



**Region 5 CAC Zoom Meeting  
September 10, 2020**

**Attending CAC Members:** Daniel Otis, Bruce Hoiland, Douglas Dreeszen, Lee Deming, Rusty Butler, Susan Gilbertz, Steve Regele, Craig Hash, Christine Whitlatch

**R5 Employees:** Terri Walters, Bob Gibson, Barb Beck, Dianne Stiff, Harold Guse, Mike Ruggles, Ashley Taylor, Bryan Giordano, Shannon Blackburn, Ron Jendro

**Parks Board Member:** Scott Brown

**Welcome/Introduction, Agenda Review:** Bob Gibson

**Major projects underway in R5:**

Fisheries – Mike Ruggles

Lake Elmo clam eradication:

- Since 1953, the only location in Montana where Asian clams have been found.
- Reviewed the Lake Elmo invasive Asian clam response video with Facebook having at least 3800 views, and YouTube 220 views.
- Reviewed the survey results with 81 total responses; timeframe March 1-17, 2020.
- Opportunities for both fisheries and parks projects if decide to completely drain the lake such as installation of fishing piers, creation of rounded jetty areas with picnic tables, development of a natural amphitheater, installing a boardwalk over the water that would go from the pavilion to the office building, building expansions like Roger's pier within the board walk, etc.
- The recreational activities that people typically participate in are shore fishing, personal watercraft/boats, hiking, running, swimming, bird watching, dog training, walking dogs and use of the dog park area. During winter ice fishing, ice skating and cross-country skiing.
- Lake Elmo is among the top five Montana state parks for visitation.
- Lake Elmo EA is nearly complete and will be out for a 30-day comment period soon.

Fishing Access Site Program:

- Cottonwood Fishing Access Site – this site is an island accessible by boat and is located on the Yellowstone River between Reed Point and the Holmgren Ranch FAS. Working to finalize the EA on this proposed site. Hoping to have a decision by the end of December.
- Two Bridges Fishing Access Site - on the Yellowstone River, is a railroad bridge and a highway bridge, will be developed into a fishing access site lease from the railroad.
- Riverside Fishing Access Site – just outside of Roundup on the Musselshell River at the juncture of Highway 87 and Highway 12. Plans for a primitive launch for rafts, camping, and a latrine. There is primarily smallmouth bass and channel catfish. Meeting with county commissioners to work out a no cost lease agreement.

Yellowstone River Fish Kill:

- Mountain Whitefish kill in the Yellowstone River 2020 – this is the third time since closure in 2016 that we've had a light mountain whitefish die off. Do not know for sure if PKD or PKX and hope to have results next week.

Wildlife – Ashley Taylor

Proposed Snowy Mountains WMA:

- History - Forrest Allen, original owner, passed away and willed it to the Shodair Children's Hospital of Montana. Shodair approached the Rocky Mtn. Elk Foundation to insure this property would get into public ownership.
- Located in HD 511, 29 miles east of Judith Gap at the base of the Big Snowy Mountains, 17 miles north of Ryegate.
- Size is 5,677 deeded acres owned by Shodair. From there is public access to 6,936 acres of BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Study Area (WSA), and 88,696 acres of the US Forest Service in the Big Snowy Mountains WSA.

- There is a county road for access, with minimal infrastructure.
- The full proposal is located on the website at:  
<http://fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/insideFwp/commission/meetings/agenda.html?coversheet&topicId=61780024>
- The 30-day public scoping ends 9/19/2020.
- All public comments are considered, with a decision to proceed with an EA or drop the project.
- Proceeding requires writing the EA, which includes a basic management plan, and work with the County Weed Management District on weed inventory and weed management.
- A public hearing is held on the EA and with a 30-day public comment period.
- All public comments are considered with a decision notice written on whether to proceed with the project or not.
- If proceeding an appraisal will be completed.
- The Fish & Wildlife Commission approval is required to proceed.
- Then the State Land Board approval is required to proceed.
- Close on the property.
- Currently this property is not open for public hunting as it's owned by Shodair. Completion takes a couple of years for the process and approvals of the WMA.

#### How Covid has affected FWP:

- Background – Barb
  - Regional offices were closed early March, then reopened on June 3. The parks and fishing access sites stayed open welcoming visitors with FWP employees continuing important field work.
  - Program Operations Group - formed in Helena to identify issues ahead of time, charting strategies for FWP to continue to serve the public, get work done and provide a safe environment for employees.
  - Some FWP employees have been directly affected by Covid that's required testing. Employees have had to wait two weeks for test results, and which requires coverage for those out sick.
  - Heavy workloads, example state parks and FASs with conducting extra cleaning including latrines, plus the front office staff providing extra cleaning of the public restroom and front lobby area.
  - Changing expectations for our work has evolved. Many employees are teleworking plus caring for children while getting their jobs done. Some have family members who have Covid, and others haven't been able to travel to visit family members. Isolation has been a factor too.
  - Under the Governor the state continues to provide services to the public. We have evolving challenges, but for the most part our work goes on with the bears coming out of hibernation into communities, plus we continue to have the initial diseases (CWD, EHD and PKD) on the landscape and in the rivers. We've had boats show up with mussels, Asian clams that didn't leave Lake Elmo that we know of, white nose syndrome enter Montana's bat population, and elk continue to dine on peoples crops. We have toilets at the state parks and FASs that must be cleaned and pumped more than usual and continue budget preparation for the next legislative session.

#### Parks – Terri Walters

- Impacts include staff testing positive for Covid, which has caused a staff shortage. Facilities closed because of lack of staff for coverage. The R5 Parks team stepped up to open facilities, close facilities and cover for each other. They have been amazing, willing to work together with flexibility to cover various locations.
- Staff have had to adapt to latrine cleaning wearing complete rubber suits and other personal protective equipment (PPE). Cleaning a latrine in 90-degree weather can be a real challenge wearing protective suits, but the staff keep doing their job with a smile on their face.
- Cooney SP had 100,520 visitors in July.

#### Front Office Administration – Dianne Stiff

- After closing offices last spring, we reopened on June 3 to the public with a lobby capacity of 4 at a time. The counter now has a tempered glass barrier added, with just two ALS machines due to social distancing.
- Later this summer a statewide directive came out from the Governor's office requiring masks, to both our employees and the general public. Masks are provided to the public as needed.
- We average cleaning counters and the lobby area plus the one public restroom about every two hours.
- We have 8 mailboxes now installed outside of the front doors of the office building to hold regulations, hunting access guides, and upland bird enhancement booklets for the public's convenience.
- Block management maps are available on the website for printing at home. For those that cannot print the maps, we mail or hand out 5 maps per request per day.

- With employees teleworking, licensing has become complicated. Many customers did not receive their carcass tags, so no charge carcass tag reprints are being completed here at the office or local license providers. The licensing staff are now back working in the main Helena office, so these issues should be resolved.
- Surplus licensing went to a new sign up system to spread out the license sales. We now have Elk B 595 and 005 available, plus the 597, 598 and 599 antlerless whitetail licenses. The surplus list is updated online on [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov), look under “popular” and then [Available Surplus Licenses \(PDF\)](#).

#### Comm-Ed – Bob Gibson

- Lobby display – Covid has stalled the work on the displays with the manufacturing, travel restrictions by contractors, and work being done remotely. Hoping in about a month work may begin.
- Both hunter and bowhunter education have gone to online only rather than in person classes. The field course is currently not required. The number of online students is above 90% of normal in person student totals.
- The online adult hunter and bowhunter education is also available with the field course not required.
- Since aquatic education cannot be held in the schools, FWP is in the process of rewriting the lessons so they are deliverable online or by teachers.

#### Enforcement – Harold Guse

- After the shutdown outdoor use slowed for a few days and then skyrocketed. Across the state employees reported that our sites became extremely busy.
- Throughout the summer, the Red Lodge area for example, every Forest Service camp spot, every place you could pull a vehicle off, was full. Deadman’s Basin was the same with every camp site at capacity or overcapacity with the number of campers or people in a camp unit. Observations from the local warden in that area was not as much boat use, and average fishing use.
- Now with the hunting seasons here, there is a curiosity as to what will be seen for public use impact this fall.

#### Wildlife – Ashley Taylor

- Normal spring deer flights were cancelled. We are relying on past data and harvest data.
- Last winter elk flights were completed.
- Antelope flights were partially completed in July with remaining antelope counts cancelled.
- This fall R5 will not conduct the biological check stations. Instead biologists will be going out on the weekends making individual contacts with hunters within their areas.
- Will try to get back to post season deer flights in December.
- CWD – two technicians will be at the Billings office during the five-week season. All sampling will be conducted either 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 4:30 p.m. Technicians will be using tablets this year to enter data and look up locations. All sampling will be conducted outside in the front parking lot on tailgates or if bad weather, in the shop bay.

#### Fisheries – Mike Ruggles

- Bighorn River was probably one of the biggest challenges early on obtaining information on the river. Whether the river was open or closed, who could or couldn’t access the river, managing all this from county to county and then county to reservation. We cancelled the Bighorn River creel survey for this year but will have one next year.
- We had a lot more use at the fishing access sites (FAS) and lot more fishing pressure. In addition, there were a lot more people in FASs to simply camp, hike and be in nature.
- There was higher use despite flooding. Took a fair amount of the summer to get everything back, but we did lose the boat launch at the Bundy FAS site on the Yellowstone River.
- With higher use of FASs, recently counties were going to Stage I fire restrictions.
- Changes with PPE and cleaning latrines has caused crews extra work adjusting as they go. Due to extra use this season there has been a lot of wear and tear at the FASs. Picnic tables are being replaced.
- Biologists Bryan Giordano and Shannon Blackburn had to adjust to teleworking and getting crews into the field. We took the philosophy that we are field work units, so if someone were to get sick, we’d be down one unit and not two. Employees are taking what precautions they can with more hand washing, face mask wearing, but they work shoulder to shoulder in the streams and on the boats for sampling.
- Biological stream permitting 310 and 124, requires meeting with landowners in person when looking at riprap projects. A lot of those folks are aware, but there are those who would rather you not wear a mask on their property.

#### CAC member round robin:

Bruce Hoiland – The Snowy Mtn. Project is fantastic. It’s good for hunters and outdoor people in the Roundup area. He had people say they received tags for completely different areas than what they applied for in the drawings. They received a negative response from Helena licensing. They’ve lost a lot of whitetail deer from blue tongue in his area especially along the river.

Christine Whitlatch – Would highly invite everyone to go to <https://www.loweryellowstoneriver.com/>. The lower Yellowstone corridor coalition has been working hard to get future funding through the next legislative session and to see more accessibility within all the gaps for use on the lower Yellowstone River. There is a map on that site plus the spokespeople, community partners, information and news stories. She has worked on this all summer beginning last spring in partnership with FWP.

Craig Hash – There is bear activity as they hit all the garbage cans in his neighborhood last night in Red Lodge. Any change with the CWD rules and transportation zones? (Ashley - No longer have carcass transport restrictions within the state this year.) <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/diseasesAndResearch/diseases/chronicWastingDisease/>

Dan Otis – Clarify OHV trail pass, do you need that everywhere or is it only designated trails and if designated trails are there any in Montana yet? (The revenues from each Resident OHV Trail Pass will be utilized to maintain and improve designated OHV routes and trails on public lands in Montana. The funds will be distributed through a grant program beginning in the fall of 2020. State Parks are working on MOU's with FS and BLM on their trail systems in Montana. Once the MOU's are complete then any system that has a trail will need to have this pass.)

Doug Dreeszen – Concerns with the licensing process coming out of Helena and all the repetition of with license reprints. Heard complaints from someone on trying to get the Come Home to Hunt information. Appears that the licensing section in Helena didn't look into a lot of applicants.

Rusty Butler – Hopes the Snowy Mtn. purchase goes through and thought the surplus licenses were great. Increase of people being outside could be causing pressure on the birds and animals out there. When will the e-mail on bears be out? (Harold – the news release on the bears already went out to the media and everyone who purchased a bear license should have gotten an e-mail.)

Scott Brown – Talked with Terri earlier and the state park use was up 70% compared to last year. FWP and state parks staff did an outstanding job of keeping the parks clean and safe with the big rush of people.

Steve Regele – Snowy Mtn. WMA is great. Receiving a lot of feedback from that and the pursuit of the adjoining 7,500 acres if and when that becomes possible. Public use has a lot of people concerned with the overuse of public areas especially with Covid. Just a reminder to take full advantage of areas that come up like Snowy Mtn. WMA to try to open more public areas. Good job with keeping up with clean up. The Audubon and federal organizations are providing input to the federal agencies about E-bikes. If there is any place on FWP lands where bicycles are allowed that's fine; please do not allow E-bikes where bikes can go. Lake Elmo is a popular area. He's talked to people who go boating, fishing and birding at this state park. Really interested in the Russian olive removal. Please give some real serious consideration of replanting those areas with native trees and shrubs. (Terri - around 300 new trees have been introduced and planted at Lake Elmo this year with the majority natives.) Yellowstone Valley Audubon, completely nonprofit, currently has a baling twine recycling project. If anybody knows anyone with a bunch of twine that they would like to recycle, go to the website <https://yvaudubon.org/>, projects, then baling twine. Any questions contact Bob or Steve. Getting feedback on Big Lake as a popular area for bird watchers and hunters, who would like to get a latrine at this site. FWP could improve the elk shoulder season with a contacts and call list of landowners through FWP on the website and elsewhere. People would like to see that happen.

Susan Gilbertz – She and her neighbor put up a camera after hearing noises in the night. Turned out they have racoons and live about 4 blocks from MSU-Billings campus. If a boat doesn't stop at one of your check stations what is the fine? (Harold – accidentally drive by, the bond is \$135 and if someone purposefully drives by it is \$335.)

Lee Deming – A lot of concerns about CWD. There is an awfully good article in the MT Outdoors just recently that went over some of the stuff you need to worry about. Heard concerns about the number of bears. Are there plans to continue with paper licenses through next year? (Dianne – yes on the paper with a new system to be developed and released license year 2022. Still will have paper carcass tags for some time.) Excited about the acquisitions of fishing access sites and up in the Snowies. The Lake Elmo amphitheater is a great idea.

Ron Jendro – EQC passed FWPs legislative proposals.

- Revise unlawful possession statute – current statutory language creates a loop hole in unlawful possession where the hunter could kill a game animal and simply abandon it in the field and not even approach it – this simply cleans up that loop hole
- We currently have a free father's day fishing weekend – this creates a free mother's day fishing weekend
- Revision to the motorized trail program – there is some cleanup on that
- Revise come home to hunt requirements – come home to hunt family sponsored is for nonresident family members who

have previously been residents in Montana. This gives them the opportunity to return home to Montana to hunt and fish with resident family sponsors; the current law states the nonresidents either have proof they had previously purchased a resident hunting license or have a Montana hunter safety certification; we are seeing people are just taking the Montana hunter safety course online and never have been a resident of Montana, so will clean that up so people cannot access that system.

- Add family members to accompany nonresidents – we'd like include a broader range of family members that can accompany youths while hunting with the youth using the nonresident youth combination – add step parents, siblings, step siblings, and legal guardian.
- Revise the license application requirements – currently we ask for occupation, we will take off the occupation for purchase of licenses.

**Wrap-up:**

- How should be communicate in the future? Can we do this in future if we need to?  
Opens more opportunities to make the meetings and ZOOM is a great platform.
- Next meeting - "meet" with legislators – next meeting will be our local legislators.

**Next Meeting:**

December 3 to get our new legislators and CAC members together on ZOOM.

Adjourned.