

Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC)
Summer Meeting & Field Tour
August 7, 2019 – Region 7 HQ & Ponessa Ranch

FWP Staff Present: Brad Schmitz, Mike Backes, Erin O'Connor, Marla Prell, Jack Austin, John Ensign and Ron Jendro

CAC Members Present: Bob Hagedorn, Gary Sparks, Ed Bukoskey, Dale Kreiman, George Luther and Glenn Heitz

Guests Present: Rep. Geraldine Custer (HD39), Glenda Kreiman and Shirley Bukoskey

Attendees convened at the Region 7 Headquarters before traveling to the Ponessa Ranch north of Miles City. Brad Schmitz, Regional Supervisor, began the tour by welcoming everyone to the ranch, which is the site of the North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement.

North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement

Brad provided some background on Conservation Easements (CE). There is currently 71 statewide, eight of which are in Region 7. They are a partnership that works well for both FWP and landowners. Conservation Easements are a good tool for FWP to aid in the preservation of specific types of habitat. CE's are perpetual and are legal documents recorded with the deed. However, the land remains in private ownership. If the ownership should happen to change, the CE stays with the land. The financial incentive is usually important to landowners, but a CE is also a viable option for those who are conservation-minded and want to maintain their property as a working ranch. There is no sod-busting or sagebrush removal and only minimal development permitted with a CE. We determine a feasible grazing plan and incorporate NRCS, etc., where needed. Both parties must agree on the grazing plan, and there is 50-50 cost-share on whatever grazing development maybe required – usually fencing, water wells, etc.

Generally, landowners seem to approach FWP about CE's, and often its someone we already have a relationship with through the Upland Game Bird Enhancement program or Block Management. The process is long and involves lots of conversation and coordination. CE's work well but they are not for everyone. Not all CE's end up coming to fruition as there is also an approval process involved.

CE's are typically funded through Habitat Montana, which is license dollars. Qualified appraisers determine the value of the easement, which is usually about 30-60% of the appraised value. Region 7's go-to person for CE's is usually John, who is assisted by the local biologist.

The North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement became a CE last year and is of great value for antelope and grouse. FWP had a previous relationship with Mrs. Ponessa, who was familiar with the different programs offered by Department, and helped this CE come to fruition. Permission is handled through the Block Management program.

Dale asked how access on CE's is promoted or advertised. John replied that most are enrolled in Block Management. This is the case with all CE's in Region 7. There is sometimes a misconception that a CE being in Block Management is "double dipping," which John also clarified. The CE payment is for access to the property while Block Management compensation pays for hunter impact to the property.

George provided some additional insightful input on CE's as he is familiar with them through his line of work.

Current Hot Topics

After returning to R7 HQ, Brad gave some updates on recent actions or news within the Department. Through the last Legislative Session, our Enforcement staff were able to make some much-needed progress on the warden/PR time issue. The amount of Pittman-Robertson (PR) time that wardens must dedicate has been reduced to 15-17% of their total hours. Ron added that hours are now pooled as well, instead of allotted to each individual. This will allow for much more flexibility for our wardens and we are very appreciative of this change.

Brad updated everyone on the Park in Focus group efforts. There is now a Regional Park Manager back in this area. Jamie Hould began in this position on Monday after working as our Fishing Access Site program manager the last few years. Prior to that, Jamie managed a couple state parks in the Helena area and worked in this region. We're glad to have him in this position.

Next, Brad and Jack discussed the bear conflicts this spring in Region 7. For some reason, we have seen a very unusual amount of bear activity which has resulted in a number of bears being dispatched or relocated. We have been working on educating the public on bear attractants and how to avoid having issues with a bear. Marla and several of our wardens recently attended the Rosebud-Treasure County Fair and provided education materials on bears and displayed our bear trap. This led to a lot of good discussion and conversation with fair attendees. Marla has also arranged for us to attend the Miles City fair and possibly one other. We will have the TIPMONT trailer at the Miles City fair as well.

CAC Roundtable Discussion

Ed provided an update on the Brucellosis committee meeting. He is concerned about landowners "hoarding" elk on their property and the potential spread of brucellosis this could cause. He praised the AIS crew and their said they're doing a good job this summer. He would like to see more AIS funding coming to this part of the state.

Dale noted that the majority or replacement cattle in his country seem to have been vaccinated against brucellosis for years. He doesn't understand why some in the areas where brucellosis has been detected aren't more vigilant about vaccinating their cattle. He is happy to see us having more of a presence out in the public at these county fairs. He had noted a little improvement in bird numbers in his area but hasn't seen any big increase in deer. He enjoyed getting out and learning about Conservation Easements. How soon we'll have grizzlies out here is something he wonders about.

Bob has been asked about our license application deadlines. Even though they've been the same way for a while now, having three separate deadlines and three different dates to remember is a lot. Brad noted that the Legislature has given us some flexibility to move dates. We have been looking at our application dates as part of a recent regulations review process, and in the middle of discussion about possible changes now. John added that there will be an April 1 deadline next year. Mike also noted that he was on the regulations review committee, which has looked at combining all deadlines into one. It's a possibility at this point; we'll see. Bob also said that Mother Nature has smiled on us again this year and the wildlife seem to be doing well.

Representative Custer thanked us for having her again. She noted that we're fortunate to have Ken Holmlund and Eric Moore from this area on the Finance Committee; this was a positive for us in the last Session. She wonders if everything needs to be a statute or if some things could be rules that would make certain changes easier for us. Brad noted that the Session was good this year and we didn't have much to oppose. Ron acting as one of our liaisons this past Session and did a great job. Rep. Custer added that she still occasionally hears consternation about the Fish and Wildlife and Parks separation

and whether Parks should or shouldn't be split off. She thinks trips like today would be beneficial in other parts of the state and for more legislators.

George mentioned the Herrera court decision and asked if we have been affected by it, as well as if the Custer National Forest is included. Brad replied that we are hearing bits and pieces of things and anticipate some issues. He and our Enforcement staff are meeting with the Department's Legal staff to discuss this next week. Hopefully we will get some answers and can be prepared for fall. Jack noted that the Custer National Forest is deemed open as part of that decision. George added that he, too, is glad to see us getting out the fairs and encouraged more activities. He is seeing more sage grouse and some turkeys this spring and summer. He appreciated the presentation on CE's and thought it was good information.

Gary said he wanted to thank FWP for its work on the Baker Lake project. In a recent survey, 92% of respondents were satisfied with the project, which is great. He was impressed with the FWP staff who came out to trap swift foxes on his property, especially in the -30-degree weather. His family has mentioned the possibility of a Conservation Easement to him.

Glenn recently took some people out to where their grandparents had homesteaded. While out in the country, they saw lots of mule deer. Of note to him was that there were no fawns with them, but he saw lots of coyotes in the area. He believes the predator numbers are getting bad in Prairie County. He mentioned that the locals were able to keep the rifle range on BLM land just outside Terry. They were able to come an agreement with BLM that was even better than what they'd asked for. He noted that BLM got lots of emails and feedback on the rifle range and he thinks that helped a lot with their decision. It has been another awful good year in his country so far.

Staff Updates

John briefly discussed CWD surveillance efforts in Region 7 this year. There is a CWD management zone in the southern portion of HD 704 where we are specifically targeting most of our sampling efforts. Hunters will not be able to remove entire carcasses from that area and will need to quarter up their animal and remove all parts for the brain tissues, lymph nodes and spinal column. We will be setting up CWD check station in Ashland, Ekalaka and Hysham and sampling can also be done at the R7 HQ. We are currently in the process of looking for staff for these stations and working out other logistics. Page 4 of the Deer/Elk/Antelope regulations has all the information pertaining to CWD and Marla is starting to work on what will be a lot of messaging and public awareness efforts on this subject.

Mike mentioned the start of the Intake project, which will be a three-year project. This could affect the paddlefish seasons in those years, depending on river conditions. We are continuing our pallid sturgeon monitoring efforts upstream of Intake. Demonstrating juvenile pallid sturgeon upstream of Intake is of interest to us, which has occurred again this spring and summer. Mike noted a few different instances of this. Mike concluded by saying we've observed big interest in stocking ponds with all the runoff this spring. Annually, we stock about 100 ponds in Region 7. This process requires certain licensing after which we will monitor and stock these ponds, provided the landowner allows angling access (with permission).

Jack informed CAC members that we have three new wardens but will be down one sergeant this fall. In addition to the strange bear activity, we also had a random bull bison show up on a ranch east of Miles City. It had no distinguishing markings and we still have not been able to determine where it came from. There are no landowners who raise bison anywhere close to the area. He is not sure what is happening with the bears. Five of the six bears that staff dealt with were 1.5-year-old males.

Erin discussed the licenses with disappearing ink and the process for reprinting those.