

Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)
Summer Meeting/Field Trip
August 2, 2017

FWP Staff Present: Brad Schmitz, Mike Backes, Erin O'Connor, Marla Prell, Jack Austin, Melissa Foster, Martha Williams and Bill Schenk

CAC Members Present: Bob Gilbert, Dale Kreiman, Ed Bukoskey and Bob Hagedorn

CAC Members Absent: Gary Sparks, Bill Klunder, George Luther, Glenn Heitz, Mark Frisinger and Ed Joiner

After arriving at Stipek Fishing Access Site (FAS), Brad began the day by introducing Director Martha Williams and Bill Schenk, Legal Counsel, from Helena. We appreciate them coming out to Region 7 and are thankful for this opportunity for them to see some of our region and meet CAC members. Brad then asked everyone else to introduce themselves.

Stipek FAS

Brad and Mike addressed the group regarding this site. Stipek FAS is located about 8 miles northeast of Glendive and is relatively new in our FAS system. This FAS came to be through two separate purchases. It encompasses about 105 acres and includes access to the Yellowstone River and a boat ramp. It is a great area for turkey, upland game bird and deer hunting. Initially, there was some opposition to the site and access road location but things have since worked out well.

Intake FAS

Mike provided information on Intake FAS with the group, as well as an update on the current proposed dam project and consequent litigation. The diversion at this site came to be in 1906. It includes a head-gate structure that diverts water for about 55,000 acres of irrigation with the water going all the way to North Dakota. The dam itself is a wooden structure with large rocks on top.

In 1990 pallid sturgeon were listed as an endangered species. Intake FAS is included in what is known as pallid sturgeon Recovery Area 2. There are approximately 100 wild adult pallid sturgeon known to be somewhere in Recovery Area 2. These pallids and those found upstream of Fort Peck are the most genetically pure pallid sturgeons within the remaining distribution of pallids. However, this is an old population of fish that has not shown any natural recruitment since the 1950's.

Pallid sturgeon migrate upstream to spawn, the fry then drift for about 14 days before physically capable of settling and holding in the river. Females only spawn about every two to three years. Currently, these fish cannot get over the diversion dam; occasionally they can use the natural side channel on the other side of the river when river flows exceed 30,000 cubic feet per second (cfs).

Approximately 60% of the wild pallid sturgeon in this area have transmitters. We have telemetry stations on the diversion dam, side channel, and throughout the river to help monitor their movement. In 2014, four wild pallid sturgeon and one juvenile hatchery-raised pallid utilized the side channel. Three of the adults went all the way to the Powder River. In 2017, two wild males went through the side channel earlier this year. Translocation of telemetered pallid sturgeon over the dam was also initiated by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) in 2017 as mandated by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). Five pallid sturgeon (two wild males and three hatchery juveniles) were translocated over the dam in May. Three kept going up the Yellowstone River and then migrated up the Powder

River for approximately 90 river miles. The total upstream migration of these fish was approximately 270 river miles upstream of Lake Sakakawea.

The proposed Intake Dam project, which has been ongoing the last few years, was Endangered Species Act-driven and administered by the USFWS. It involves Endangered Species Act funds. Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)'s involvement with this is only as a technical agency on the side.

Phase 1 of this project was to install the new head-gate structure, which is done. Phase 2, which is what has been going through litigation, proposed to create a manmade bypass channel. This would also require a new diversion dam, which one proposed option was a concrete structure. The natural side channel would be filled in. The state supports the proposed bypass alternative with three conditions: 1) it provides successful fish passage in both directions, 2) the full water right is provided to the irrigators, and 3) federal agencies stay committed to the project until the first two conditions are met. An injunction was put on the project, which was lifted in April, but another was since filed in June. The litigants want the dam removed altogether and the irrigation district to use pumps. Right now, there is no clear future on where the project is headed.

Bob Gilbert reminded attendees that the 'dam' is actually a weir. People think of dams in a different context. Brad added that there is already no fish passage at Intake; this proposed change would only compound that problem. Brad also reminded everyone that FWP does not want to take away the irrigators' rights. Bob G. added that we need a solution.

Dale asked how long pallid sturgeon typically live, to which Mike replied usually at least 60-65 years.

Martha addressed the group and stated that what FWP does not want here is a fish versus people situation or attitude.

Dale added that the CAC members really need to talk to the people they all associate with, whether that be friends, family, coffee shop groups, local service organizations, etc. Getting information out there would be a good thing.

Elk Island

The group traveled on to Elk Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA), located just southeast of the town of Savage. Elk Island is also a FAS on the Yellowstone River with that part of the site being about 70 acres.

Melissa Foster, Wildlife Biologist for the area, provided the group with some background on the site. Elk Island WMA is just over 1400 acres and was purchased in the 1970's. The WMA is very conducive to upland bird, waterfowl and whitetail deer hunting. FWP has been fortunate in that the site's neighbors have been very cooperative and great to work with. We purchased the last part of the WMA from a neighbor within the last few years. FWP utilizes a sharecropper on this WMA, which has been an arrangement that's worked very well. Per this arrangement, the sharecropper leaves 25% of their crop each year as payment. One noticeable fringe benefit of the sharecropper agreement has been the community buy-in we've seen. Neighbors and recreationists in the area know about our cooperative work with the sharecropper and have a sense of "ownership" of the site that has helped curb some of the vandalism and off-road use issues that plague other sites.

The WMA has a lot of smooth brome grass that grows there. This is good to an extent in that it provides cover for nesting birds, etc., but can also cause issues when it gets overgrown.

The group was able to see a shelterbelt project which Melissa completed last year, and an area of willows that were planted to help provide bank stabilization. The river channel is cutting in on part of the site and we're hoping these willows will help to slow that progression.

Bill asked about non-consumptive users at the site, to which Melissa replied there is a good deal of this. The area is utilized by hikers, bird watchers and folks who just like to come and run their dogs or simply enjoy a quiet day away from town.

Ed asked about the possibility of bee keeping at the site.

Seven Sisters

The last stop on the group's tour was Seven Sisters WMA. This site is located just east of the town of Crane, between Savage and Sidney. Seven Sisters WMA is about 1500 acres and also provides ample whitetail deer hunting, as well as turkey, upland and migratory bird hunting. Seven Sisters also includes a FAS that is just under 8 acres in size. Both the FAS and WMA are also popular for boating, picnicking and other recreational opportunities. Melissa discussed the use of a sharecropper at this site and the benefits we've seen from that. It's essentially free to FWP to have a sharecropper, has proven effective and has engrained us into the community at this site, just as it has at Elk Island. Good relationships with neighboring landowners has assisted us with additional purchases and expansion at Seven Sisters as well. We are very grateful for these opportunities and to be able to foster those relationships.

Melissa also explained FWP's Upland Game Bird program and how funds from that are used for habitat work on WMA's such as this one. The local Pheasants Forever chapter has also been involved with projects at Seven Sisters. This site also experiences invasive smooth brome grass growth and has occasional challenges from flooding. During the height of the oil boom in recent years, both Seven Sisters and Elk Island experienced significant use and issues with vandalism and littering. Since oilfield traffic has been quieter the last year or two, things have improved greatly, though.

One last topic of discussion was the cooperation between Wildlife and FAS staff, as well as wardens, in the region and how all parties assist with site management. With the large size of our region and distance between staff members, it's critical that staff has this good rapport.

Conclusion

Brad thanked CAC members and guests for attending and participating in discussion. It was a nice day and we hope everyone enjoyed this tour.