

MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- DRAFT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Helena, MT (Meeting 23)

Council Members: Joe Ball (absent), Sen. Jill Cohenour (absent), Rep. Rob Cook, Darlyne Dascher, Bill Howell, Bill McChesney, Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie, Craig Roberts (absent), Josh Schrecengost, and Dale Tribby.

FWP Employees and Conservation Partners: Heather Brower (PF—Farm Bill Biologist), Aaron Clausen (PF—Farm Bill Biologist), Jake Doggett, Erin Fairbank (PF—Farm Bill Biologist), Chad Harvey (PF—Regional Rep), Debbie Hohler, Bob Jeffrey (Big Sky Upland Bird Association), Jason Kool, Ken McDonald (absent), Matt O'Connor (Habitat Forever—Team Coordinator), Dave Nikonow (NWTF Cooperative Wildlife Biologist), Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Collin Smith (NWTF—District Biologist), Hunter VanDonsel (PF—Farm Bill Biologist).

Monday, March 26

Dale began the meeting at 8:15 am, beginning with introductions.

Rick Northrup gave an overview of the UGBEP and the role of the CAC and the biannual meetings. The Council makes sure the department stays true to the strategic plan. The program has come a long way thanks to the CAC, and the department is thankful.

Dale recapped the minutes from the past meeting in Lewistown and provided an overview of this meeting's agenda. Dale expressed appreciation of the work done at Coffee Creek and noted it's a good management example.

Charlie moved and Josh seconded. Minutes accepted.

1. Division Update (Rick):

- Pheasant releases are on the decline. At this time, the department will not pursue a legislative action because of other needed items.
- Habitat maintenance – proposed to modify Habitat Montana statute so more revenue goes to maintenance.
- A very recent “Call for Lands” projects identified a potential conservation easement in Region 7. May be looking at funding mostly with UGBEP but still need to go through the initial stages of proposal development. FWP recognized the need to present the final proposal to the Council in advance of the FW Commission. This action may require the need for a teleconference in the interim.
- Enforcement's funding—about 30%--was received through PR to do wildlife restoration work. The wardens helped with chronic wasting disease sampling, habitat monitoring, project leads, habitat enhancement on WMA, and putting up signs. Wardens' wildlife work is varied across the regions.

- Dog Training Rule and EQC—at the recent EQC meeting (March 21-22), EQC directed the department not to proceed with any rulemaking process. Instead, the Department needs to look at the current statute first. Charlie asked how the CAC might provide input or help if needed. Rick replied that there isn't a need specifically from the CAC because of the overwhelming input from dog trainers and other organizations.

2. Message from Dale Tribby, outgoing CAC Chair

Dale has been a founding member of the CAC since July 2007 and the chair for the past 4 years. He is now completing his term and rotating off the CAC effective this meeting. Charlie Noland has been appointed by Director Williams to chair the CAC meetings. Dale thanked the CAC for their ongoing engagement. He noted that this has been one of the more effective CAC, most likely because of the shared passions for habitat and hunting. Dale strongly felt that the legislative members, such as Rep. Julie French, Sen. Jim Shockley, Rep. Bill McChesney, and Rep. Rob Cook, have been invaluable. Dale also thanked the program staff and the CAC for their engagement. Dale also expressed some concerns about the future of Coffee Creek work and the succession plan. He also felt concern over the outlook on pheasant releases and associated expenditures. Dale asked that the CAC continue to provide oversight over finances and not lose sight on access. Dale handed over the chairmanship to Charlie Noland. Charlie thanked Dale for his dedication and hard work over the past 9 years with the Council. He wished Dale many happy days in the field.

3. Program updates (Hohler). Debbie went over the fiscal reporting, Habitat Forever and NWTF contract updates, Open Fields/VPA HIP, pheasant releases, update on database status, and the *Grown in Montana* publication.

- \$45,000 has been obligated for 3 years for the PF bios (2017-2019): Erin Fairbank, Hunter VanDonsel, and Heather Brower.
- Overview of Pheasant Releases planned for 2018
 - o Reviewed revenue and percentages
 - o Right now, about \$2K over the minimum required amount to spend.
 - o For the 5-year limitation rule, is it easier to adjust this rule or are there other areas of flexibility we could adjust. Statute? Rep. Cook recommended that if looking to revise statute, the department should proceed with any legislative changes during this session.
- VPA HIP grant update
 - o Balance of \$97K going into the enrollment period. could result in another 9-17 landowners for another 2,700 acres to enroll.
 - o Rule of thumb – 50 hunter-days per year
 - o Open Fields – been popular with hunters and landowners
 - o Compared grant goals with actual enrollments – have exceeded goals in all areas except number of landowners involved
 - o Marketing: March 12 news releases and also worked on letters to mail to CRP landowners. Have 3 applications from one applicant so far. Asking for all applications by May 1.
- UGBEP Partner Balance Summaries – contract positions (Habitat Forever, NWTF)

- Council does support continued funding for contracted positions if funding is available.
- Review of Program Revenue and Expenditures Spreadsheet
 - CAC would like to see how the projected and actual amounts compare for FY'17
 - Charlie said that Travis Muscha reported that non-resident numbers were down for Block Management.
 - Concern raised about not being able to keep up by FY22 – projected. Consider raising portion of license diverted into Program. Josh stated that we need to be proactive. What about other funding sources.
 - Representative Cook – he would not recommend a fee increase for the UGBEP. There would likely be sportsman pushback. Addition of AIS fees, etc.; creating friction between landowners and FWP.
 - Dale feels there needs to put some thought into this as to what actual needs are. Not sure legislature or FWP is ready to tackle that again.
 - Council concerned about future revenue projections. Charlie requested this be reflected in the minutes.
 - Debbie added that there may be increasing need to be more selective on projects, more competitive funding, along with leveraging dollars with other entities.
 - Rob Cook asked “What is a safe minimum balance?” He prefers this format for presenting information.
 - Bill Howell would like to see actuals in addition to projections, for instance for FY17 (put actuals in parenthesis, below projections).

4. Region 4 updates (Jake Doggett).

Jake provided an overview of Region 4’ strategic plan. The region’s emphasis is to put UGBEP projects on public lands. Jake has been involved with assessing pheasant release applications and is geared up to do Open Fields applications. He will also be involved with crow counts and lek surveys. Jake reported that winter conditions were tough this year.

Jake has been working on various project proposal development, such as an HML on Block Management, expiring CRP projects, and a potential conservation easement/grazing management system. There will be a shelterbelt planted this May. Jake did follow up with 10 MSU county extension agents to discuss UGB biology and habitat requirements. Jake is following up with the Sikes Act that may be a good fit for UGBEP funding. BLM will be converting crested wheatgrass to more productive grasslands. Council discussed using stripper headers.

5. Region 6 updates (Ken Plourde)

Ken reviewed Region 6’s strategic plan. The Milk River corridor, NE part of the region, sage-grouse habitat, habitat renewal and monitoring are the chief focus of program implementation. Because of expiring CRP, Ken has looked at how best to conserve CRP, often looking at conservation of overall CRP acres versus quality CRP. Ken has done quite a bit of program outreach with Hunter VanDonsel, identifying expiring CRP (~32,000 acres) on Block Management areas. Ken and Hunter mailed out 67 letters to affected Block Management cooperators and followed up with phone calls. There are

about 4 projects as a result. Ken also has 4 HML in the works. The preliminary results of a new diverse food plot mix were assessed. It's been difficult to gauge the success of the mix because of the extreme drought in 2017. The Grassland Initiative resulted in a 30-year contract in Phillips County. There are negotiations going on for additional contracts in Blaine and Sheridan counties. Ken reported that a conservation easement in Roosevelt County has been delayed while awaiting the mineral report. Ken reported on winter conditions: February was 3rd coldest month on record and March had some significant precipitation. Pheasant routes were checked but birds were not having trouble feeding. BMA and hunter-days were done, likely affecting local businesses. Ken also went over pheasant release applications received this year. The department is release about 50% less than previous years, but there's been no significant complaints, although there have been 5 or 6 people expressing interest in continuing releases.

6. Region 7 updates (Justin Hughes)

Justin has several landowners interested in the new pilot food plot initiative. He anticipates Open Fields enrollment will be low this year as many producers rely on CRP to get them through tough forage times. Justin has 1 potential sagebrush nesting cover project, 3 HML, and has been actively recruiting for Open Fields. Justin discussed Angela Farms, land acquirement that DNRC purchased. Justin is doing outreach to the new lessee, hoping to interest him in habitat projects. Justin has been looking at ways to work with partners on Pumpkin Creek on ways to successfully convert marginal cover to more productive cover. If time allows, Justin will participate in lek surveys in spring. Justin provided an update on Veebaray. The pipeline was put in last year but needs to be tied in. Stock tanks will be installed next. Much of the main infrastructure is in place and fencing will be the next priority. This past winter was a challenge to get the infrastructure in place. Justin wants things completed by this fall. Hunter-days were down this year on Veebaray, but that is consistent with the entire region. Charlie mentioned that there may be opportunity to create a pheasant factory near Green Ash Coulee by establishing food plots. In the past, Veebaray has put in cover crops but they weren't successful. Charlie expressed thanks to Justin for the work he is doing.

7. Regional updates (Debbie Hohler, Matt O'Connor)

Debbie provided an overview of the work being done on Canyon Ferry WMA staff and Pheasants Forever chapters. Aspen work is continuing in the Custer Gallatin National Forest.

Matt O'Connor provided an overview of the work being done through the Habitat Forever partnership. Highlights include:

- Habitat work continues on the Yellowstone WMA, Voyagers Rest, and Pompeys Pillar. New work is being conducted on Grant Marsh – upgrading nesting cover. Matt reviewed the 2018 farm plans.
- To enhance sage-grouse cover, a 285-acre pasture renovation began a couple of years ago near Roundup. This year, the pasture will be planted to native species.
- Mission Valley – Ben Hoesl, formally the Billings Habitat Specialist, is now working in Region 1. Matt went over the work plan for Mission Valley.
- Craig Roberts was unable to attend the CAC meeting and will provide an overview of the planned work in Region 4 when he returns.

- The new Habitat Specialist in Region 5 is Steve Rockhold. Steve knows the irrigation districts well, which is an asset for these projects. The focus on Yellowstone WMA are brood strips. Food plots and nesting cover management will continue this year.
- Grant Marsh WMA – A local farmer has been contracted to do work. Currently, flood irrigation is being mapped. The local PF Chapter may assist with fence removal.

8. Pheasants Forever updates (Chad Harvey, Heather Brower, Erin Fairbank, and Hunter VanDonsel)

- Al Eiden is the new PF Western Region Representative.
- Erin Fairbank is the PF Farm Bill Biologist from Conrad. She has worked in the area for 14 years. Heather Brower is the PF Farm Biologist in Scobey. She is enthusiastic about helping to get UGBEP projects on the ground. Hunter VanDonsel is the PF Farm Bill Biologist in Chinook. He works typically with Scott Hemmer but has worked with Ken Plourde a couple of times. Hunter is focusing on CRP mid-contract management.

9. General Discussion on Work Plans.

- Landowners and food plots: May be a challenge for some landowners to want to switch machinery over from grain to diverse food plot seeds. The MOU that UGBEP had with the Sheridan Co Road Dept would have been a good fit to help incentivize the planting of the diverse food plots, reduce any extra burden to landowners.
- Darlyne moved to approve the work plans, seconded by Josh. Motion to accept the work plans carried.

10. Discussion on CAC Memberships.

Rep. Rob Cook's position on the CAC will be replaced before Spring 2019. FWP will get the 2 legislator positions filled before the spring meeting. It's possible we may have a conference call in November after the election. Council offered 2 referrals to the department for Director William's consideration. Region 7 had some interest with applications. Josh knows a suitable candidate in Region 1 who is interested in participating on the CAC. Charlie recommends we fill a vacant seat with someone who is in Block Management and has an interest in sharp-tailed grouse.

11. 2018 Cost-list. Debbie reviewed the new biennial cost-list developed by the Habitat Bureau. The CAC felt the woven wire cost estimate was too low—reported at \$3 per foot. Debbie will review the costs again.

Meeting wrapped up for the day at 4:30 pm.

Tuesday, March 27

Charlie began the meeting at 8:12.

1. CAC had discussion on the future challenges and opportunities with pheasant releases. Rick gave an overview of the Program's history with pheasant releases, beginning in 1987. The goal of

pheasant releases is to enhance pheasant populations (as stated in statute). Rules governing pheasant releases ensure that this is not a stocking program.

Currently, the department will pay \$9.20 per 10-week old bird. Debbie stated that the pheasant release side of the program has been seeing changes over the past decade: (1) continued loss of CRP; (2) fewer pheasant producers available for the program's needs; (3) a decline in interest by landowners; and (4) the 5-year release rule that began in 2013. There are foreseeable challenges to meet the statute that requires FWP to spend at least 25% of the 15% set aside for pheasant releases. While the demand for pheasant releases is continuing to decline based on the 4 factors stated above, the funds for pheasant releases are building, nearly exponentially every year.

The CAC noted that pheasant releases can open up opportunities for hunting and may be an important economic factor for some communities. Ken Plourde gave information about Region 6. There have been about 35 applicants who couldn't apply because of the 5-year rule. In total, about 10,000 acres were not available to hunt, but 60% of those acres are crop fields. Ken feels quality habitat has been lost. Out of approximately 100 hunters, 2 hunters will ask about pheasant releases. The legislative session may be an opportune time to address the statute requiring 25% of the set-aside spent on pheasant releases. The CAC and department feel that eliminating pheasant releases is not prudent. A change to the statute that eliminates the 25% of 15% expenditure seems appropriate. Council also discussed wild turkey transplants, which haven't occurred in recent years.

2. Jason Kool, FWP Access Bureau Chief. Jason updated the Council with what he did last year. He traveled the state and attended a lot of meetings. Jason handed out the Policy book for cooperators. There are a total of 850 MBAs, 64 that are new. There was a \$5.8 million payout (including a \$230,000 weed payment). There are a total of 7.25 million acres enrolled that provide 454,000 annual hunter-days. Jason was invited to the Spring 2019 meeting.

3. Dave Nikonow, NWTF Cooperative Biologist. Dave reported that there are quite a few areas in western Montana that have turkeys. He updated the CAC on projects he is involved within the Bitterroot, Flathead, Lolo, Kootenai, and Lewis and Clark NF. Dave's position has been clearly necessary as the USFS Biologists are tied up with litigations or other duties and don't have the time to provide technical assistance that help provide wildlife benefits. Dave has been on board for 3 years, and the CAC and FWP clearly appreciate the work he has accomplished.

4. CAC – recommendations to statutory changes.

VOTE 1

Dale moved:

- Change pheasant release part of program to a maximum of 15% of program revenue
- Eliminate mandated minimum required expenditure
- Unspent funds would be allowed to be used for habitat enhancement side of the program

Dale moved, Dustin seconded. Motion carried.

VOTE 2

Bill McChesney moved:

Revise requirement of council membership - One legislator from each major party represented.

Bill moved, Josh seconded. Carried.

5. CAC – Open Discussion.

The CAC asked about the status of MSGOT. The MSGOT is in motion, with DNRC providing oversight. Dale mentioned that the Interior will be revisiting Sage-grouse.

Dustin opened discussions on turkeys. He feels there are public land opportunities for habitat enhancement. Collin Smith stated that the Big Belts are the best opportunity in Region 3 for turkey. He also revisited the upcoming USFS/NWTF/UGBEP project planned for the Big Snowies. Approximately 39 acres of aspen regen plus 128 acres of meadows will be treated to move Ponderosa Pine. The project will benefit Duskie and Wild Turkeys. Contributions for this project are from USFS (\$6,000), NWTF (\$3,000), and UGBEP (\$3,500). Collin will also apply for a grant from the Cinnabar Foundation for match.

The CAC and FWP discussed future funding of Open Fields. There is uncertainty surrounding the Farm Bill, so UGBEP may be the sole funding source for future enrollments. Dustin motioned to allow UGBEP to expend up to \$125,000 for 2019 Open Fields projects. Josh seconded. Motion passed. CAC will re-evaluate when Farm Bill is renewed.

6. Habitat Specialists are identifying practices that are wildlife-friendly and that could qualify for incentivizing payments. Discussion followed. Council would like more information by next meeting.
7. Public Comment period. No public comment.

The 2019 CAC fall meeting will be held in Miles City. Dates TBD. Rick suggested the 2020 fall meeting be held in Region 2 to review the projects Dave Nikonow has worked on to enhance habitat for wild turkeys and mountain grouse.

Meeting Summary

General CAC recommendations from March 2018 meeting:

- Move public comment period on first day of meeting when meeting is in Helena. Public comment period will be on the second day in the morning when meetings have scheduled habitat tours.
- Continue funding of partner positions (Habitat Forever, NWTF) if funding allows.
- Revising 2 program statutes. See statutory changes section on Page 6 (#4).

- UGBEP will provide up to \$125,000 in 2019 and will revisit this amount once the Farm Bill is renewed.

Action Items for Oct. 1, 2018, meeting:

- Add FYE 2017 to next fiscal report to compare with projections; add line graphs to report.
 - Update CAC on dog training rule
 - Invite Ryan Weiss, DNRC—Public Access Specialist
 - Review sage-grouse population estimate in 2018 and compare with 2017 estimates
 - Recheck costs for 8-foot wire fence. It seems high.
 - Provide the CAC with UGB hunting HD and Harvest information for each region and species.
 - Provide CAC with additional information for wildlife-friendly practices.
 - Department to give additional thoughts on ways we might use Rick Sodja's poll on MSU Extension Agents relative to program outreach.
 - Review the final proposal of the Region 7 Conservation Easement prior to FW Commission. This action may require a teleconference in the interim.
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Next Meeting: Conrad, October 1 and 2