



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

UGBEP CAC Meeting Minutes and Summary -- FINAL Conrad, MT (Meeting 24)

Council Members: Joe Ball, Doug Bonsell, Rep. Rob Cook, Darlyne Dascher, Trent Kleppen, Bill McChesney, Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie, Craig Roberts, Josh Schrecengost (absent).

FWP Employees and Conservation Partners: Gary Bertellotti, Aaron Clausen (PF—Farm Bill Biologist), Jake Doggett, Erik Eneboe (DNRC Unit Manager—Conrad), Erin Fairbank (PF—Farm Bill Biologist), Adriane Good (MSU Extension Agent), Chad Harvey (PF—Regional Rep), Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes, Brent Lonner, Ken McDonald, Dave Nikonow (NWTF Cooperative Wildlife Biologist), Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Ryan Rauscher, Gary Riewer (Conrad business owner, Northgate Motel), Collin Smith (NWTF—District Biologist), Mark Sullivan, Graham Taylor, Scott Thompson, Hunter VanDonsel (PF—Farm Bill Biologist).

Monday, October 1: Habitat Tour

After introductions and meeting the 2 newest CAC members, Doug Bonsell (Ekalaka, MT) and Trent Kleppen (Plentywood, MT), the Council, FWP staff, and conservation partners toured a variety of habitat projects north of Conrad. The tour kicked off with Jake providing an overview of land use and conservation opportunities in the Region 4 area. Ag-related discussions ensued.

Habitat stops included Open Fields enrollments, an HML on a Block Management area, HML on DNRC State Trust lands, Marias River WMA food plots, and a project site with a CRP seed-cost-share.

The weather forecasted for the day included precipitation and cooler temps, but overall the tour commenced under partly cloudy skies with temperatures climbing gradually in the afternoon. Everyone agreed that the fall foliage was spectacular.

A complete tour agenda and map are attached to the meeting agenda.

The tour concluded at approximately 5:30, and people gathered at Joe's Steakhouse for dinner. On behalf of FWP, Graham Taylor acknowledged Craig Roberts' contributions to the program during the times he spent on 3 different councils. With over 50 years of experience, Craig's knowledge of upland game bird habitat enhancements and management are second to none, and we've learned a lot from him. We all thanked Craig for his passion and steadfast work and wished him all the best in his future endeavors.

Tuesday, October 2: Meeting

Charlie called the meeting to order at 8:30 am. Debbie went over general housekeeping items pertaining to the meeting.

Rick welcomed the Council members and gave an overview of the Program's history and the purpose of the Council. The Council meets twice a year, spring and fall, to review proposed work plans and annual accomplishments. Council's input on program items is welcomed and appreciated, helping to advance the program to where it is today.

Debbie reviewed the minutes from the March 26 – 27 meeting in Helena. ***Bill moved to accept the minutes as presented and Dustin seconded. Minutes accepted as presented.***

There was no public comment.

1. Ken McDonald provided the Council with Department updates.
 - a. Legislative session begins in January and staff are working on proposals and a several bills.

Dog Training Rule: Currently a statute in place (found in field trials section). Currently states, "If training dogs within 1 mile of nesting "birds" (no mention of UGB), need director's approval. FWP Enforcement put out a directive that caused some anguish: If 4 dogs or less, can train without a permit. If greater than 4 dogs, not allowed to train. EQC repealed that rule and decided FWP needs to fix the field trial statute. The proposed bill will not require a permit for training. For field trials on public lands, a permit will be required.

Department is cleaning up Hunter Access Statutes (3) that mostly pertain to Block Management.

Definition of non-game wildlife. Currently, there is no good definition. For example, "bats" are classified as "rabies vector" and do not fall under the jurisdiction of FWP.

UGBEP Statute relating to pheasant releases and minimum expenditures. FWP was advised that this was not a high priority. Currently FWP is looking for a legislator to carry the bill.

Block Management fees. Block Management gives a complimentary landowner license. The Legislature added fees for AIS provisions (\$2 for resident, \$15 for non-resident). Now Block Management pays fees so landowners don't have to pay on "complimentary" license.

Wolf and Bear Specialists. Legislature has never approved base positions. Last year, the specialists were approved to be base positions for one time only. Department will request full FTE for these positions.

Ken also noted that a **chronic wasting disease position** (full FTE) will be funded by a PR grant to do surveillance.

Helicopters and Farming Equipment. Currently the department has Vietnam-era models and it's difficult to get parts. To replace rotors, it will cost \$200,000. Department is proposing to purchase 2 helicopters with P-R dollars. Department is also seeking to purchase farm equipment for WMA in addition to requesting additional FTE for maintenance on WMA.

P-R Wardens. 30% of wardens' time is non-enforcement and mostly wildlife-related work). Staff identified wildlife priorities to utilize 30 FTE (equivalent), which equates to 70,000 hours' worth of time or close to \$3,000,000 in value.

Sage-grouse annual report with sage-grouse numbers. The annual report with sage-grouse numbers and lek counts was recently published. Lek counts are a trend indicator but the legislature wanted an actual number, University of Montana was contracted to get a number using trends. The report's graph shows that sage-grouse numbers are above the long-term average.

Charlie asked about license sales. Debbie will provide that information to the Council when she gets the report.

2. State-wide program summaries and updates (Debbie).

Pheasant Releases. UGBEP paid producers \$9.20 per 10-week-old pheasant plus loaded miles at \$1.09 per mile. 3,260 pheasants were preauthorized for release in regions 4 and 6. Region 4 did not receive pheasants because the original pheasant provider did not have pheasants for the program and the second pheasant raiser did not respond in time for the releases to take place. In total, 2,655 pheasants were released in Region 6 at a total expenditure of \$24,771. This expenditure was the first time the program was under the statutory requirement for a minimum expenditure of 25% of the 15% set aside for bird planting. The minimum for FY19 is \$27,589. The unspent funds balance for bird planting is approximately \$133,636.

VPA-HIP Grant Status. By Sep 30, 2018, the program zeroed out the grant and match balances. For the grant enrollment period (2015 – 2018), the program enrolled 140 landowners, 26,223 CRP project acres, and opened up a total of 49,431 acres of walk-in access. The average contract enrollment is 8 years.

Partner Balance Summaries. The 3 Habitat Forever positions (Mission Valley, Denton, and Billings) and NWTF position have close to one more year of funds available, which will allow another 1-year extension. 2019 will be the last year to renew contracts. New contracts will be developed early next year.

Obligations and Future Outlook. Debbie looked at annual program revenues (projected) and expenditures (known and projected). Within 3 fiscal years, the program could be in the red if expenditures continue to climb.

State summary of UGBEP projects initiated this field season. Debbie commented that this was the busiest year to date. Jake, Kenny, Justin, and other FWP staff successfully implemented cost-share projects, regional food and cover plots, Open Fields (funded solely by UGBEP), management leases, and a conservation lease agreement.

Total projects initiated this year:	77
Habitat Site acres:	13,119
Access Acres:	92,544 (plus USFS lands)
Program Obligations:	\$535,834
Cooperators' in-kind	\$108,381

Updates

- The UGBEP will provide funding to support 4 Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists positions: Aaron Clausen (Bozeman/State-wide), Erin Fairbank (Choteau), Hunter VanDonsel (Chinook), and Heather Brower (Scobey). The UGBEP obligations for the 34-month contract is \$68,000 (\$500 per position per month) with deliverables that result in UGBEP contracts.
- “Life After CRP” is a great article published in the Sep/Oct edition of *Montana Outdoors*. The article featured Habitat Management Leases and Open Fields opportunities for landowners to offset losses in CRP acreage.
- Database refinement continues but users experienced a loss in functionality July – August.
- Marketing discussions this summer identified program immediate needs and future needs.

3. Region 4 update (Jake)

Jake provided an overview of his responsibility area and a recap of projects accomplished this field season as well as Open Fields enrollments over the last 4 years. Looking ahead, Jake is planning a large-scale conversion to productive habitats through enhancements in the BLM Woods Bottom Unit in Loma. Craig asked about the local PF chapter’s involvement, and Jake added that the chapter oversees a 13-acre food plot. Jake provided a recap of the region’s strategic plan. Jake concluded his presentation by discussing the bird forecast, which has been difficult to determine, and looking at potential opportunities on Lake Frances. Jake’s predecessor also looked at potential projects, but Jake acknowledges there are concerns with grizzly bears in the immediate area.

4. Region 6 update (Ken)

Ken reviewed the strategic plan for new members. Currently, the Region has 78 active habitat projects and 18 new habitat projects from this field season, but not including Open Fields projects. Ken strongly feels that increasing the habitat acres to 320 acres helped increase landowners’ interest. The local pheasant raisers have recently begun promoting pheasant

releases to Region 6 Block Management cooperators. Ken concluded his presentation by providing an overview of the impacts of weather and habitat availability that have likely influenced 2018 bird populations in Region 6.

5. Region 7 update (Justin)

Justin provided an overview on influential weather patterns and ugb populations. He concluded that many of the birds have been displaced. The Region 7 seed mix received a lot of attention from landowners this year. Justin gave an overview of the seed mixes and project locations. The mixes provide vertical diversity and structure, which is especially helpful for young chicks. Blue flax provides cover nearer to the ground while Sorghum and other plants provide good cover against aerial predators. Using air drills to establish cover helps broods to navigate through thick vegetation.

6. Habitat Forever updates (Craig and Debbie)

Craig updated the Council with accomplishments conducted on PF Coffee Creek, Beckman WMA, and DNRC and PF Wolf Creek properties. Craig finds some of the greater shelterbelt successes are a result of keeping the area weed-free the first 2 years. Craig, Virg, and the Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever generally hand weed these projects. Craig shared some pictures of Silverscape, a patented shrub from Canada. He also showed pictures on fencing techniques to help keep deer away. This year, Craig and Virg planted sweetclover in-between the double silver sage rows with good success. Slides of cotoneaster showed a great abundance of berries—this plant is a near guarantee that birds can find berries every year. Craig concluded his presentation by expressing his thanks to the Council and offered to help find PF funding for projects the specialists might develop with Pheasants Forever.

Debbie provided an overview of work accomplished in Regions 1, 3, and 5. According to Ben Hoesl, Habitat Specialist in the Mission Valley, the war on weeds is ongoing at all sites. He continues to prep ground for reseeding at Ninepipe WMA and on USFS WPA. Fred Jakubowski and the PF Chapters continue to do seeding on Canyon Ferry WMA. Steve Rockhold, Billings Habitat Specialist, has been a quick learner and doing a great job learning irrigation needs and habitat maintenance needs.

7. Dave Nikonow provided an update on projects conducted on the Helena National Forest and Lolo National Forest. Dave provides input to promote healthy forest stewardship practices that benefit wild turkey, mountain grouse, and forest health.

8. Pheasants Forever, Farm Bill Biologists. The Farm Bill Biologists provided an overview of their accomplishments for this past field season. They plan to attend the Grain Growers meeting in Great Falls (Nov. 26). Erin plans to work on a management plan for the newly PF acquired Teton River Wildlife Area. She plans to work with Jake Doggett on the plan and ways the UGBEP might contribute some cost-share.

9. Wildlife Friendly Practices (Jake, Ken, and Justin). The Habitat Specialists came up with some new wildlife practices with recommended costs that the program would pay landowners. Many of these practices came by way of their knowledge of the current Farm Bill Program and recognizing the need to expand program implementation in new ways, especially with the uncertainty of the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The Habitat Specialists presented on each proposed practice and the Council followed with a handout. The Habitat Specialists noted that to be competitive, the program has increased habitat management lease payments for light, security, and thermal covers (\$15, \$25, and \$30, respectively).

Council and partners' responses were favorable and there were additional recommendations made.

- Charlie commended the Specialists for “thinking outside the box.”
- Craig recommends disking to occur March/April and to remove the word “light.” He has seen excellent responses from double disking at a ~ 6” depth.
- Darlene will review and mull over the practices. Some of them likely to have a favorable outcome at a minimal cost.
- Doug feels there are opportunities to stagger many of the practices.
- Trent sees opportunity to piggyback these practices with NRCS cost-shares. He also mentioned that haying dates need to be consistent: July 1 or July 15.
- Craig has a friend who keeps stubble height, which provides effective cover for birds.
- Recommend using the term “Established Pastures” over “Established Grassland.”
- For improved grass management practice, the \$20 per acre seems high (Hunter VanDonsel). Need to ensure cost-share reimbursement paired with FSA or NRCS cost-share reimbursement doesn't exceed 100% of practice cost.
- Ken McDonald added that there are some concerns with costs and program expenditures. He recommends more strategic enrollment than across the board enrollments. Ken Plourde suggested that these practices would provide beneficial habitat if the Farm Bill programs weren't reauthorized next year.
- Charlie recommended not to push or oversell/over commit to these practices.
- Justin views these as a pilot effort with strategic implementation for the first year.
- Rep. Cook suggested setting a dollar cap. It could be a risk to the program to over-obligate funds.
- Bill and Dustin expressed support to move forward. Charlie added, move forward but not to “go wild.”

In summary, the department is hearing support for the concepts but several need to be tweaked. We need to look at financials and identify a dollar cap. We will proceed on a trial basis followed by a review at the spring meeting.

Bill moved to proceed with the revised practices on a trial basis and Trent seconded. Motion passed.

10. UGBEP CAC Open Discussion.

- Dustin emphasized the need to do wild turkey enhancements on public lands in Region 3. Access on public land is challenging and there is more pressure on public lands.
- Joe Ball stated that \$128 for non-resident bird licenses is cheap when compared to surrounding states. Ken stated that there may be a bid to increase license sales in the next session (2021).
- Bill added that license fees are approved by the legislature and it could be opening a can of worms. Bill enjoyed the meeting.
- Darlyne appreciated the Habitat Specialists thinking outside the box. She will continue to think about the proposed practices.
- Doug was pleased to be here at the meeting and said the presentations were outstanding.
- Trent agreed and said he was happy to be here. Thanks to all.

11. Meeting wrap-up. Charlie and the department thanked Craig Roberts, Joe Ball, and Representative Cook for their input while on the Council. Charlie thanked the department and added this was a productive meeting.

NEXT COUNCIL MEETINGS:

May 6 and 7 in Helena (Travel day Sunday, May 5)

September 23 and 24 in Miles City (Travel day Sunday, September 23)

Charlie adjourned the meeting at 4:00 pm.