup was one species but only .16 was the total so there is not a lot of species of concern.

He said they also did an upland inventory. He said one of the areas that they inventoried was areas of bitterbrush as it is good winter browse for wildlife. He said they found some areas of heavily browsed bitter brush. He said they also evaluate how much litter is on the ground in plant communities to determine erosion.

He said they also looked at forested areas. He said exposed ridges have a lot bare ground and that is a natural system. He said some forested areas had some very healthy stands. He said some uplands of Idaho and rough fescue areas were very healthy as well. He said there are some volcanic rock outcrops and there is no wildlife or livestock impact and never will be. He said some areas had some heavier impact that had some plant disturbance. He said the overall upland range was healthy but with some problems. He said 7 percent of the total area has weed issues. That is about 1000 acres of weeds. He said spotted knapweed and cheat grass are the two biggest problems. He said the west side has a weed problem. He said out of every polygon there was an average of 2.6 weed species in all 41 polygons. A polygon is 10 to 20 acres in size.

He said in the uplands, 85 percent are of the forage is native. He said 14 percent was covered by non-native species. He said the dominate native species is bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue.

The western area is overall healthy but with problems. The central scored healthy. He said in the central area there are some very healthy stands with good plant diversity and cover. In the west there is more disturbance, more heavily browsed bitter brush, some invasion of non-native species, etc. He said there was a lot of increaser species and weeds present in the western portion of the WMA.

He said because of the cheatgrass, it is recommended not to burn the cheat grass as it will come in and bitter brush will disappear. You can use fire for some quaking aspen rejuvenation. He said the western area had 13 species of weeds with 700 acres invested with 13 percent of the total area covered. He said there is heavier use in the western area than there is on the eastern side of the WMA.

He used some examples of other WMA and how they compare. Blacktail WMA is Functional but at risk. Mount Haggin is almost to a health functioning system. Robb/Ledford had a lot of problems and is slowly moving to a healthy functioning system.

He said you have to define what your goals are and are they attainable for the WMA. John asked if a management plan is feasible for this WMA. Paul said yes, all the parts are there, some areas have some problems and they need some fixing, the healthy areas need to stay healthy and can have some more use in those areas to still remain healthy. He said the riparian areas need the most management. John said there are areas of rough fescue in which the plants are dying and they need some use. Paul said he agrees that it needs to be used. He said if livestock can be moved to those uplands with water development and moved off of the riparian then we are moving the right direction. John asked do you develop management systems. Paul said yes, we can develop water development, electric fencing recommendations, etc.

He said one of the biggest issues on the Spotted Dog is weed management. He said spraying is not the only answer but some different management strategies can also be used.

Bill Pierce asked what classifies a weed? Paul said every state has different plants they consider what a weed is. He said they are not native but introduced from Eurasia. He said they are invasive and take over desirable plants.

Bill asked on those badly eroded stream banks is the overall goal to keep livestock off or do you need to haul in rock, etc. Paul said how much money do you have and how quickly do you want to fix the problem. He said some simple management manipulation like putting it in a tank, having water gaps, etc. will fix the problem. He said you need to out think a cow and develop a management plan that will enhance the riparian zone.

He said we do not have a lot of topsoil or organic matter in Montana and we need plant material to cover and protect this resource.

Pat Hansen asked on Trout Creek there are several areas that the livestock have not impacted but certain banks are eroding away. Paul said in many of those area they are predominantly Kentucky Blue grass and you need to flip that system back around and develop those deep binding root systems.

Jason Swant asked if you were working with someone on this plan where would you start. Paul said he would develop a different management system in which you take the livestock off of the riparian zones and move them into the upland systems. He feels with some small adjustments you can develop some rest rotation type systems. He said some of the upland sights need more grazing use.

Pat said on the west side it is predominately elk how do you move them off of there. Paul said that is a difficult one, hunting is one management system. He said the interaction of livestock and wildlife can help to change some of that management schemes.

John said our group is put together to try and give some recommendations and he felt Paul had some very helpful information. He said we want to put together the facts and develop a management plan with wildlife being the number one concern. There are some that believe using livestock as a tool is important and others may not. He feels that under grazing can be detrimental as well and he feels it is a very neat piece of property. He said by helping the vegetation we are helping the wildlife, fish, birds, etc. Paul said their charge was to develop a baseline and develop the facts that are on the property as we do not have an ax to grind and do not base it on a knee jerk reaction. John said there are a lot of improvements on these game ranges. Paul said you want to install adaptive management as there are tools that will work and others that may not.

John said we want to work together and we do not want to take sides or start lining up on the wall. Paul said he has taught conflict resolution and 90 percent will be in agreement and the other 5 percent will line up on both sides of the issue. He said you cannot satisfy everyone.

John said he has talked to Jon Siddoway from the NRCS about doing some range monitoring and he felt that there needs to be some other on the ground recommendations from other agencies.

Mike felt that we need to work on the plan together rather than having one group give recommendations and other groups giving other recommendations.

Dan wondered if there will ever be an inventory of the eastside. David Dziak said this goes back to the bison issue and originally the bison were going to go on the west side. He said we did the west side to show the agency that bison was not a good idea. Mike said he felt it would be a good idea. Dan said the elk use the west side and if we can start to rest it from grazing then we may be able to start to repair that area. If we can use some grazing in the east side then we can start to move in the right direction of managing the system.

Mike said we need to tackle the issue of where do the cows come from and do we include adjacent landowners to manage a bigger area. He likes the idea of swapping grass and identifying what needs to be managed. Paul said you can use livestock to improve wildlife habitat. Donna said at one of our future meetings we need to have a discussion on access and how does that system look.

John asked what topics do we want to discuss at the next meeting. John wondered if the bordering landowners got together and to ask what their plans look like or what they want. John said we need to make a plan for the summer and what goals do we want to attain. Mike said we want a complete management plan for the WMA that includes travel, access, grazing, etc. Dan felt if everyone came with a map and have each member come with a vision on what is important to them. He said if we manage the grass then the rest will fall into place. Pat asked if the hunting is set for the next two years. Mike said yes that is correct. Mike said we did not go to permits, he said he was also surprised that we did not get very many comments on the Spotted Dog hunting areas. He said we felt that we needed the comprehensive management plan in place first before going to a permitting system if that is the direction we want. He said if we are not grazing the property for a year or two it will change the pattern of the elk, etc. Neil wondered what the local landowners want; he said he would like to hear from them and what they would like from the WMA. Jim Flynn said we do not know what the adjacent landowners want. He said we do not know what the public thinks about grazing. He said it would be helpful if neighboring landowners got together and asked how grazing would benefit them. He thinks we need to get the neighboring landowners to come up with their thoughts on grazing and how it can benefit their operations. He said then FWP could take those comments and work on that management plan. Dan said as a landowner we are very individual and it may or may not work for each landowner. He said FWP has never listened to his complaints or what he would like so he is skeptical in that it would work or not. Jim said he would like to see a recommendation come from the landowners and then run through this committee and that it does not come from FWP.

Next meeting will be Thursday, May 1, 2014 at 7 pm

Respectfully submitted:

Jodi Pauley