

Meeting Minutes of the Spotted Dog Work Group

Meeting of July 16, 2015, at the Elk's Lodge in Deer Lodge

Noted and summarized by Mike Thompson, FWP

Attendees: Dave Dziak, Kelvin Johnson, Dan McQueary, John Beck, Chris Hagan, Craig Sundberg, Neil Horne, Jason Swant, Louis Smith, John Hollenback, Jim Flynn, Jason Lindstrom, Randy Arnold, Bill Pierce, Rick Northrup, Mike Thompson, Ray Vinkey, Brian Robbins (DNRC, replacing the recently retired Fred Staedler).

Public: Pat Hansen, Stan Frazier (Helena Hunters and Anglers), Steve Knapp, Marty Dippold

Chairman John Hollenback called the meeting to order at 6:40 P.M.

Ray Vinkey, FWP wildlife biologist, gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (WMA), the various purposes and objectives currently in place, an update on FWP maintenance activities to date, and an outline and timeline for developing the revised management plan for the WMA.

The PowerPoint presentation is appended to the minutes.

Ray said that he sees the value in sitting down and building some mutual trust and respect. He said it's important for FWP to work with the local communities, and that the department functions within the context of the community.

Ray spoke of the various perspectives from which people view and value the WMA. Grassland is what makes the Spotted Dog WMA stand out in Western Montana.

Ray made a point to clarify that FWP pays taxes to the county on its WMAs.

He listed the administrative rules for WMAs, the statewide WMA goals presented in ARM 12.9.509, the guiding principles developed by the Spotted Dog Work Group, the resources and issues identified by the Work Group, the Landowner Group values, WMA maintenance standards, SDWMA maintenance accomplishments, recreation occurring, and management priorities.

He recalled that the Spotted Dog property was listed for sale at the time FWP purchased it, and at the asking price it probably would not have been acquired by an agricultural operator. Now it is in public ownership and we are working together.

Ray showed a map of vegetation condition classifications by Paul Hansen's firm. The West side of the WMA was the heaviest used by livestock and elk and is not in the best condition. The uplands on the East side of the WMA are in the best condition: good condition with a weed problem. The riparian system on the WMA is in comparatively rough shape.

Dr. Hansen's work is not the be-all, end-all. It is an important starting point for gaining further understanding. Ray referenced Hansen et al, stating that, "overall, sites retain all components necessary for recovery and good health."

Ray listed near-term needs for WMA maintenance and development, including a timeline for each. These are listed in the appended PowerPoint presentation.

Similarly, an outline for the revised management plan is presented in the appended PowerPoint presentation.

Ray said that we all must work together on the management plan.

Ray said that he will have an internal FWP draft management plan by June 30, 2016. Following that will be further review by the Work Group and broader public input.

Ray said that WMA management plans have not historically gone to the Fish and Wildlife Commission for approval.

Jim Flynn asked what Ray meant by the term, resource. He recalled that the Work Group broke into subgroups to identify these resources. He asked if Ray expected more work by the subgroups to further identify resources and issues. Ray replied, yes.

Neil Horne commented that he was excited to see the date for completion of the internal draft management plan—June 30, 2016. He said this was the first date we've seen. He wondered if there would be a minimum acreage used as a qualification criterion for private landowners who might want to cooperate in grazing. Discussion ensued.

John Hollenback reminded the group that Jodie has a list of landowners who have already expressed interest in looking at the possibility of grazing cooperatively. He advised that FWP call them and talk to them. He offered that the Work Group could help make those connections. He said that the landowners will want to know what FWP would require of them, what is entailed, and he would want those interested landowners to have that opportunity to talk.

Jason Swant reminded the group that there is a lot of evidence in the Hansen et al. vegetation report that pertains to rest from grazing and starting dates for potential future grazing. He asked if there is a timeline for grazing. The answer was no.

John Hollenback shared his understanding that some places may be ready to graze soon, some later (years), and some not at all. He said he was encouraged to see some timelines for making plans and developing direction.

Ray replied that FWP is laying out a stepwise basis for decision making—to decide where the opportunities exist.

John Hollenback observed that a lot of the West side of the WMA could be rested a long time and still not be very good. He noted that the Devil's Kitchen group took their work to the Commission several times, but allowed that maybe the process has changed. He asked if the process is to get a plan together and then obtain public comment, and the answer was yes.

Jim Flynn added that the Work Group could always bring something to the Commission, but we might not have a need for that.

Jason Lindstrom brought the road-crossing issue to the Work Group's attention. He said he has visited 50 of the at-least-53 crossings in the past few weeks. He said that more than 30 crossings have issues from a fisheries perspective. Culverts are perched. He said it's been good to get out on the ground and see all this, and it's good that most of the problems are on low-traffic roads.

Dan McQueary commented that most of the culverts were put in 20-30 years ago and the bad ones were installed on logging roads. All those roads up all those drainages along Dog Creek are 30-35 years old.

Neil Horne wanted to check his assumption that FWP wouldn't replace pipe before knowing the final outcome of the travel planning process, and Jason confirmed that.

Kelvin Johnson (FWP grazing specialist) asked for a copy of the list of interested landowners.

John Hollenback asked if we could combine some of the resource areas to correspond with the 4 topic areas of the existing subgroups. Others agreed and Rick Northrup said the groups were Access & Travel, Water & Fisheries, Vegetation Management (including Forests), and Wildlife & Hunting. Dan observed that we might be leaving out the "management showcase" opportunity with these categories, but nothing else.

Neil Horne commented that he liked Ray's presentation, but that it conflicts with the idea of 7-years rest from grazing.

Jason Swant liked the presentation, but does not want to give the impression that we're working out deals for grazing. Has the decision been made that if grazing occurs in one or more prescribed locations on the WMA that it will be a neighboring landowner? Would it have to be a neighboring landowner?

John Hollenback said the presentation is a great starting point. He said that people advocate lots of things, referring to the 7 years of rest as one alternative. Now we need to take a look at what FWP put together, get our subcommittees together, and start working through the process. It will be good to start dealing with realities and dispel some of the rumors. No decisions have been made yet.

Jason Swant agreed that there are rumors. Grazing is the hot button. Jason cautioned that the Work Group be careful and honor Paul Hansen's expertise, and at least rest the parts of the range where it is degraded. He asked, How do we define a neighbor, and can a neighbor have grazing land close by, but not adjoining?

John Hollenback said that all the landowners in the landowners' subgroup were adjacent to the WMA.

Jim Flynn said that FWP's interest in expanding the footprint of the WMA to include cooperating neighboring landowners is justified. He acknowledged that some people will disagree. Professional people in FWP have pointed in a direction that explores an expanded footprint of cooperative habitat management around the WMA.

Dan McQueary asked if we have a goal for the number of elk desired on the WMA? He said his operation sustains more damage since FWP owned the WMA than ever before. He said that the neighbors push for a grazing plan partly because of the elk problem—to offset it. Ray replied that elk numbers are at double the objective between Butte and Garrison and that we need cooperative access to harvest elk across land ownerships. Ray said we will build a goal for elk numbers on the WMA as part of the management planning process.

Jason Swant asked when the Elk Plan objective was set and if it had been revised since FWP purchased Spotted Dog WMA. Ray said that he thought 2008 was the year when elk objectives were updated in the Upper Clark Fork. Jason said that he would like to have more elk in general and hopes that the WMA allows us the capacity to carry more elk.

John Hollenback said that the elk don't stay on the WMA alone. He said that he likes elk, too, but that damage is hard to take when the elk are on his crops.

Neil Horne asked what's changed on the Dog. In the old days he could see elk in the summer, but not anymore. He offered access as the thing that's changed. FWP personnel said that they have been seeing elk on the WMA this summer. Ray said we are seeing changing elk behavior regionwide.

Dan McQueary said that the sheer numbers of elk now are causing conflict. Ray said that maybe we have too many people on the WMA, or maybe we need to improve the habitat.

John Hollenback said it's going to be a long term management issue and that we won't solve it in one night.

Stan Frazier said he doesn't believe that elk like to feed where cattle have been. He said that we have the vegetation study now. If we want to solve the controversy, we could let the WMA rest from grazing for 10 years and then introduce grazing and compare the results.

Steve Knapp asked about grazing objectives and what criteria the Department is using to guide grazing. Ray said that we will develop the objectives and criteria as we embark on the management planning process.

Marty Dippold said that we use a generic term when we say, "landowners." Need to be more specific about what we mean when we are considering landowners to partner on grazing.

Jason Swant said that we can't marginalize people who don't fit the mold that we recognize. If we are going to have a successful plan, we can't stereotype people.

Rick Northrup (FWP) spoke to grazing criteria. The importance to the larger landscape of the wildlife habitat on a private landowner's property will be a factor in identifying a potential cooperating landowner. Also, the landowner would need to possess the capacity to move his livestock from pasture to pasture when the grazing system calls for it, as another criterion. Others.

Kelvin Johnson mentioned that these criteria would not be plowing new ground for FWP. It's what FWP has been doing in other grazing systems on other WMAs.

Bill Pierce reported that there was a heated public meeting in Elliston recently about the Forest Service travel plan. How significant is the Forest Service proposal to what we are doing here on Spotted Dog WMA? Ray replied that it's really important and that FWP and the USFS would like to work together on a larger landscape scale.

John Hollenback instructed the Work Group to get the packet (meeting minutes plus PowerPoint printout), look at it, get our subgroups together. Members should be thinking about the issues and resources that they'd like to work on.

John concluded by saying that this meeting helped us get on track and set some timetables.

NO MEETING IN AUGUST

The next meeting will be September 17.

Chairman Hollenback adjourned the meeting at 8:45 P.M.