



Region 5 CAC Meeting

Attending CAC Members: Lee Brunckhorst, Lee Deming, Bruce Hoiland, Joe Stahl, Bill Milton, Dan Aadland, Doug Dreeszen, Steve Regele, Lanie White, Bradford Grooms, Pat Riley

Attending FWP Staff: Barb Beck, Bob Gibson, Harold Guse, Mike Ruggles, Jason Rhoten, Sean Flynn, Dianne Stiff

Absent CAC Members: Chris Fleck, Susan Gilbertz, Craig Hash, Daniel Otis, David Russell, Josh McQuillan, Kayhan Ostovar, Philip Hughes, Rusty Butler, Jim Ballard, JW Westman

Introductions: Bob reviewed the meeting agenda, and Barb covered current staffing at the R5 office including the acting fish manager, parks manager and wildlife manager. New game wardens to the region are Jake Barszen in Hardin, and Sydney Young at Cooney State Park.

Fisheries Management:

Fisheries Statewide Program and Guide - Jason Rhoten, acting R5 Fisheries Manager

- Fisheries guide is for the entire state. Public comment closed last Friday. Received over 300 comments from the public and organizations. Number one comment was walleye being considered a non-native species. Non-native is the correct designation at this time. Holter/Canyon Ferry are managing other species at a higher priority than walleye because they are classified as non-native.
- Mike Ruggles gave the historical background on the walleye management conversation.
- Comments are in and moving forward with the final program and guide to go to the commission in April for final approval.

Fishing Regulations –

- Fishing regulations are reviewed every four years, with the next review is 2020.
- Timeline: Currently the internal scoping period has begun with the public scoping next. In addition, we'll meet with recreational angling groups. The public scoping period goes until May 31. Those comments are looked at during an internal review again and then submitted to the Commission in August.
- Open houses will be held around the state during the comment period with the final Commission approval in October.

Legislature –

- HB 2 is a main item for the fisheries budget this legislature. Currently looking good with funding potentially being restored back to where we were prior to 2017.
- Haven't heard much on the AIS bills yet for where funding will come from. Sean Flynn, AIS, indicated that at this time looking at a boat sticker and reduced AIS pass purchased with fishing license.
- Water Leasing is on fisheries radar with a 10-year sunset. Hoping to get this renewed and have the sunset go away making this permanent.

AIS - Sean Flynn, Eastern Montana AIS Technician/Supervisor

- AIS Division within FWP is split into two different categories: monitoring and inspection. Sean deals with the inspection side in the eastern fisheries district.
- Overall there are 250 unique water bodies that are monitored in the state. High traffic areas are monitored the most with all the reservoirs in R5 being monitored at some point.

- There were 1,450+ water samples taken and processed this year to look for mussels (zebra/quagga). In addition, looked for plants and other animals. New Zealand mud snails are found in the Bighorn River and Bluewater. Other species that are found in the state are curly leaf pond weed and Eurasian watermilfoil.
- When the program started ten years ago in Montana, there were 98 inspections total. The summer of 2018 there were over 116,000 inspections. There were 40 stations statewide that were both FWP and partner run stations.
- The check stations in eastern Montana, Hardin, Tongue River and Wibaux Station get from 1,000 inspections per summer up to 4,000 per summer. Last summer Hardin had the highest with about 4,000 inspections.
- We are really looking for the out-of-state boats coming into Montana. Last year there were 16 out-of-state boats intercepted across Montana that had mussels found on them. Four of those were intercepted at the Wibaux Station.
- Check stations are now using tablets for data collection and conducting inspections. The tablets run an application from the state of Colorado, which is used by other northwestern states like Wyoming and Idaho. Boats can be followed state by state within the program.

Mountain Lakes Fishery - Jason Rhoten, R5 Biologist

- Within R5 we have over 950 lakes which all but 2 were believed to be historically fishless.
- About 320 lakes contain fish populations today.
- Lakes are located at higher elevation at about 8,500 up to over 10,000+ feet.
- The bulk of the lakes are located around the Cooke City area in the Absaroka-Beartooth's. There are 19 in the Crazy Mountain area.
- High level of diversity within R5 including warm water fish, tail water fish, free flowing rivers (Yellowstone, Boulder, Stillwater and smaller streams).
- Diversity within the R5 mountain lakes; range in size from an acre up to 435 acres at Mystic Lake. Depth wise there are shallow ponds that cannot occupy fish and for example Slide Lake that is 245 feet deep.
- Historically stocking began at the turn of the century with the first lakes stocked being those easily accessible either by foot or horseback.
- Nonnative brook trout were the most prevalent fish stocked with some cutthroat stocked. In the 1970's the stocking effort was shifted to Yellowstone cutthroat trout (YCT). Today about 100 lakes are still stocked with YCT to maintain for species conservation.
- Management of these lakes is important because of the huge demand for data and monitoring from recreationists within and out of the state.
- The mountain lakes program was initiated back in 1989 to where we are today. There is a crew of 2 employees with FWP and 2 summer interns. This is an 8-week field season, July-August (hiking an average of 25-35 miles per week). There are 30-50 lakes sampled per year with fish data taken (length, weight, scale sample for aging and the overall condition of the fish).
- The Crazy mountain lakes are not in wilderness like the Absaroka-Beartooth lakes, so the helicopter is utilized for transportation which allows for sampling 16 lakes in 3 days. Sampling is rotated 7 to 8 years.
- Management objectives include first, fishing opportunity and second, species conservation.
- Fishing opportunity includes high catch rates (kids, inexperienced anglers, fish for the pan), variety of fish species, trophy fisheries, and various opportunities.
- Species conservation is important as these lakes are difficult to access and act as a genetic reservoir for fish species. With difficult access, it's a refuge from things like competition, AIS invasions and buffered from habitat loss.
- The 3 species that fall in the category of species conservation are Yellowstone cutthroat trout, golden trout and arctic grayling.
- The mountain lakes guide is a useful tool for fielding calls from the public.
<http://fwp.mt.gov/regions/r5/mountainlakes.html>

Bighorn, Musselshell and Yellowstone Rivers – Mike Ruggles, R5 Biologist

- Side note: Ken Frazer retired after 40 years. He received the American Fisheries Society Career Achievement Award in January 2019.
- Bighorn River – Mike shared a video of electrofishing in action near the Bighorn River's Mallards Landing Section.
 - Work continues with Wyoming on how to better manage Bighorn Reservoir to supply proper inflow to the river and how to build confidence in our forecasting.
 - Reviewed the impacts of the last couple of years with high water years, the 1992 to 2018 data sets, sampling results and water chemistry/temperature.
 - Trout grow fast and die young in the Bighorn so there should be a quick replacement of fish if we have a normal water year coming up.
 - The Bighorn still has big fish.
- Musselshell River –
 - Egge Diversion Dam - Cost share with the landowner with the diversion dam being removed as of 2017.
 - Roundup – Reviewed the flood of 2011. DEQ provided mine clean-up money. Various projects have reduced the total elevation by 3 feet through Roundup. FEMA money was available to use for purchase of property with plans for a community pond, and an open flood plain. The Musselshell coalition spurred on the Roundup reach study to look at how the flood plain can be improved for people.
 - Carson is proposed as a new fishing access site called the Roundup FAS with a legal easement.
 - Pedrazzi/Newton Diversion - repursuing the removal of this old diversion dam.
 - A proposed project with a landowner near Melstone, McClearing channel avulsion, is in a catfish and sauger area.
- Yellowstone River –
 - Working on bank work application to install an 8-foot tall flat gate on the ditch that runs past Cabela's. This ditch is one of the more diverse prairie fisheries with 12 different minnows.
 - Blue Creek FAS is a new site that was purchased by the Yellowstone River Parks Association. FWP will develop with a latrine, boat ramp and parking lot.

CAC members observations and input:

Doug Dreeszen – At the recent national convention for the Wild Sheep Foundation, the auction for the bighorn sheep license went for \$285,000. This money is earmarked for bighorn sheep work in the state of Montana with 10% held for administration. The money goes back to the local biologists throughout the state for surveys, studies, acquisition of lands and parcels for sheep migration. A new world record bighorn sheep was found deceased on the Wild Horse Island SP. Several reproductions were made of the bighorn sheep head with one being auctioned off at the Reno, NV, sheep show. These earmarked funds will go back to Wild Horse Island SP to help with this individual state parks budget.

Dan Aadland – For the shoulder season not sure if many were taken in his area. The local meat processor has decided to be closed during the early shoulder season in August because most of the elk that were brought to him during that time of year had already begun to spoil.

Bill Milton - Two groups north of the Musselshell who were ranchers are working on grasslands conservation. There is a project on the Musselshell to actually buy a ranch to run tests on. Young producers in the area will be involved. This is an example of local partners working together to save grasslands.

Bruce Hoiland - In the past few months with FWP, really pat yourselves on the back and focus on the good that you do. There was a drowning in the Musselshell River, and after putting a call out for coldwater gear, the first ones to show up were FWP. Thank you.

Lee Deming – Heard of CWD testing complaints and where FWP is going with that. He had a call with questions on bird dog trials in eastern Montana and wanted to know everybody's stance on that. Still a lot of support for shoulder seasons. Concerns about the article in paper on the wolf killed by Cooke City and a push to move the protection boundaries in that region. His constituents do not support that proposal.

Pat Riley – He is a member of the Roundup conservation district and has been appointed to be the head of the water committee for the state. He has been dealing with legislation. For the last hunting season, it was the first time he drew an elk permit in the Bull Mountains. Access is clearly a problem. Seen some wolves in the Bull Mountains. He is worried about his hunting heritage as his kids are not pursuing hunting because of access.

Lee Brunckhorst – Commented on this meeting being great with fisheries as a good topic and was quite informative. Shoulder seasons continue to be great for the Big Timber area.

Bradford Grooms – Most of the people he's talked to are happy about the upcoming changes to the hunting regulations. Most complaints he has heard are about access.

Lanie White – Had over 800 public hunter days this year on their place and only 90 elk were harvested which includes both shoulder seasons. The elk are currently destroying a haystack. They have a lot of sick deer. There are more porcupines than they have ever seen. There's a lot of talk of grizzlies coming into the Crazyes. A lot of opportunities to do some song bird monitoring this spring. We're waiting for green grass!

Steve Regele –

- Good fisheries presentation today as nongame native fish species are really important too. We work well with Megan the Region 5 nongame biologist, who also works closely with anyone interested in nongame. Region 5 works well with neighboring regions. Berkeley Pit is an example and Jim Hansen contributes significantly. In Miles City, Brandi Skone is working to get more people interested in nongame species and outdoor activities.
- Steve, hunting friends and ranchers that he knows tried to concentrate on elk hunting on the east slope of the Beartooth's last fall. There wasn't a day he didn't see elk and they were on private land that didn't allow access. You can hunt block management areas and public lands during the regular season, but it's really hard to take cow elk during the shoulder seasons.
- Trails and recreation – hunting, fishing and birding are important but the number one thing throughout Montana for every age group has been the trails and recreational access.
- Data – it's really important. FWP is hosting the program manager from the Natural Heritage program to demonstrate the computer software developed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Current Hot Topics:

Harold Guse – CWD Update

A year and half ago we did CWD surveillance in Region 5 and found the first positive in Carbon County. This past hunting season surveillance was moved to the north in the highline. The year before there was one positive in Region 4 north of Chester, MT. Next year our surveillance moves to the southeastern part of the state in Region 7. There are CWD management areas established. Within those areas of the state you cannot transport whole carcasses (a deer with the spinal column attached) out of those areas. The Commission adopted the southern border which includes highway 212 all the way up to Billings and down the interstate into Carbon County. Yellowstone County will be within the CWD positive area. There will be a similar area in the northern part of the state. In Region 5 there were some management changes implemented to deal with animal densities. There will be an increase mule deer B tags in hunting districts 510, 502, and 575. In hunting district 510 the mule deer buck permit requirement will go away.

Bob Gibson – Regulations

Hunting and Trapping Regulation Rewrite Working Group

- Simplification
- Public/user demand
- Decision-maker demand
- Enforcement accuracy
- Internal inconsistency
- Prepare for the future
- Try for cost savings
- FWP publishes just short of one million books for hunters.

For 2019 big game hunting regulations:

- Gone to a table format by hunting district.
- The legal descriptions will be in their own book.
- In 2019 the MCA or commission rule citation will be listed.
- Just one page of the multi-district licenses and permits.
- Took all the youth opportunities and the PTHV and have them all in one place.
- Will have a more comprehensive index.
- Make the table of contents more logical.

What's next:

- Making elk and deer and antelope all the same hunting district number.
- Timing and the March 15 deadline – there is legislation to move the March 15th deadline to April 1 or allow the commission to change. Get surveys and data analysis done a little earlier. Shorten up the public comment period.
- There is a big push by the public and biologists to combine hunting districts where there are too many hunting districts in some parts of the state.

Barb – Legislative Update

How to follow bills:

- Go to leg.mt.gov and on that site search by legislator, by bill, subject and also look at who is on the committees. Most of FWP bills go through House FWP or House Natural Resources.
- There are house and senate committees on fish and wildlife, FWP.
- HB 2 is our funding bill and under appropriations.
- You can watch or listen to the committees having their testimony.
- You can look up language on individual bills plus any amendments that come through.

New position - the department is planning to hire a deer/elk planner. The first two years are set aside to update the elk management plan.

Wrap-up and adjourn:

Next meeting will be after the legislative session sometime in May.