

MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- DRAFT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Teleconference (Meeting 27)

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

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and Members of the Public: Heather Brower (PF Farm Bill Biologist), Aaron Clausen (PF Farm Bill Biologist), Ben Deeble, (Big Sky Upland Bird Association, Missoula), Erin Fairbank (PF Farm Bill Biologist), John Ensign (R7 Wildlife Manager), Debbie Hohler (UGBEP Coordinator), Justin Hughes (R7 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), Ken McDonald (Wildlife Administrator), Dave Nikonow (NWTF Cooperative Wildlife Biologist), Rick Northrup (FWP Habitat Bureau Chief), Ken Plourde (R6 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), Kevin Rose (R5 Wildlife Manager), Brad Schmitz (R7 Supervisor), Mark Sullivan (R6 Supervisor).

Monday, March 23

Charlie began the meeting at 9:00 am and took roll call. Darlyne moved to accept the September 23, 2019 minutes as presented and Trent seconded. Motion passed.

Legislative/Department Updates

Ken thanked the Council for coming together for the meeting in spite of challenging times. The Wildlife Division is in the process of putting legislation proposals together that were drafted with consideration from the Council.

1. Refinement for bird planting will remove the required spending of the 25% of the 15% set-aside for pheasant releases. Proposed change will allow the department to spend up to 15% of the annual income on bird planting activities.
2. 2 legislators from different parties and chambers (current statute) has a proposed change to “2 legislators from different parties”, removing the requirement that speaks to different chambers. The department is challenged to consistently meet the current requirement; but by removing the need for different chambers, opportunities will likely increase that will allow us to fill the required seats on the council.
 - a. Council discussed eliminating the requirement that legislators are from different parties. At this time, Council prefers to have one legislator from each party but supports dropping the chamber requirement. **This topic will be discussed at the September meeting.**
 - b. On behalf of the council, Charlie expressed support and offered to provide a letter and provide testimony at the session.
3. Ken noted that—anecdotally—license sales are about half of what they were last year. A drop in sales could have impact on future revenue. We will have a better understanding this fall.

Fiscal Summary Update

Debbie referred to the handout emailed this morning (version 2) and gave an overview of program balances and obligations.

Recommendations: Charlie stated that the program needs to honor contracts already underway. He emphasized that projects should provide the most bang for the buck on any given contract. Dollars spent to promote hunter days to the public is key as that is where funding comes from.

There was general council agreement with Charlie's recommendations above.

Trent asked what the dollar of the bird release funding. Currently there is about \$200k in the account, but after the FY 21 release (this calendar year), approximately \$100,000 will be added to the unspent account.

Tana asked if there could be regrets about the decision on removing the 25% required spending. For example, what if there is a natural disaster and an entire region is significantly wiped out. Debbie pointed out that funding would allow for releases, up to 15%.

Charlie added that the proposed revision isn't intended to eliminate pheasant releases, just respond to limited demand.

UGBEP project costs overview

Council reviewed the project costs handout earlier. Costs were broken out by project type and region, and it should be noted that project costs did not factor out contract length. General council discussion ensued.

- Charlie sees Habitat Management Leases as cost-effective.
- Question on temporary electric fencing, which could be more cost effective. Doug stated that electric fence might not work well in some cases and permanent fence is best.
- Trent asked about the access gained by pheasant releases. Debbie will provide information on access and releases.

Overview of Dec. 11 Program Staff Meeting

The meeting focus was to answer 3 questions – 1) how to prioritize project types; 2) how a ranking proposal might look; and 3) how to optimize program funding.

1. How prioritize project types? We looked at the project types that had most meaning to the group (top 5): Open Fields, HMLs, Grazing Systems, food/cover, Conversion of Ag to permanent cover.

How are these project types valued? Cost/benefit; habitat benefits/hunter benefits; addressing limiting factors; ecological importance of certain project types; hunting opportunity.

2. What would a proposal submission/selection process look like?

Call for projects and prioritization, once a year on April 15. May 15-June 30 contracting period. There was a question on the timing with seeding. It would be better to begin contract period earlier.

3. Exploring opportunities to optimize funding:
We will look to work with partners such as Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, National Wild Turkey Federation to contribute to projects that align with their mission.

Seek Pittman-Robertson dollars for money to be used for habitat projects.

Because the payment for grain food plot is higher than commodity prices, the price was lowered to \$75/acre to keep pace with market. The new rate will take effect with new contracts. The program will pay \$100/ac for diverse food/cover plots plus seed costs (~\$20/acre).

UGBEP Updates and Statuses

VPA-HIP: Total grant awarded **\$1,894,060.50 to fund 2 FWP programs**

- ~\$1.4 Million for UGBEP's Open Fields and HML
- \$300K for long-term access agreement through Block Management
- ~100K for indirect costs
- 3rd VPA-HIP for UGBEP
- We have 3-years to spend money, emphasis will be re-enrolling expired Open Fields contracts, if eligible, and getting new enrollments.
- Zero match from UGBEP but the program will help incentivize mid-contract maintenance.

2020 Pheasant Releases

Pheasant release applications were due January 15. 10 applications were received (some were individuals submitting more than 1 application): R4 (2), R6 (8), R7 (0). There are 2 pheasant raisers in R4 that can provide pheasants to cooperators.

4 application pre-approved for pheasants = 290 pheasants. Projected expenditures: <\$3,000
3rd consecutive year we won't meet statutory requirement. Charlie emphasized that there is clear need to revise statute to meet the program direction.

Partnerships: contracts and work plans

Currently UGBEP supports 8 positions with various partners and costs:

- 3 Habitat Forever positions (R1, R4, and R5), 1 NWTF position (R2), and 4 PF Farm Bill Biologists (R3, R4, R6).
- All partners were given a 3-year notice that next round of contracts will only continue for 3 years (generally 5) but UGBEP can't continue as we have in past years. Partners will need to find other funding sources.
- R1 Habitat Forever contract expires in August 2020, and a new 3-year contract will be implemented.
- R4 Habitat Forever – contract was executed July 2019 and will be executed for 3 years. Contract was adjusted to reflect actual costs, about \$60k/year.

- Debbie is working on the R5 procurement contract paperwork for a 3-year contract but at a lesser rate that is more in line with actual costs. Contract will be a total of \$180,000.
- NWTF new 3-year contract began July 2019. \$40k/year in partnership with USFS.
- Farm Bill biologist positions – Conrad, Chinook, Scobey, Bozeman – help with program outreach. Charlie asked Art about R1 Habitat Forever work and the Tribes. The Tribes participate “unofficially” through equipment loans and other project cooperation.

Plan implementation and work plans, including overview:

Kenny Plourde (R6) – see handout.

Summary: There are several projects that will be planted in Region 6 this spring. The major focus for enrolling new projects in the region this year will be Open Fields and other CRP related nesting cover projects. Due to the UGBEP budget restrictions, there is no outreach effort planned in the region this year, and we intend to enroll fewer food plots and HMLs in the region than in the past few years. Given the likelihood that less time will be spent pursuing new projects this year, monitoring existing projects and maintaining good relationships with current cooperators will also be an important focus. Finally, identifying ways to do projects more cost efficiently, finding ways to leverage partner funding, and finding potential new grant dollars to do more projects will be a consideration throughout the year as we get used to working with a smaller, sustainable UGBEP budget and with the new ranking process.

Justin Hughes (R7) – see handout. A general selection is represented below.

1. Habitat Management Lease and Food Plot- Approximately 180-acre habitat lease in McCone County that will be paired up with 14 acres of Diverse Mix Food Plot immediately adjacent to woody winter cover and nesting cover.
2. Grazing System & HML- Nearly 1,000-acre grazing system that includes installment of a few miles of fence and a few thousand feet of pipeline to facilitate a 3-pasture rest rotation grazing system in Dawson County. This project also has an associated Habitat Lease on a riparian area adjacent to the grazing system to protect a riparian area from over grazing.
3. Wildlife Friendly Practice- Install ~110 acres of cover crop on ag land to increase soil health prior to its return to pastureland in Wibaux County.
4. HML & Food Plot- Install electric fence to preserve a 78-acre area that includes a woody draw and nesting cover In Wibaux County. There will be 10 acres of diverse mix food plot installed immediately adjacent to the HML to provide additional winter cover and feed.

David Nikonow is planning a large project ~150,000-acre project on the Bitterroot forest. Our fall meeting will include a tour of other projects that Dave has been working on.

Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Bios: will plan to defer to fall meeting to discuss specific projects.

Council rotations, set up meetings for 2021.

Debbie stated council should be at capacity. Some members are rotating off. We specifically need someone from Region 4 to be represented on the council and have seen some public interest. We hope to see Sen. Ellsworth and Rep. Marler in September. We will plan to set meeting dates for 2021 at the next meeting.

Charlie thanked Darlyne Dascher – landowner/rancher—who graciously served on the council for 4 years. On behalf of the program, “Thank you for your efforts and contribution to council!”

September Meeting will be in Missoula Sept 14 and 15. We will be setting up to look at work by NWTf and David Nikonow.

Action Items: Will backfill presenters this fall who would have presented this spring.

Public comments:

- Ben Deeble from Big Sky Upland Bird Association: relative to UGBEP revenue and spending down the fund—he participated in an upland bird meeting a couple weeks ago. At 62 years old, he doesn’t understand why he doesn’t have to pay for a license anymore. There may be ways residents or seniors can contribute more to the UGBEP? Charlie feels this is an excellent idea, and we explore this idea more and discuss at the fall meeting.

Other items:

- Jake Doggett – took another position as GF Biologist. Looking to fill that position, likely to be in the GF area.
- Tana participates on the FWP Dog Training committee over the concerns about habitat, bird dogs, and places to train. Charlie – council has supported the idea of avoiding during the primary nesting season. Recommend seeing minutes
- Trent – have Tana send minutes to the council.
- Debbie – will work on the paperwork for council member’s honorarium for today...will be sent by the end of the month.
- Tana – has a recommendation for a person that would be a good representative for Region 4. Debbie will follow up with Tana.

12:36 pm. Motion to adjourn...carried.