SPWMA Public Meeting November 30, 2017

Public Meeting for the draft management plan was called to order by John Hollenback at 6:40 pm on November 30, 2017 at the Elks in Deer Lodge. Members present were: Neil Horne, Louis Smith, Dan McQueary, Pat Hansen, Jodi Pauley, John Hollenback, Jason Swant, Bill Pierce, Bill Mosier, Gayle Tomlinson, Brian Quigley. FWP present: Rick Northrup, Randy Arnold, Jason Lindstrom, Brady Shortman, Julie Golla, Kelvin Johnson, and Mike Thompson.

Mike introduced himself at the public meeting. He said we called this meeting to go through the management plan and come to a mutual understanding on what should be included or taken out of the plan. He gave a background of the Spotted Dog and how FWP came about to purchasing the property. He said FWP also felt it was important to have a citizen's work group and that was formed in 2013. He said this meeting is designed to take in public comment, take detailed notes and then the committee will deliberate as a work group and decide how to implement those comments. This is a working document and will change in the future as we move forward.

Mike said the work group was formed in 2013 and the group decided to have John Hollenback be the chairman of the group. John gave a history of how the working group was formed. He said this group has taken tours of the Spotted Dog to get to know the landscape better and learn more about the habitat of Spotted Dog. He said we also worked on doing some education of how other WMA's work, the members, and other assessments were done by FWP. We also broke our group into special committees dealing with public access, wildlife, natural resources, history, etc. and this was the backbone to developing the management plan. John said he thinks this committee should continue meeting in the future to make sure that the property continues to go in the right direction. He said we have to remember this property was bought for wildlife enhancement.

Mike said we will take comments through December 8th on this management plan. Mike said the meat of the plan is in the executive summary. He also highlighted what is in the management plan. He said the Spotted Dog is not a stand-alone property but part of a larger ecological system and the areas surrounding the property. He said part of the charge is winter habitat for elk and this is a major part of our management plan.

Mike moved into discussing the Executive summary and one of the major discussion areas is our current elk numbers and that there are too many and instead of trying to manage habitat for increased elk we need to manage our elk numbers and that is being taken care of in a different area of FWP on a statewide basis. He said at the same time we need to still be managing habitat for the Spotted Dog and surrounding areas.

Mike said the Spotted Dog wildlife management area is for public input and for public access. He said the working group was the public's voice to get to the draft of the management plan. He said this is not a NEPA document. He said where NEPA would be introduced, for example, is if cattle grazing became a tool then that would go before the public and the commission and through the NEPA process. This document gives us the sideboards to get started to implement any of those types of proposals that are brought forward.

There was a question about access during the winter months in that snowmobiles need to stay in designated areas but what about walking or cross-country skiing, etc. Mike said people can walk in there or cross-country ski and he said that could be clarified better in the public access area.

There was a question about camping and how that is going to be handled between DNRC and FWP managed lands.

There was a question about opening the old stage road and how would FWP handle snowmobile access as that could create a conflict of interest. Bill Pierce commented that the old stage road has always been a public access road and has been a public road all along. He said about 40 years ago that road was basically locked off and simply has not been used. He said the current commission is wanting to open the road and if that happens it would be open to wheeled vehicles and could be open to snowmobiles. He said that road is out of the jurisdiction of FWP and is in control of the county. Randy said right now it is still moving through the district court system. The comment was why is this an issue all of a sudden when it is public ground because before when it was private land it was never an issue. Bill said it is out of our control on what the county does.

Joe Dippold asked on Page 15 how are the Management Unit boundaries identified. Mike said it was identified by the water shed boundaries basically.

Joe Dippold asked on Page 30, about the basics of inventory and is that only going to happen every 10 years or would there be other changes in between. John commented that he thought it would be ongoing, the every 10 years would be an in-depth assessment only but there would be other assessments in between so it doesn't get out of hand. There was agreement that if situations arose that changes should be addressed.

Joe Dippold asked what kind of partnerships is FWP looking at with private landowners to work on management schemes from grazing to weed control, etc. Kelvin said one of the management schemes is being a good neighbor and working with surrounding landowners to expand the footprint of the WMA. Kelvin said we hope that by working in partnerships we can enhance other wildlife habitats, etc. He said he and Julie have visited with the surrounding landowner and what kind of viable grazing options can happen with neighbors.

There was a comment about curlews and what kind of habitat they like, Kelvin said they like the land hammered or more open and short grasses, etc. There was a public comment that two FWP personnel had now used the word "hammered" and that is not the kind of word we should be using when discussing rangeland or wildlife resources. The comment was that curlews like short bunch grass areas. Kelvin did apologize in that he did not mean to say hammered but was using it more as a reference tool to compare between wildlife habitat scenarios. Mike also went on record for saying he did not mean that in the context when talking about resources of the WMA.

Dwight Crawford asked why can't grazing be included in this plan and why do some things have to go through NEPA and others do not. Mike said right now we are not far enough to include grazing in this plan but it could be done in the future.

Dwight Crawford asked what does a healthy forest mean as defined on page 28. Mike said it means a lot of thing such as weed encroachment, etc. It is more about what is on the ground currently.

Anaconda sportsman made a comment in that we support grazing as long as it enhances wildlife and following the model that was done on Fleecer as it is a good model to show the cooperation between private and public lands.

He said the conversation is always about elk but we have consider the other species especially mule deer and antelope. Antelope are increasing and mule deer are disappearing.

The other issue is a shoulder season and Anaconda Sportsman are against having any shoulder seasons on public lands. Shoulder seasons need to be handled on private properties. The WMA has made a contribution to the health of elk but having a shoulder season is not supported by sportsman on public ground.

There was a comment about beavers and he felt that beavers needs to be re-introduced for stream health. He said cattle have trashed this property for 70 years and he felt that there should be no cattle on this property for the next 20 years.

There was a question about the county road and he wondered why FWP is not talking to the county commissioners and they should continue to keep that communication open between the agency and the county.

There was a question about if there has ever been an inventory on carrying capacity of these properties and forage volume that is being taken by grazing on public ground. Mike asked if he meant the WMA specifically or all public ground. This was not clarified but the comment was that with public leases, the forage volume that is being taken away could be replaced with 1300 head of elk.

There was a question about fire on the WMA and how would that be managed especially on a grassland area and how are prescribed fires going to be managed as he would like to see more of that in the plan.

Gary Swant asked how would grazing be managed and would they have to do it by foot or horseback since the general public has to do the same with no motorized vehicles.

Matt Graveley said if a rancher is grazing, he is working to improve the habitat and is working for the FWP. He said it is also a benefit for both properties.

Marty Dippold commented about predators and the only predator he sees right now on the WMA is human beings controlling the movement of wildlife, etc. He said if you don't control your predators, it changes the movement of elk, etc. We have large herds of elk that are destroying public and private grounds as they are no longer in little herds scattered through the landscape.

Matt Graveley asked if there is a plan to do an inventory in MU 5. As that can be a problem with weeds between the forest service and the WMA, etc.

There was a question about what happens if someone gets burned out can the WMA be a temporary place for someone to bring their cattle, etc. Mike said that can be complicated as do we have the infrastructure to make it work, and then the fact comes that could come up every year and how do you make those fair management decisions.

Rick Northrup said right now they are working with a rancher in eastern Montana to see if he can use one of the WMAs in that part of the state to give them a year of relief.

There was a question about the reservoir and what is the long term plan. Jason Lindstrom commented in that the water rights are owned by a private landowner and FWP has no rights to the water. He said they would not be stocking it with fish as it has live water coming in there but is a non-channeled reservoir. Public can access it but there won't be any future development for now.

Meeting was adjourned,

Respectfully submitted,

Jodi Pauley, Secretary