

Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)
Meeting Minutes
January 6, 2016

FWP Staff Present: Brad Schmitz, John Ensign, Mike Backes, Jack Austin, Erin O'Connor, Melissa Foster, Steve Atwood, Travis Muscha, Brandi Skone, Jackie Tooke and Ryan DeVore

CAC Members Present: Bob Gilbert, Gary Sparks, Dale Kreiman, Ed Bukoskey, George Luther, Bob Hagedorn and Ed Joiner

CAC Members Absent: Glenn Heitz, Bill Klunder and Mark Frisinger

Brad began the meeting by welcoming everyone and giving an overview of the agenda. Mike Backes will provide an update on Intake, the fish regulation cycle and 2016 changes. John Ensign will update us on the '15 & Forward process, as well as provide information on current proposals relative to the biennial wildlife season setting process and upcoming public meetings.

Brad recognized the Wildlife staff in attendance seeing as how most of them are not usually at CAC meetings, and asked all attendees to introduce themselves. He would like for CAC members to know who their respective biologists are.

Brad then asked Jack Austin, Warden Captain, to give a brief update on the status of Enforcement in the region. Jack began by saying we trained four new wardens this past year and just lost the Miles City-area warden who went back to Wisconsin for a warden position. There's 12 people total in Enforcement here. We currently have seven wardens with a year-and-a-half all the way down to about nine months of experience. There is one warden with four years experience, two with five to ten years experience and two with 20 years. It costs a good deal to get new wardens trained, and get them and their trucks outfitted. They have to stay in their initial district for 30 months. A lot of the new wardens we get seem to stick around for the initial 30 months and then move on, mostly to western Montana. When wardens transfer, they take their equipment and training with them. A good deal of money is also spent on new wardens to put them through specialized training; if and when they leave, they take that expertise and training with them. This equals a good amount more of administrative and logistical work for the region compared to some others. Brad is hopeful that we will see some retention.

Brad continued by noting that current vacant positions in the region include the Information Officer. We attempted to fill the position, and had qualified candidates but they all dropped out prior to interviews. Unfortunately, that position was hit by legislative cuts and we lost a quarter of the funding for it. This seems to have been a factor in the first recruitment attempt. Brad is intending to try again soon and hopefully have someone in the position before spring.

Dale asked if it is typical statewide that a lot of wardens move on at the end of their first 30 months or if Region 7 is the "training field" for the rest of the state. Brad replied that Regions 6 and 7 seem to bear the brunt of that. A lot of them leave, move west and then seem to settle in somewhere. As Jack said when a warden transfers this region loses all of their training, talent and input which means a lot of time is spent on administrative things. He thinks this takes away a little bit from our ability to focus more on what's on the ground. However, we're pretty tickled to have these new guys and hope they'll stick around for a while.

Brad continued by saying the region has a fairly young Wildlife crew, too. We've seen this trend across the whole agency; about 75% of FWP has turned over in the last five years. There was a point where a big cohort of staff left and were replaced with these young folks, who are getting their feet under them now. He feels this is a very exciting time and the Department is starting to hit its stride again. The older staff has brought the culture of FWP to the younger staff. A lot of this contributed to the implication of '15 & Forward.

John mentioned that the Jordan-district Wildlife Biologist position is also currently vacant. The position was advertised earlier this week. His intentions are to having this person living in Jordan.

'15 & Forward Update

Brad then turned the floor over to John Ensign, who is part of the '15 & Forward Planning Team. The last time the Department did a visioning process was about 20 years ago. John reminded CAC members of the '15 & Forward activities they took part in at our last meeting. About a year ago, Director Hagener tasked Department personnel with developing a process to look at where we're at, the validity of our vision and mission if these still fit, or if change is needed. That process became known as '15 & Forward with hopes that the resulting plan will serve us well for at least the next ten years. Personnel applied for spots on either the Planning Team or Sounding Board. Twenty-seven staff were chosen for the Planning Team and another group of folks were selected for the Sounding Board. Appointments for both groups included a good cross-section of seasoned folks, newer folks, different regions and divisions. The Planning Team met five times over the course of the year.

There was ten public meetings and eight internal staff meetings, referred to as 'listening sessions', held around the state. A total of 306 citizens, including CAC members, and 371 staff members participated. All the information gathered from those sessions was condensed; results are available on the webpage. This information helped the Planning Team progress and ultimately produce the recent document that they finalized in December. The final document, referred to as the Vision and Guide, was recently presented to the Director for his review. It will next be presented to the Management Team, which includes Regional Supervisors and Division Administrators, later this month. They will either make adjustments or approve it. Once the document is approved, it will go out for general public consumption.

The Planning Team intends for this to be something that everyone buys into and uses on a day-to-day basis. The core values in the vision include commitments and actions which direct FWP and manages our resources, how we develop priorities, how we collaborate internally and externally, etc. One of the main goals that we're trying to achieve with this vision and guide is to align FWP with the public's values, needs and expectations. We want to involve public and employees in determining how we can be effective over the next ten years, and set a direction that we can put into action.

From the listening sessions, we heard that the public wants FWP to be responsive, collaborative, inclusive, and resourceful. They value our integrity, trustworthiness and high professional standards. They urge us to lead and stand firm on public trust principles, be objective and be consistent in our policies. They want us to anticipate issues. Hopefully this document is a significant step in that direction.

John then reviewed the objectives of what the Planning Team has put together. He said the big question comes down to implementation – how are we going to take this document and make it work? The hope is that we will have this document in place by the start of the new fiscal year in July.

Bob Gilbert asked if the final document will be Commission-approved and if there would be a public comment opportunity before finalization and approval. He said it is difficult for CAC folks to

support or oppose something that they haven't seen. John replied that that decision may come back to the Management Team, which the Planning Team will be presenting the document to later this month. The Commission will have final approval of the document, but he isn't sure about the public involvement to that extent. Brad added that this is technically an internal document that guides how FWP operates, and so it could likely be kept in-house. The Director did want public involvement, though, which is why the listening sessions were held and the information was brought to the region's CAC's. John also said that, to date, even the Sounding Board and staff haven't seen the current document; so far the Planning Team is the only people who've seen it.

Dale asked John if he was satisfied with the final document for regional application purposes. John replied that the document is basically a "big picture" view. With that in mind, we have to decide how we as a region implement it. Overall, he likes it and is happy with it.

Fisheries Update

Brad then turned the floor over to Mike Backes for a Fisheries update. Mike started with a review of the four-year Fisheries regulation process, which just wrapped up. He showed an overview of the region's boundaries for Fisheries purposes and explained staffing.

The 'jewel' of our region is the Yellowstone River, which there is 293 river miles of in Region 7. Many of the fish species in the Yellowstone spend their entire lives in a large geographic stretch of the river. There is 63 fish species in the Yellowstone River, including the pallid sturgeon which is an endangered species. While the Yellowstone is an un-dammed river, there are six low-head diversion dams that have some impact on fish migrations seasonally.

The pallid sturgeon was designated as endangered in 1990. Mike then provided some views of the Intake Dam and part of the current dam project that is already complete. The structure is owned by the Bureau of Reclamation, which wants to try to improve fish passage for pallid sturgeon. Hence, the proposed fish passage project. A primary goal of this project is to improve passage for pallid sturgeon and also for other native species, or at least not reduce passage for native species, which is key for FWP. The other goals are to minimize entrainment into the canal and to continue water delivery to the Lower Yellowstone Irrigation Project.

This project originated some years ago. Half-way through building the structure, the cost of the head-gate became more than what was originally thought. This is where the bypass channel came into play, which had been discussed somewhat in theory but never carried forward. Moving forward, the biological opinion changed. The bypass channel ended up being the preferred alternative. After that, some outside groups got involved and filed a lawsuit to essentially stop the whole process. Recently, the Corps, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Bureau of Reclamation and the litigants has reached a settlement to some extent. The lawsuit stated that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has to be completed. This is normally a three-year project, but the federal agencies have condensed it into one year starting immediately. The EIS will have six alternatives – a no action alternative, the bypass channel which will probably be the preferred alternative, an excavation of the existing high-water channel for use as the bypass channel alternative, a multiple pumping stations alternative, and an alternative from the plaintiffs.

There will be a public scoping meeting January 21st in Glendive to try to gather input on what needs to be incorporated into the EIS on the front end. Later, there will be two June public scoping meetings in Glendive and Sidney with the draft EIS.

Telemetry work by our biologists has already been taking place to determine what kind of passage is taking place for pallid sturgeon and native species including sauger, shovelnose sturgeon, blue sucker and paddlefish. Ten transmitters were put in each of the fish species in two different sizes and two different locations. The study reach included upstream of Glendive and a stretch of river that is

not at a diversion dam for comparison of movement to determine if the dam is being an impact or not. The fish were then monitored weekly and at base stations located along the river. Mike then showed several graphs of the different species' movements. Of interest is that one adult pallid sturgeon did get upstream of Intake; it went through the historic side channel. This telemetry work will be continued in 2016.

Mike then moved onto the paddlefish program. Our paddlefish program is managed cooperatively with North Dakota. We also work with the Glendive Chamber of Commerce's caviar program that collects eggs at a free fish cleaning service at Intake. The joint program has been in effect since 1994. The money generated from goes into a grant program for projects with historical or recreational aspects. However, it has had some challenges through the years. It was a near-record egg collection year in 2015, so things are starting to look optimistic.

Paddlefish anglers have designated catch-and-release days and harvest days. There was five harvest days in 2015 before the harvest target was reached and the season subsequently closed. Mike reported that it is estimated about 80% of the total paddlefish harvested come through the cleaning station at Intake. Consequently, when Intake starts approaching 800 fish an instantaneous 24-hour closure for the rest of the river is issued in order to try to not go over the 1,000 fish harvest target. Catch-and-release fishing is only allowed at Intake. Fisheries staff tries to gather biological info on every fish they can.

Next, Mike provided an update on the fish regulation process. Most everything proposed in Region 7 went through the final review and was approved by the Commission. The 2016 regulations take effect March 1. One change is an improved bait list that details the 10 fish species that can be used for live bait rather than the ones that cannot. Another change is a modified pond/lake list where live bait can be used. The smallmouth bass limits on the Yellowstone River were increased from five to 10 daily and in possession. A mandatory 48-hour reporting for paddlefish harvest has been instituted, as well as a lottery for paddlefish tags on the Upper Missouri River (white tags).

Mike then showed the 10-species list of fish that can be used as live bait. A color handout has been put together to help folks identify the differences between species.

Brad then asked if there were any questions for Mike. Ed Bukoskey asked about the status of northern pike in the Yellowstone. Mike said there's gotten to be few. The influx of pike in the river that folks were seeing the last couple years was due to the large water year of 2011. A lot of pike came from Lake Sakakawea over Intake during the flood in 2011. Pike require aquatic vegetation to spawn on, which the Yellowstone lacks. Consequently, pike spawning success is very limited in the river.

Brad encouraged members to visit with Mike or any of his staff if any questions.

Wildlife Update

John began by discussing the biennial season-setting process. Every two years the Department goes through a hunting season-setting process. Starting this past August and September, there was online scoping which was used to generate season proposals. Wildlife staff created the proposals in October, which were then sent to Helena staff in November, and then went to the Commission in December. The Commission decides what becomes proposed tentatives that will go out for public comment. John then passed out the statewide list of proposed changes for the next two hunting seasons.

The public comment period is open now and runs through January 22nd. Afterwards the Commission will review public comment and decide what's going forward before finalizing the proposals at their February meeting.

One statewide proposal of interest is in regards to archery permits. The proposal would require hunters applying for archery-only permits to have purchased a Bow and Arrow license prior to making application. Another statewide proposal would require a General Deer license to have been purchased prior to hunters applying for a special antlered deer permit. One last statewide proposal of interest is the finality of permit availability after March 15th. Unlimited permits would no longer be available after that time.

John referred folks to the front page of the proposed changes packet. There is good summary on that page, as well as instructions for how to submit public comments, etc.

There are several proposals here in the region regarding elk and deer. John turned the floor over to Steve Atwood for discussion on the current status of elk in the region, as well as our elk proposals. Elk overall are expanding in Region 7. There is a lot of available habitat south of Interstate 94 for elk to expand into. Steve showed an overview of the Custer Forest Elk Management Unit (EMU), which basically includes Hunting Districts 702, 704 and 705. Overall, the Custer Forest EMU is in great shape. There was approximately 2500 elk observed in the last surveys. What we look at in our surveys is mainly the ratio of bulls to cows and calves to cows, which is a good measure of populations. The 2005 Elk Management Plan lists target ratios of 30-40 bulls per 100 cows and 30 calves per 100 cows. This EMU is currently at 39 bulls per 100 cows and 45 calves per 100 cows.

The Missouri Breaks EMU, which is basically Hunting District 700, showed much of the same trends. There was approximately 1100 elk last observed. Bulls to cows and calves to cows ratios are right on target or over target.

Steve then moved into the Region 7 elk proposals. The first proposal is to create a 007-00 elk B (antlerless) license. This would be valid across the entire region, excluding the Custer National Forest and the Charles M. Russell Wildlife Refuge (CMR). The quota range is 500 – 1500; we are proposing a quota of 500. The reason this proposed license is coming about is because the 900-series elk B license that was valid in multiple districts across Regions 4, 5, and 7 is being disbanded. The proposed 007-00 license we feel further liberalized the season structure in Region 7 and also give landowners another tool to reduce elk if need be. Regions 4 and 5 already have a similar license and its working well for them.

Ed Bukoskey asked if this license would be a special drawing, to which Steve replied it will be. John added that this is part of the June 1 drawing. Ed added that he wished we'd proposed something similar for either-sex permits.

Bob Hagedorn asked what the thinking was in not having these licenses valid inside the Forest Service boundaries on private land. Brad replied that there is a different proposal that will address this.

Bob G. asked if the 007-00 license would be valid on BLM, to which Steve replied it would be. The only places that would be off-limits would be the CMR and Custer National Forest. Brad added that those two places already have their own specific cow licenses. Assuming this license proposal goes through, the entire region would be covered by three different cow licenses – a Breaks cow tag, a Forest cow tag or this new cow tag that incorporates everything else. It separates people a little bit and allows a broad-scope license that gives hunters another opportunity and landowners another tool to provide elk hunting on their property.

John then addressed the question previously asked by Bob Hagedorn regarding Forest Service boundaries. Another proposal in the region is to change the "Forest Service administrative boundary"

requirement to “Forest boundary.” Previously, the “Forest Service administrative boundary” requirement essentially meant private in-holdings within the Custer National Forest were off-limits to anyone without a special permit or elk B license for the area. This proposal would open up those private in-holdings to folks with General Elk Licenses or the new 007-00 elk B license. Bob H. stated that this would clear up a lot of confusion. George Luther added his concurrence and said this clears up any gray areas. Brad also added that this would allow landowners who live within the Forest and have elk on their property to be able to harvest elk without having to be drawn for special licenses to do.

Steve then moved onto the next proposal which addresses a minor change in Hunting District 701. Elk from neighboring Region 5 also inhabit the southwest corner of HD 701. A few years ago, the requirement was changed in the area to allow bull elk to be harvested only with the HD 590 permit. A General Elk tag in that area would be only valid for cows. In HD 590, immediately west of this area, spike elk can be harvested with a General Elk license. Presently, the General Elk language for the district says, “Valid in portion of HD 701 north of Yellowstone River, south of Highway 12 and west of Sumatra-Myers Road.” Our proposal is to remove that language and to also include spike elk to be harvested with a General Elk in that corner of the district. The HD 590 permit would still be required to harvest a branch-antlered elk there.

The third proposal for elk is to increase the 799-20 permit. This is the permit for HD’s 702, 704 and 705 and allows access to the Custer National Forest. The current quota is 175 with the proposal being to increase that number to 225. Elk numbers have been increasing in the area and so we feel the population can support the increase and still remain within population objectives. Hunter success on this permit has typically been about 35%.

Bob H. asked if that success rate is for bulls only or both sexes since it’s an either-sex tag. Steve replied that it is bulls only and there is very few cows harvested on that permit.

Seeing no further questions on elk, John moved onto deer and Ryan DeVore for an overview of deer proposals. Ryan began by explaining that there are 13 deer trend areas that we fly post-season and in the spring. The spring surveys are what we base our quota system on and are the best picture of what populations are like coming into the season. We have seen our deer populations start to bounce back in the last few years, after the severe winters of 2010 and 2011. Populations have been increasing steadily. After the past spring’s surveys, we saw an increase in mule deer for most of our trend areas and as a whole the region is 12% above long-term average (LTA). In 2012 mule deer were 57% below the LTA, 32% below in 2013 and 8% below in 2014. Now they’re 12% above LTA. The increase can be attributed to the mild winters we’ve had, ample growing seasons, precipitation and good forage bases.

Fawn to doe ratios is one of our indicators in post-season surveys. In 2014, this ratio was 91 fawns per 100 does and 2015 was 90 fawns per 100 does, which is really high and seems stable across the region. John added that these numbers are unheard of.

George stated that he has noticed this trend and also saw lots of twins and even some triplets while he’s been out in the field.

Ryan continued by saying our mule deer population is comprised of a lot of young, highly productive animals. He feels if we have another mild winter, mule deer numbers will only continue to increase. With this in mind, the region is trying to get ahead of the curve with some of our season proposals. All but one of our post-hunting season trend surveys has been completed. Half of the districts surveyed have seen the highest or second-highest counts ever recorded since we started surveys.

Dale inquired as to what staff has seen while doing surveys in his area. He has not been seeing much for deer on his place, particularly white-tail. Melissa replied, taking into consideration that much of that area is white-tail country, that mule deer numbers were very good, even slightly over objective.

White-tail are down a bit there. Dale then inquired about how hunters were able to have multiple mule deer doe tags. Melissa explained that this was a result of the licenses being under-subscribed through the drawing. Essentially, not all tags were sold through the drawing so were then offered as surplus. Hunters can purchase multiple surplus licenses if they so choose.

Ryan continued that our post-season buck to doe ratio was 38 bucks per 100 does, which is unheard of. Ed Joiner stated that he lives in one of the hunting districts where antlerless mule deer were not able to be harvested for a couple years now, so folks have been shooting small bucks. Is the buck to doe ratio still that high in his area with so many young bucks being harvested? Ryan confirmed that ratios are looking good across the board.

Ryan then briefly covered whitetail numbers. We don't have as many trend areas for whitetail, but overall they seem to be doing well. In 2014 whitetail fawn to doe ratios were 84 fawns per 100 does, while 2015 was 77 fawns per 100 does.

Moving on to our proposals, the first is the return to the general deer license to either-sex, either-species in Region 7. The last few years it has been either-sex whitetail or antlered mule deer. The second proposal is to eliminate the district-specific mule deer B licenses and return those licenses to a region-wide tag. Our final quota for these B tags will be based on spring survey numbers.

As points of reference, typical harvest success on mule deer B tags is about 50%, and around 65% or more of mule deer bucks harvested in the region are four-point or better.

John concluded by saying that there is no proposed season changes to antelope at this time. We'll conduct antelope surveys in July which will determine what we do with our antelope quotas. Antelope numbers overall have been increasing similar to deer but at a slower pace. John provided a current count on bobcat and lion harvest. Current harvest seems to be on target with past years.

Brad added that these are tentative proposals which we will take comment on at our public meetings the following week in Glendive and Miles City. He encouraged CAC members to attend.

Roundtable Discussion

Brad then opened the floor up to CAC members for roundtable discussion. George began by saying the predator population seems high and he's also seen lots of rabbits. Turkeys seem to be coming back. He's had interesting conversations with some nonresident landowners who've had thoughts of trying to execute land exchanges within the state of Montana but don't understand Montanans passion for big game. He's worked with a few of the new wardens; tries to make it a point to bring them up to date on some of the history in the area and past issues. There were a few issues with the Colstrip Management Hunt. However, there is a zero-tolerance policy for any misbehavior with this. Anyone causing issues is done hunting the management hunt area and Block Management handled by Western Energy, and any other entity that participates in the management hunt. He's heard a few complaints about elk in northern Prairie County. John and Brad responded that there's been an opportunity to harvest either-sex elk on a general tag in that area for about four years now. The 007-00 elk B tag would also be valid there, giving hunters two opportunities to harvest elk.

Dale said sharp-tail grouse and pheasant numbers in his area seem good. He's seen lots of Huns and limited turkeys. He's noticed more late-season pheasant hunters this year. There are a good number of trappers helping to keep coyotes numbers in control in his area. He is not aware of many elk harvests in his area. He tries to make it a point to visit with his Block Management hunters to see what he can bring back to the CAC. He's heard that bird hunters don't like having to leave legs on for transport. Deer harvest was good on his Block Management Area.

Ed B. noted that he saw few antelope on his travels between Forsyth and Melstone. He is also on the sage grouse committee and believes predator impact on sage grouse numbers is being ignored. He is also on the elk brucellosis committee and noted that harboring of big game animals continually comes up in their discussions.

Bob H. said the season was very quiet on his ranch with just a few groups of hunters. There were no poaching problems. Deer numbers seem good in his area; there are a lot of fawns. Bird numbers are also good, although he has had almost no bird hunters.

Ed J. appreciated the Enforcement staff that assisted with a search and rescue effort in his area. He's noticed lots of coyotes and is hoping high fur prices will help with that. He has taught Hunter Ed for lots of years; wasn't in favor of the new Apprentice Law at first. However, while he's still not completely comfortable with it, he did have a good experience with a family friend's 11 year-old apprentice hunter. Brad said he, too, wasn't comfortable with the Apprentice Law but talking to kids and parents at check stations has changed his perspective. The positive experiences that apprentices and their parents had was nice to see. Mike added that his 9 year-old daughter's interest in hunting was piqued after hearing classmates' hunting stories. The excitement among the kids has changed his perspective, too. Erin noted that approximately 3,600 youth were certified for Apprentice licenses. One thing she saw in the front office was the instances of adults who said they hadn't hunted in years but were picking it up again now with having children who wanted to hunt.

Bob G. said he was in Helena during the voting on the Apprentice law; it was very interesting and emotional. He doesn't necessarily agree with the ability to designate someone other than a parent or guardian to accompany apprentices in the field. He believes we will see another run at live fish transport in the eastern fishing district in the next legislature. Mule deer numbers are definitely expanding while whitetail seem down a bit in the Sidney area. He thanked Mike for the paddlefish snagging info that Mike sent him after our last meeting. He gained a good understanding from that info. He referred to the recent Parks Board decision on the future of Hell Creek State Park and noted the popularity of the park. He asks that folks make an effort to think about what can be done to save the park for the benefit of the people. The park is important to the people of eastern Montana and attracts visitors from all over. The bottom line is Parks probably does need more funding but how do they get appropriate funding?

Gary Sparks noted that antelope are doing well from Plevna to Ekalaka. Elk are also back. Having taught biology for 38 years, he likes seeing hard data like was provided today. It's good to see and means FWP has been doing its homework. Having to take numbers, mortality, weather, hunter success, etc., into consideration is a big job and the FWP staff here is doing a good job.

Conclusion

Brad mentioned some ideas he has for the group's summer meeting. Melissa is taking part in a deer study with a PHD student that would be interesting to see. Travis has good information to share on access and Block Management, and Brandi is doing some neat work with bats and other non-game critters. If these are items that would be interesting to folks, he'd be happy to focus our next meeting on such topics. Another possibility that he is leaning towards would be a field trip-type of meeting at a Wildlife Management area, such as Seven Sisters or Amelia Island. If there's anything that folks would like to see or discuss, he's open to suggestions.

Ed B. said he thinks it would be nice to meet somewhere and see some projects or work taking place on the ground. Brad agreed that sounded good and will work on putting something together for July or August.

He thanked everyone for their attendance and participation, and encouraged folks to call with any questions, thoughts or items of concern.