

MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- FINAL
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Glendive, MT (Meeting 26)

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Rob Brunelle, Darlyne Dascher, Sen. Jason Ellsworth (absent), Trent Kleppen, Tana Kradolfer, Rep. Marilyn Marler (absent), Bill McChesney (absent), Charlie Noland, Dustin Ramoie, Josh Schrecengost (absent), and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and Members of the Public: George Biebl (Sidney), Heather Brower (PF Farm Bill Biologist), Caryn Dearing (FWP Operations Bureau Chief), Jake Doggett (R4 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), John Ensign (R7 Wildlife Manager), Ross Farber (Glendive), Melissa Foster (FWP Biologist), Chad Harvey, Sen. Steve Heinbauch (Wibaux), Debbie Hohler (UGBEP Coordinator), Justin Hughes (R7 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), Lew Melby (Glendive), Bill Nankivel (Sidney), Dave Nikonow (NWTF Cooperative Wildlife Biologist), Rick Northrup (FWP Habitat Bureau Chief), Ken Plourde (R6 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), Mark Sullivan (R6 Supervisor), Scott Thompson (R6 Wildlife Manager), Dale Tribby (Miles City), Hunter VanDonsel (PF Farm Bill Biologist), Ryan Williamson (R6 Biologist), and Cameron Wischhusen (FWP Game Warden, Glendive).

Monday, September 23

INTRODUCTIONS

Charlie began the meeting at 8:30 am. Introductions were made and general housekeeping announcements were made. Debbie went over the May 6, 2019, meeting minutes. Dustin moved to accept the minutes as presented and Doug seconded. Motion passed.

Rick gave an overview of the Council's purpose, as described in statute. On the department's behalf, Rick expressed his appreciation for ongoing support for the UGBEP. Rick gave an overview of the program's history, which began in 1987 mostly as a pheasant release program. During the next legislative session, the program focused more on habitat enhancement.

DEPARTMENT UPDATES

1. Department giving thought to the 2021/2022 Legislature. FWP will have a new administration at that time. There has been interest expressed in offering up changes in the statute, specifically pheasant releases. A likely scenario is to look for one of the council legislators to sponsor a council bill. Charlie requested that the department provide input at the spring meeting.
2. FWP has a new wildlife manager in Region 4 – Cory Loecker, who replaced Graham Taylor.
3. Kevin Rose is the “new” wildlife manager in Region 5, replacing Ray Mule’.

HABITAT TOUR

Justin provided a quick overview of the tour. We'll head up the Bloomfield Highway. We will leave at 9:30 pm. We saw lots of projects, including diverse food plots, a grazing system, and habitat management leases. The weather was favorable, and we noted how green eastern Montana remained even late in September. Several members of the public participated in the tour. We returned at

approximately 3:00 pm and resumed the agenda. Charlie thanked Justin and the rest of the region for their great work with landowners and enhancing habitat.

STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND PROGRAM OBJECTIVES/PROGRAM UPDATES

Debbie presented fiscal and program summaries to the Council. **Fiscal Year 19 began July 1, 2018 and ended June 30, 2019.**

FY19 INCOME

Total income was \$759,739

- License Revenue = \$702,847
- Interest Revenue = \$56,892

FY19 EXPENDITURES

Total expenditures were \$1,035,426

- Bird Planting = \$26,453: includes Pheasant Releases, Wild Turkey Transplants, and Supplemental Feeding in Daniels, Sheridan, and Roosevelt counties –all expenditures funded pheasant releases.
- Habitat = \$688,119: includes all habitat projects plus support of 8 partner positions
- Admin = \$192,387: includes personal services and operations, Council meetings, research, printing services (access guides, signs, mailings)
- Overhead = \$128,467

Since FY 11, we have expended more than the annual income each fiscal year, with the exception of FY 15 and 16.

FY19 SUMMARY OF HABITAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS - SUMMARY

- 111 new Project Types enrolled

Project Type	# Projects	Project Type	# Projects
Biennial Food Plot	1	Habitat Management Lease	19
Conservation Lease Agreement	2	Nesting Cover	7
CRP Seed Cost-Share	1	Open Fields	20
Diverse Food Plot	30	Shelterbelts	4
Fence	3	Winter Food/Cover Plots	20
Habitat Management	4		

- 102 new / renewed contracts
- 27,772 enhanced acres
- 107,863 new access acres
- \$1,477,342 obligated dollars for contracts (payments made anywhere from 1 to 10 years)

FISCAL REPORTING – OBLIGATIONS

At this point in time, there is a total of 107 projects (includes all Fiscal Years) with unspent obligations that amount to \$1,667,482.

KNOWN EXPENDITURES AND BALANCE

The beginning balance of unspent funds for FYE19 was \$2,487,659. We know we have obligated \$1,667,482. Therefore, the unspent/unobligated program balance is \$820,177. Approximately \$200,000 is statutorily set aside for bird planting and approximately \$200,000 is needed for administration (overhead and interest TBD). The end balance (adjusted) in the unspent/unobligated program fund is \$420,177. Note that this figure does not yet include the 2020 annual revenues or expenditures.

PHEASANT RELEASES

Interest in pheasant releases continued to dwindle except for Region 4. For the first time in the program’s history, nobody applied for pheasants in the northeastern part of the state. The pheasant raisers in that part of the state lost infrastructure and didn’t have the ability to raise pheasants.

Total expenditures for pheasant releases were \$9,500, which is below the required 25% of the 15% set aside to release pheasants. Through the past 3 years or so, the program has lost cooperators interest, cooperators fulfilled a 5-year cycle, or pheasant raisers were not available to provide pheasants.

Region	#Contracts	#Pheasants
4	6	768
6	1	200
7	0	0

PARTNER POSITIONS

The UGBEP supports 8 partner positions: 3 Habitat Forever (HF), 1 National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF), and 3 Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists (PFFBB). Debbie provided the contract breakdown.

Position	Contract Initiation	Annual Obligation	Total Obligation
HF Lake County	January 2020	\$25,000	\$75,000
HF Denton	July 2019	\$64,000	\$192,000
HF Billings	January 2020	\$80,000	\$240,000
NWTF - Missoula	July 2019	\$40,000	\$120,000
PFFBB	January 2019	\$17,000	\$68,000
TOTAL		\$226,000	\$695,000

JAKE DOGGETT, UGBEP HABITAT SPECIALIST, REGION 4

Jake provided an overview of R4’s strategic plan. Jake worked with the Pondera County 4H for pheasant releases. The 4H had 400 birds but lost many to a weasel—only 168 4H pheasants were able to be released. A local, prominent pheasant raiser supplied pheasants for the remaining contracts, which brought the total of pen-reared pheasants released at 768. Jake feels there will be more interest in the pheasant release program in the future. Jake then gave an overview of the projects enrolled this field season, including ones that weren’t approved for funding.

Charlie asked Jake what the limiting factors were in R4 – Jake responded (1) nesting cover and (2) winter cover.

KEN PLOURDE, UGBEP HABITAT SPECIALIST, REGION 6

Ken provided an overview of R6’s strategic plan. One important focus is the Milk River corridor. Ken updated the Council with a 5-year history of new enrollments, pointing out that these past couple of years showed promise with the diverse mixes. Ken also reviewed CRP losses in Montana.

Hunter VanDonsel added that FSA is moving towards an emphasis for continuous CRP, although there is not a lot of interest in Montana. Rental rates will decrease by 85%. SIP and PIP payments have all but been eliminated.

Ken has been involved with project monitoring this year. He updated the council on the status of the local pheasant raisers, who have seemingly quit the business and likely not interested in resuming.

Outreach and marketing: Ken received a lot of interest with habitat management leases and food plots.

MOTION TO ADJOURN AT 5:00 PM. Darlyne moved and Trent seconded.

Tuesday, September 24

Charlie opened the meeting at 8:30 am.

PUBLIC COMMENT

1. Lew Melby, Glendive and hunter

Lew provided an overview of his hunting history and expressed concern over the disappearance of sage hens. Habitat looks good, north of Terry but still hard to find sage hens.

- Feels sharp-tailed grouse populations are low.
- He would like to see a reduction in the 8-bird limit (Gray Partridge). Five or 6 bird-limit is what he recommends.
- Reduce limit on sharp-tailed grouse to 3.
- Feeding birds – Lew feels this should be allowed.
- Lew appreciates the professionalism with FWP and likes the food plots.
- Roughed grouse populations are down back east, and he thinks there is something ominous going on.

2. Bill Nankivel, via email sent September 24

My comments are pretty general. It appears that game bird enhancement money can be integrated with other funds such as block management the overall goal being access. The property we looked at while eating lunch is just not gamebird habitat. However, access to that property for other purposes is a good thing. If the upland funds are essential, I would be supportive. The first place we stopped appeared to me to be an exercise in futility. A 10 acre plot no matter how well done with no woody

winter cover and no dense nesting cover surrounded by thousands of acres intensively farmed seems like tilting at windmills. In my mind, projects and funds yield the most benefit when all the components of dense nesting cover, winter cover and a reliable food source are all in close proximity.

We much appreciate your efforts. I know it is easy to be a critic when you are on the outside looking inside.

Bill Nankivel
Sidney, Mt.

JUSTIN HUGHES, UGBEP HABITAT SPECIALIST, REGION 7

Justin presented several pictures in his presentation that gave a good overview of the current habitat conditions, which look good for winter carryover. Weather has been extreme at times (hail) with lots of moisture this year. Justin discussed the diverse food plots. They provide a lot of soil health benefits in addition to habitat benefits. The blue flax, which grows first, provides good bug and pollinator habitat. Pheasant and sharp-tailed grouse tend to gravitate to the diverse food plots. Plots transition from pollinator to food to winter cover over the season. Triticale was planted and grew about 9-feet tall (fall-seeded). It proved to be great winter cover. Justin also had a shrub clump planting that occurred on USFS lands. Looking ahead to expiring contracts, there are approximately 3-4,000 acres of CRP expiring with about 8,000 acres of access.

Rick asked Justin to track grazing opportunity for cover crops (grazing in March) and to get more input from landowners. Justin feels there would be interest, perhaps because of low commodity price. Also seeing changes in producer demographics (younger) and they're willing to try other management practices.

PF FARM BILL BIOLOGISTS SEASON UPDATE

Hunter (Chinook-Havre-Malta) and Heather (Scobey) introduced themselves and described the type of work they do as Farm Bill Biologists. Many conservation options for landowners. A new Farm Bill Biologist was hired in Billings, Sterling Spilnek. It was noted that NRCS is moving away from individual projects to more regional/county conservation needs.

Heather provided an update on the pilot project spearheaded by Rick Sodja – Precision Ag. The focus is on the return of investment (ROI).

DAVE NIKONOW, NATIONAL TURKEY FEDERATION COOPERATIVE BIOLOGIST

Dave's primary focus is on wild turkey and forest grouse management and an overview of the partnership, which is made up of USFS, FWP, and NWTF. Dave provides technical assistance, does grant writing, and helps out with NEPA. Dave provided a list of accomplishments for this field season.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO STATUTES: PHEASANT RELEASES & UGBEP COUNCIL

Pheasant Releases

Over the past 3 or 4 years, UGBEP has seen an overall decline in cooperators' interest to release pen-reared pheasants. Reasons likely include: general lack of interest, unavailability of pheasant raisers, and the 5-year rule. In the meantime, the programs bird planting fund continues to grow exponentially while interest wanes. The department and Council are tasked to frame up changes in statute. The provided the suggested edit to the council:

(2) (a) ~~At least~~ Up to 15% of the funds collected annually under [87-1-246](#) must be set aside each fiscal year for may be used each fiscal year for expenditures related to upland game bird releases.

(b) ~~At least 25% of the funds set aside for upland game bird releases must be spent each year.~~

This is a relatively easy fix that would keep funds available for pen-reared pheasant releases. Any unspent funds would roll into the habitat fund. Currently, UGBEP has 2 funds (1) Bird Planting and (2) everything else (administration, habitat, overhead). Statutory change would allow for 1 fund.

- **Council provided their input and support. This proposed change will keep the bird planting available and optional if needed. By a show of hands, the council supported the proposed change 100%.**

UGBEP Council

Current statute requires that the department include 2 legislators on the Council, specifically a senator and representative from different political parties. In the last 10 years, it's been difficult to get 1 senator and 1 representative from different political parties. In order to fulfill statute requirement for 2 legislators, the department approached the council seeking their recommendations to the proposed rewording of the statute (87-1-251 (1) (f), MCA). The department proposed the following change:

(f) ~~a senator and a representative~~ two legislators, each from different political parties.

- **Council provided their input and support. By a show of hands, the Council reached consensus on this proposed statutory revision.**

PROPOSAL SUBMISSION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Program has been transitioning over the past few years. Lately, money in is less than money out. Need to have processes in place for the program to be structurally balanced. The reserve balance is largely obligated. The program staff are meeting in December to come up with processes/solutions for 3 questions. The department will present to the Council spring of 2020 to receive recommendations:

1. PROCESS: Current process to fund proposals is usually continuous throughout the year with some call for projects (e.g., Open Fields). Some options for enrollment might be: (1) Call for projects annually or (2) portion out a percentage of annual funds to the regions while leaving some funds available for a competitive process. There might be other processes yet identified.

2. VARIETY OF PROJECT TYPES: The UGBEP has expanded in terms of different projects and pilot projects available to landowners and land managers. Each project type has its own cost, risk/success, return on investment. We need to look at program intent and ability, in terms of all project types. What direction should the program go into?
3. How can we more effectively partner/leverage UGBEP dollars to maximize benefits?

Charlie added some comments. Looking back, we were looking for projects with an ever-building savings account. Now, we've spent more dollars and have more projects on the ground. We're going into a "belt-tightening" period and need to meet the obligations we've made.

General Council discussion ensued:

- Tana: It would help to have costs and project types.
- Doug: Difficult to turn away good projects, but we need to be fiscally responsible.
- Art: Including ranch-wide projects is an important priority.
- Trent: Perhaps consider prioritizing counties? Identify and prioritize areas or projects.
- Darlyne: We need to find a way to continue projects.
- Charlie: Not comfortable splitting dollars equally among "pots"
- Dustin: He likes the idea of 1 pot of money – activity could shift among regions. Need flexibility. Recognized we already have ranking for some projects, and it might be the way to go for ranking.
- Trent: Made a recommendation to increase license dollars.

John commented that it can be a challenge to rank projects, as it's a local area perspective.

A modest increase in license dollars might occur 2 ways:

- Increase actual license contribution to the program
- Shift dollars from license fund to UGBEP

Action Item: Council requested the program staff tabulate the project types and costs from the last 5 years and present the information at the next Council meeting.

The UGBEP staff are meeting December 11 and 12 in Lewistown to discuss ways to keep the program structurally balanced. An update to the Council will be done at the spring meeting.

UPCOMING UGBEP COUNCIL MEETING DATES:

March 23 and 24, 2020 in Helena
September 14 and 15, 2020 in Missoula

