

MINUTES AND MEETING SUMMARY -- DRAFT
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Monday, September 14, 2020
Zoom Meeting

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

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and Members of the Public: Lorelle Berkeley (FWP Research Biologist), Heather Brower (PF Farm Bill Biologist), Aaron Clausen 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), Evan Rodgers (R4 UGBEP Habitat Specialist), Colin Smith (NWTF Regional Biologist), Rick Sodja (PF), Mark Sullivan (R6 Supervisor), Mike Thompson (R2 Wildlife Manager), Scott Thompson (R6 Wildlife Manager), and Hunter VanDonsel (PF Farm Bill Biologist).

INTRODUCTIONS

Charlie began the meeting at 9:00 am. Introductions were made and general housekeeping announcements were made. Jeff Cornell from Choteau joined the Council and represents Region 4 as a private landowner, one not enrolled in Block Management.

Rick gave an overview of the Council's purpose, citing statute but also providing a 15+ year history of councils that have participated in an advisory capacity, including this current council, which began in 2009. On the department's behalf, Rick expressed appreciation for the ongoing program support from the Council, which continuously improves the program's functionality. Rick also gave an overview of the UGBEP's history, which began in 1987 as a pheasant release program but quickly evolved to a habitat program.

DEPARTMENT UPDATES

Ken McDonald provided a legislative update. FWP is anticipating a light legislative load next year. The department would support the council legislators if they wish to sponsor the 2 proposed bills: one to revise the pheasant release statute and a second to revise a change in Council memberships.

1. Stocking of pheasants – 15% set aside, 25% must be spent annually
 - a. Current statute has never been very popular with biologists and sportsmen, it is better to invest in habitat. There hasn't been a lot of interest by bird raisers, and this year we haven't been able to spend the required 25%.
 - b. Change language from "at least 15%" to "up to 15%" and the requirement of 25% eliminated.
2. Council Legislative representation – been having trouble getting different houses and parties consistently participating. One recommendation to change to two legislators or two legislators, one from different parties

Covid-19 has had some effects on the Wildlife Division but not as much as anticipated. The hunting season could promote crowding, especially at check stations, CWD response, etc. We will need to make sure people are safe.

The Block Management Program is hiring. Training will occur in small groups.

FWP is seeing tremendous use of outdoor facilities, nearly double the typical use. FWP is anticipating higher hunter numbers this season.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

Debbie reported on balances, expenditures, and obligations for FY 20

The program is using a new accounting approach for habitat projects. Each contract will be assigned an accounting number with obligations identified, keeping track of expenditures and balances. This new method will clearly show the unallocated, unspent program balance for habitat funds.

Bird planting is currently at a \$370,000 balance.

Habitat accomplishments (Summary): Habitat -52 new contracts, 74k acres of access, \$1.02M obligated.

The Habitat Forever position in Billings was renewed for another 3 years at a total obligation of \$180,000. The department was awarded a VPA-HIP grant for \$1.9 M to continue enrollment in Open Fields and to fund a new access program for long-term access leases. The grant has yet to be finalized, but the program has garnered interest with landowners and will begin enrollment once the grant has been signed.

In December 2020, the program will review proposals and make selections for funding. Approximately \$600,000 is available for habitat projects.

STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND WORK PLANS

Evan Rodgers (R4), Ken Plourde (R6), Justin Hughes (R7) gave a more detailed account of projects enrolled during the 2020 field season. In spite of COVID-19 and its restrictions, progress was made with enrollments.

Using PowerPoints, Dave Nikonow (NWTF), Hunter VanDonsel, Aaron Clausen, Heather Bower (Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists) highlighted project accomplishments during the fields season.

Council began discussions on proposed revisions to the pheasant release statute and Council membership statute.

Different parties represented, ONE FROM EACH MAJOR POLITICAL PARTY

- Representative Marler stated this is a reasonable change and would be willing to carry that bill. Doesn't think it would be a hard sell.
- Rob expressed full support of both changes
- Charlie asked the council for further input. Disagreement? Motion?

Trent moved to change statutory language, two legislators, one from each major party. Doug Bonsell seconded. CARRIED

Charlie gave an overview on the current statute addressing pheasant releases. The department is required to set aside 15% of annual income for game bird releases. Typically, that amount is about \$100k. At least 25% of the 15% must be spent each year, usually about \$26k. The overall expenditure trend has been less than 25%. Council generally feels bird releases are ineffective for improving populations in good habitat and would rather see funding spent on habitat, if available. Up to 15% may be available for bird releases annually, but if there is no interest, funds may be used for habitat projects if needed. General discussion ensued.

- Art agrees with the use of bird releases but believes there is minimal effectiveness where there are already birds. However, restoration projects like sharp-tailed grouse releases can be effective. Charlie noted that with regard to sharp-tailed grouse release, it's difficult to ensure a hunting opportunity requirement.
- Tana agrees with the wording as presented.
- Charlie noted there are "pros" for pheasant releases, as it does open some gates.
- Jeff Cornell supports the wording change especially as it doesn't eliminate potential STG introduction in the future. If there is a good project to use the funds, he would be in favor of that funding.
- Rob is in full agreement with the change that is recommended
- Trent agrees with the wording as it gives flexibility but doesn't rule out bird release in the future, including turkeys. He noted that R6 is where the strongest sentiment has come, and he knows he will hear about it from some people, especially if the change were to go forward. If FWP isn't going to carry forward, but instead a legislator, it will need to be a certain legislator. Otherwise, there may be some blowback if this change was brought forward by a western legislator. It would be good to have a central or eastern MT legislator to carry this bill.
- Doug supports going along with the emphasis on habitat and not shutting the door on this part of the program.

Summary: Council is comfortable with more flexibility in the bird release section, still agree up to 15% may be set aside and used for bird releases, if demand is there and meets requirements, but mandating is counterproductive. When there is a lack of enrollments, council would like to see unused funds be available for the habitat side of the program.

Clarifying points: Should we keep a minimum reserve for bird release? No, council recommends going with wording as suggested:

“Up to 15% of the funds collected annually under 87-1-246 may be used each fiscal year for expenditures related to upland game releases.”

Jeff Cornell moved to make a recommended change to statutory language as it pertains to pheasant releases. Rob Brunelle seconded. CARRIED

Rep. Marler commented that she sees this as clear and doesn't think it is a controversial “ask.”

Council held discussions on the current version of the UGBEP Strategic Plan and reviewed sections where updating is needed (Council and Department).

Review of bird situations in each region and the take on strategic plan priorities

R1 – Art highlighted the habitat conservation work within the region, enhancement work is quite active.

R2 – The best opportunities are on federal grounds where there is public access; best focus for UGBEP.

R3 – Tana expressed concerns about loss of huns over the years.

R4 – Winter cover is most limiting, but council member and new staff are learning what the needs are and what may be needed. Jeff Cornell pointed out that identifying existing and historical leks may interest a lot of landowners who might be interested if they knew they existed.

R5 – Sundance is not part of the plan right now, but Pompeys is a good area but concerns about public use plays into the future; Yellowstone WMA is good, receiving habitat enhancements on public lands.

R6 – There is a lot of emphasize on winter cover and dense nesting cove. Rob has been hearing good things from hunters, happy with what they are seeing; Ken Plourde noted there are some updates needed in the plan, items that were missed and removing redundant sections. Focal areas are expanding, such as McCone county landowner interests. It may be worth to consider expanding to cover that area. The regions would benefit with promoting work on CRP region-wide, per input from other biologists as well. Trent commented that CRP loss is huge, and it is not “cow country” like R7. There are cattle producers, but he feels that managed grazing will become the bigger opportunity in the absence

of CRP. Where there are big fields, there are big producers, and there are no signs that indicate we're going back to small producers. Often, they will take out tree rows; old farmsteads are coming out when bins are removed. Fringe habitat is special, sometimes the only habitat. Economics is a big thing in R6, and it depends on access and habitat.

R7 –Grazing work and other habitat work has been good. There may be need for predator control. In summary, feels plan is spot on.

Statewide – Debbie provided an update on state-wide sections that need updating, namely: Project Types section, hunting/harvest statistics, economic updates, payments section, and project allocations.

Additional Updates

Aaron Clausen provided an update on CRP in Montana.

Lorelle Berkeley provided updates on FWP's current upland game bird research.

Public Comments

None

Scheduled Meetings

Spring: March 29-30, 2021, Helena for in-person meeting. Trent moved and Tana seconded. Motion carried.

Fall: September 13 – 14, 2021, Region 2 for tour. Art moved and Rob seconded. Motion carried.

Meeting Adjourned. Doug moved and Jeff seconded. Motion carried.

Helpful Info

Link to the UGBEP Strategic plan: <https://fwp.mt.gov/ugbep>