

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting  
Minutes & Meeting Summary -- Final  
Mar 28, 2022, at Montana Wild**

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Rob Brunelle, Tom Codon, Jeff Cornell, Sen. Jason Ellsworth (absent), Rep. Tom France, Jay Hanson, Tom Keegan, Trent Kleppen, Rick Sojda, and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Brett Dorak, Debbie Hohler, Garrett Jericoff, Bob Jeffrey, Justin Hughes, Ken McDonald, Christian Meny, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Liam O'Connor, Deb O'Neill, Ken Plourde, Evan Rodgers, Noah Starling, Matt Strauch, Hunter VanDonsel, and Hank Worsech.

**Monday, March 28**

Trent began the meeting at 9:30 am. Introductions were made along with sharing of backgrounds and interests. Trent went over the meeting highlights, and encouraged everyone be familiar with program rule and statutes.

**Motion** to accept the meetings as presented. Rick Sojda moved, Art Soukkala seconded to approve. Motion carried.

Rick Northrup provided a history of the program and when legislation began (1987). Program went through a period with no dedicated staff and accrued a large unspent balance.

Discussion on the involvement by established AG organizations and participation on the council.

**Legislative/Department Updates**

Ken thanked the Council for continued support and input. The Program has benefited from council's engagement. Ken's updates:

- 1) Currently developing legislative proposals for January's session. Preliminary recommendation to change UGBEP pheasant release statute to "may spend up to 15%" on bird planting and to remove the requirement of spending 25% of the set aside on pheasant releases. We're seeing reduced interest in stocking but an increase in habitat enhancements. Recommendations to revise statute has been sent to the director's office.
- 2) Proposing revised legislation to change requirement for council's legislator requirement of different parties and houses. Recommended change to "2 legislators from different parties."
- 3) The director and governor will decide if these revisions will go forward.
- 4) Agency decided two years ago to not carry these bills but council could work with legislature
- 5) Budget Proposals
  - a. HB2 – Debbie's salary is UGBEP funded, proposed PR with UGBEP match.

- b. HB5 – Requested \$300k of PR to supplement habitat projects
- 6) Habitat Montana – leases, acquisitions, easements. Concern about getting acquisitions and easements through the process. Focus is shifting to 30-40 year leases and to focus on sagebrush habitat. Initiative out to public in next couple months. There could be a positive impact on upland bird habitat.

Rep. France asked about freshening the recommendations. Moved that council encourage FWP to make these two statutory changes for the 2023 legislature. Change “shall” to “may” and to also change the makeup of the two legislators, one from each party, but can come from same house. Doug Bonsell seconded. Motion carried.

Discussion over perpetual easements. Ken pointed out that the driver has been to get through the commission and land board, and it’s uncertain if we will be able to do that. There’s a strong need for sagebrush conservation. If land projects cannot get funded, the pot of funding will grow and likely subject to reallocation.

10:00 am Director Worsch/Deb O’Neill

Director Worsch addressed where we’re going as a department and then will be open for questions.

- Worked for FWP as the licensing bureau chief and legislative liaison. He retired but applied for the director. He feels staff are amazing, have passion, and care about the resources. He is guided by “15 and Forward,” and following the public trust doctrine.
- Trustees are the legislature and commission
- Wildlife managers – our role is to provide the best science
- Public – talk to the trustees, help department lay out the right way
- Simplifying regulations – getting rid of stuff that doesn’t make sense
  - He has asked biologists about season setting – what can we sustain, how liberal without hurting the resource.
  - All within boundaries, let public decide sideboards
- New commission process
  - FWP makes recommendations – public review; individual commissioners offers changes; commission meeting will own the changes.
- Prison pheasant releases
  - This guy has some of the best birds in the state, not the average pen-raised birds. Deputy director hunted over them and they are pretty wild birds.
  - Hank said we will study these birds. Answering the questions “Yes we have recruitment or no we don’t.” The study would be handled by FWP’s researchers.
  - Jeff Cornell – Montana has a history on raising pheasants. We should note the history of what happened and learn our lesson.

- Hank mentioned the economics of pheasant raising. The prison went to one gentleman who has been raising pheasants.
  - The prison used to have a dairy but Costco wouldn't use prison labor. Win-win for the state,
  - Watch and see what happens, see what kind of recruitment.
  - Rick Sojda – what is the role of the council advising on pheasant study? Hank responded favorably but asked: what is the litmus test? How prove successful?
- Discussion on R3 – Recruitment, Retention, Reactivation and its purpose behind the pheasant releases. Discussion on using a separate permit to hunt certain number of birds.

General discussion with the director:

- Hank intends to go around the state annually to talk to staff and public, hearing what people have to say.
- Jeff Cornell: Opportunity to study youth hunters becoming sportsmen, includes learning about what habitat needs are and difference between permanent population vs released birds. In 10 years, what has happened to hunter knowledge, relationship to landowners? It should be an important part of the program. Hank liked the education component – habitat, pheasants, and other birds. Jeff Cornell added it's critical to build long-term sportsmen relationships.
- Hunter: All are passionate about habitat – thoughts on opportunity to increase funding for UGBEP?
- Hank- perpetuity vs term agreements? Hank heard loud and clear that NE Montana don't like CEs. Sage-grouse habitat dollars is key and there's interest. We want to be successful.
- Trent: This council is separate from the state lands releases for R3. To get landowner involved, more habitat work needs to be done with landowners and NGOs. In R6, bird hunters are not from R6 (from out of state or Western Montana). Demographics are changing and people live in town, and not taking kids out hunting. Need to focus on kids in R6. Emphasis on kids in Ag communities, especially. Ag is getting cleaner and bigger. Recommended developing relationships with Ag kids. Kids may lack understanding of what birds need to survive.

For regions 2, 3, 4, and 5, there's plenty of opportunity with forest grouse hunting.

- Hank likes both ideas – ag kids and local hunting opportunities (forest grouse); social media – learn how good things are in some areas, or not.
- Deb O'Neill: R3 working group is looking at geographic recruitment or underserved areas. Mentorship is huge. FWP does not have capacity.
- Jeff Cornell: Future farmers and landowners, there are not as many small, family farms.
- Hank – FWP needs to work more on relationships with landowners.

Additional discussion on put and take, public education over hunting wild versus released birds.

UGBEP Fiscal report (Hohler)

Fiscal report and enrollment updates appended to minutes.

12:30 pm

Lunch

### **Regional Updates**

Project updates from Evan, Ken, and Justin.

#### **Evan (Region 4)**

- 27 projects expired, down to 92 active projects
- Majority of access areas are on private land
- Dry conditions, observing concentrated birds
- Turkey release – moved turkeys, good overwinter survival, originally wild birds from Nebraska. The landowner estimated 400-600 turkeys on property
- Targeted fencing for riparian restoration (TIP) – focus on ruffed grouse habitat.
- Freezout – planting shelterbelts – not habitat without grasses...making better cover. 8 species of grasses; each row with different species. They've also planted test plots with grain sorghum that heads out in under 80 days.
- Marias – food plots to perennial grasses project is ongoing.
- Wood Bottom BLM – planting delayed, waiting until better planting conditions.
- Called all expired Open Fields cooperators – about 1/3 looking into re-enrolling.
- Targeted mailing in Lewistown area - 150 mailings, no replies.

#### **Ken (Region 6)**

Ken gave an over view of R6's strategic plan. He has several nesting projects in the works. 3 projects total \$100k. Food plots will be contracted later this year, with most landowners re-enrolling. One project involves UGBEP and Mig Bird, leveraging funds for an HML and grazing project. He has dialed down outreach because of decreased funding. Ken provided an overview of general CRP. Rental rates have dropped and crop/hay prices are up.

#### **Justin (Region 7)**

Justin gave an overview of current UGBEP contracts in R7. He's not observing much interest in Open Fields. Lots of money is needed to get CRP bid competitive, which is a main driver of Open Fields enrollments. Conditions are dry. "Hunting for habitats more so than hunting for birds." Overview of future habitat projects. Justin pointed out that if the UGBEP had more money, the regions could get more work done.

Discussion on smaller scale enrollments. Ken said there is not a lot of landowner interest in small scale projects. Hunter added it's a hard sell.

Rep. France asked if the department is offering comment to have an effective voice with the Farm Bill program. Rick followed up that we have a Farm Bill liaison – Heather Harris. She also works with AFWA, and that group works at the DC level.

### **Partner Updates**

Dave Nikonow, NWTF Cooperative Biologist, continues to provide technical assistance with project identification, planning, design and development, and outreach efforts. The cool and wet spring conditions western Montana experienced this year pushed back the available burn windows. Consistent May precipitation followed by a USFS agency and nationwide halt on all prescribed fire caused an early end to the spring burn season. These time and weather limitations account for fewer acres treated.

Dave mentioned the potential windfall from the Infrastructure Bill. Bitterroot NF will work with partners to get things on the ground. Partnership is key!

### **Hunter VanDonsel**

Hunter gave an overview of the 12 partner bios. PF is very partner-centric. PF is focused on grassland conversion and access. “Adopt-a-Ranch” focuses on uniting hunters to help goodwill with ranchers. PF bios are focused on:

- Grassland Conservation, CRP
- Upland Habitat Wildlife
- Public Access
- Pollinator Habitat
- Big Game Corridor

### **Christian Meny** – Audubon, Conservation Ranching Program Manager

- 2019 – enroll ranches with excellent stewardship, bird-friendly ranches.
- The Audubon Conservation Ranching program empowers consumers to support conservation by selecting beef products bearing the Audubon seal, knowing that these products come from lands where grazing and management practices ensure diverse bird habitat, healthy soils, abundant pollinators, and cleaner waters. Audubon’s “green seal” is the premiere certification for products that have positive impacts on grassland bird habitat and grassland ecosystems.
- Montana Audubon pays for the certification

Discussion on collaborative approach.

Tom France: Collaborative model hasn’t shifted attitudes. Suggests disconnecting from win-win approach. It’s not reflected in legislature. How do we connect? Getting production ag involved here? Chambers of commerce invested – more encompassing than between PF bio and landowner, more reflective in the community. Rural-urban divide is fierce, and the model doesn’t fit

Hunter: RSA and Winnett ACES – using wildlife to drive dollars into rural communities.

- Community projects

- Chad Harvey and Hunter VanDonsel split political roles in Montana and beyond.

Tom France: He tried to introduce legislation for community development fund for hunter check off. Leaving something for communities that are appreciated beyond.

**Liam O'Connor**

- Conducts renovations on WPA's in Mission Valley, funding is primarily NAWCA grant – 272 acres of restoration work is overall goal
- Works with Mission Valley Conservation Alliance
- Control of reed canary grass is a priority
- Art added there's emphasis on improving water use and habitat management – now is the time.

**Debbie** gave an update on habitat efforts in Billings and Denton

- Denton – Virgil Gluth. Habitat work and maintenance since 2008. He has done outstanding work. Partners meet annually to go over work plans, 2022 will focus on weed management,
- Billings—Steve Rockhold. Partnership since 2008. Pompey's Pillar and Yellowstone WMA with expanding work out to Grant Marsh WMA

**Ken Plourde:** Provided an update on R3 and asked for input from PF and the council.

Motion to adjourn. Doug moves and Jeff seconded. Motion carries.

Meeting adjourns at 4:30 pm.

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**Tuesday, March 29**

Trent called the meeting to order at 9:15 am.

**Jason Kool.** Updates on the Block Management Program

Jason has moved with the program to Parks and Outdoor Recreation in September

- How hunter access is funded – variety of hunting licenses, PR funds, small grants, and donations
- \$7.6m spent on contracts last year, not counting cost of staff and operations
- Focused on providing impact payments. Impacts to private lands, not paying for access.
- 6m private land acres, about 1.2m public land acres
- Compensation based on 1) how long open; 2) species & gender restrictions – 5 base species (upland birds, waterfowl, deer, elk, antelope) and gender; maximum is \$13/HD payment. Limit is now \$25k/landowner.
- Compensation is based on 4-year rolling average of hunter-days. Avoiding high peaks or lows because of fire conditions.

- Type I BMA – hunter administered permission.
- Type II BMA – someone else is administering permission, e.g., landowner, FWP, etc.

Debbie - update on strategic plan

- Unable to get the draft out to Rick/Ken and the council
- Debbie proposing, putting all sections together, get to Rick and Ken next week. Then to council before the end of April.
  - End of June for 30-day public comment
- 30 day comment after council review
- Can get comments out to council after that for follow-up

Tom France – asked about a cooperative agreement with DNRC for work on state lands? Debbie answered that there has been an MOU between DNRC and FWP that sets up a frame work to deliver UGBEP projects on DNRC. Work on state lands is opportunistic and successful with a willing lessee. Regions work with lessees, developing trust and working relationships. Regions recognized that sometimes there's a disincentive to partner on state lands as any enhancement may cause the bid to go up. Discussions ensued.

10:00 am                      Public comment at 10:00 – no comment.

**Brett Dorak -- Presentation and updates on the sharp-tailed grouse reintroduction efforts.**

- Plan came out in 2019
- Identified 3 release sites (Blackfoot, Drummond, Northern Bitterroot)
- Fall 2021 capture efforts were in Region 7
  - Chris Hammond was the brainchild/workhorse
  - Franz came over to lead the ground crew, Dale Tribby helped
  - Goal was 75 males, a little over a week captured them.
  - GPS PTT marked birds and nano tags (motus stations) let staff know if tags are still out there
- PTT tags are no longer functioning and issues with motus stations
- About 1 month ago
  - 25 males released in each location
  - Tags remaining 88% Manley, 56% MPG Ranch, and 84% Peterson
- Leks of capture – 15 or more males
- Significant decline this spring from last year in the Knowlton capture area – probably drought related. Only one of the original leks of capture would qualify for the 15-bird minimum.
- Montana Outdoors Article
- Future capture plans – no more than 30% males removed from a lek, no more than 8 females per lek
- Working in regions 4 and 6 this spring (2022) for captures.

### Rick Sojda – Precision Ag Pilot Project

- Benefit to bottom line and to pheasants
- Private land
- Potential for landscape effect
- Contacted John Deere dealers to identify potential farmer cooperators
  - PF had a national co-op agreement to do this project with John Deere
  - Work is taking place in various parts of the country for pheasants and quail
- Hold a professorship (unfunded) at MSU
- Landowner privacy is stressed with cooperators
- Poor yields – poor return on investments – opportunity for not planting those areas, would make more money.
  - 165 field maps
- With landowner permission, provide info to the local PF biologist
- Conclusion – identifies land for changing management; meeting with MSU VP for research to talk about project; need to find a way to continue; another tool in the toolbox – a lot of potential for it, but recognizes not a “silver bullet”
- Article in latest PF magazine – three farmers worked with are clarified

### Closing Topics

- Writing a formal letter: Debbie pull together a draft for sending to the council, send to chairman – France moved, Rick Sojda seconded. Carried
- Informal input into R3 working group via Ken Plourde – formal input opportunity expected in May. Trent says council would like to be invited into the R3 discussion. Jay Hanson asked if the council can connect to the stocking program for R3? If the council is involved with R3 suggestions, can the council offer input into the R3 stocking program? Ken Plourde felt would be an opportunity to provide comment on R3 in general and stocking topic in general;
  - France wondered about tradeoff between releasing pheasant costs and expansion of block management
  - Trent – council would not be offering endorsement or validation, but a seat at the R3 table, offering what council would like to see. General agreement would like to stay away from the topic of pheasant release component of R3. Offer alternative ways of R3 outside of put and take pheasant release.
  - Tom Keegan is supportive as long as doesn't conflict with statute or intent of the council's role.
  - **Motion** to offer input as a council. Debbie would help facilitate information from council members. Jeff Cornell moved to seek that formal invitation to provide input. Tom Keegan seconded. Carried.
- Pheasant survival research



- Opportunity to provide advice for how to evaluate R3 pheasant release program/population enhancement evaluation discussion.
  - Jeff Cornell – less thought was win win situation; training prisoner to raise pheasants, not training for getting out
  - Keegan – a lot depends on nebulous implementation plan. Putting into non-pheasant habitat vs where they already exist. Different outcomes to look at.
  - Sojda – actively promote scientific evaluation. Nexus between our program and R3 item
  - Keegan—Only focus on UGBEP release piece. Trust the department to develop experimental design.
  - Art – doesn't agree with pheasant release. The objective is important. Is it supplementing population or R3? Banding is first thing to get return on harvest.
  - Jay – do we want to even touch this?
  - Tom France – will come up at the legislature; may be wisdom in saying this is the director's program and steering clear
  - Tom Condon – why open door to this? Why replicate studies that have already been done? Good money after bad money.
  - Doug B – disagree with how going about the whole thing.
  - Trent – initial thought –we have a release program too, leveraging desire to do an augmentation study. The concern is that it's tricky with R3 working group, these things are alongside each other. If council gets involved, brings two programs together in the minds of the public. Historic negativity directed at the UGBEP, don't want that to happen as a result of being adjacent to the program.
  - Tom Keegan – if focus is on our release program that is the only piece to be involved in.
  - Hunter – the state land releases are pitched as purely R3. He is concerned about changing shape to something different (e.g., augmentation). PF would voice stronger opposition if this is where it is headed.

### **Next Meeting**

Council chose Malta for the meeting venue and tour. September 12 and 13.

- Conservation orgs are there and can look at different projects. Plan to invite Sen. Lang.
- What does council want to see on a tour? Open fields and habitat leases or partner projects.

**12:15 pm. Motion to adjourn.** Rick Sojda moved, Jay seconded. Motion carried.