

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Minutes & Meeting Summary
Mar 27-28, 2023**

Meeting Location: In person meeting at Montana Wild with Zoom participation.

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

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Maverick Cady, Brett Dorak, Debbie Hohler, Lena Havron, Anne Howes, Justin Hughes, Tana Kradolfer, Ken McDonald, Kiley Myers, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Deb O’Neill, Ken Plourde, Matt Strauch, Dustin Temple, Hunter VanDonsel, and Crystal White.

Monday, March 27

Trent Called the meeting to order at 9:00 am. Nearly 25 people were present at the meeting. Introductions were made, and people shared their backgrounds and interests. Trent went over the meeting highlights and minutes from the last meeting (Sept. 21 – 22, 2022).

Motion to accept the meetings as presented. Art Soukkala moved and Tom Keegan seconded. Motion carried.

Legislative/Department Updates

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

Ken’s updates:

- The Legislature has been relatively calm.
- HB 74 (remove requirement to release pheasants) currently in the House. The legislators asked several questions. Voted 13 – 5 in favor of the bill. Ken credited the Council for their work on this bill.
- WHIP aka Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program grants. \$2 million available each year. Program is due to sunset but a bill will lift the sunset. The bill proposes to use funding for additional weed management techniques. Typically, weed districts oversee the grants but didn’t have funding to administer the grants. The bill will allocate funding to the weed districts.
- Sen. Lang sponsored SB 280 about using commercial bird dogs. The bill came out of concerns out of Region 6. The bill would require a license for training bird dogs on birds not raised in captivity. The Fish and Wildlife Commission shall adopt rules, including the number of licenses available. The key will be in the rulemaking. The bill passed the Senate 49-1 and will go to the House Tuesday.

- SB 58 to raise the payment cap of Block Management participants. Very popular.
- HB 2 – Covers all agency budgets, personnel, and operations. Proposed shifting \$75,000 UGBEP to Pittman-Robertson to free up additional dollars for habitat projects.
- HB 5 –covers capital projects such as UGBEP. Funding proposed for UGBEP is: \$1.52 M license, \$388,000 bird planting, and \$600,000 PR for approximately \$2.5 M for the biennium.
- Migratory Bird Wetland Program – new bill to increase nonresident license amount for waterfowl. The Migratory Bird Wetland Program advisory program bill would add 2 members. At the hearing Ken reported that the sponsor wants the Mig. Bird Council to function like the UGBEP Council, where the members are effective and successful.
- The Division hired 3 new Habitat Specialists who will implement the Habitat Conservation Lease Program. They are station in regions 4, 6, and 7 and will also put out word about UGBEP and Mig Bird. A public access component is negotiated For the Habitat Conservation Lease Program.
- Habitat Conservation Leases update: Initial request for applications resulted in 6 or so applications for approximately 10,000 acres. The amount of dollars proposed to fund the projects did not seem enticing enough. Currently, FWP is revamping costs and will put out a supplemental EA with increased payments. The focus is on grasslands, riparian, and wetland habitats.
- New elk (revised), grizzly bear, and wolf plans are out to the public for comment as part of the MEPA/NEPA requirements.
- SB 525 (limit NR licenses). Deb O’Neill stated that FWP has not developed a position but will likely be informative.
- Migratory Bird Wetland Program is contributing dollars for PF positions. Tom Condon asked if FWP collaborates with Delta Waterfowl. Rick replied DW doesn’t have as much presence in Montana like North Dakota.

Update on Strategic Plan revision

We have waited until the passage of HB 74. It was noted that Rick Sodja made a lot of updates to the plan. There was a suggestion that the plan is brought up at each meeting.

- Jay Hanson recommended that an update on HB 74 be included in the plan.
- Art recommended inserting a complete land stewardship and distribution maps in the plan. Natural Heritage Program will likely have complete maps.
- Rick S. asked how will we know if the program is successful? How much habitat is needed (nesting cover, for example). He wants a quantitate assessment.
- Rick Northrup pointed out that the first version of the strategic plan had a regional focus. Program delivery is diverse across the state, due in part to UGB species home ranges, which can vary 80 acres to a couple or more square miles. Priority areas have been identified.
- Tom Keegan success can be measured through access.
- Rick S. added there needs to be an assessment of needs.
- Jeff Cornell addressed the program’s goal and asked how best to answer legislator’s questions. We need a way to measure results of the program long-term.
- Trent asked how might this program defend itself against a person asking about results on money spent.

- Rick S. mentioned the need to assess a developmental tool with metrics that are tracked through time. There can be reports to the council, legislature (acres, project types)

Public Comment

Tana Kradolfer – If measuring success in regions, it's been a total failure in R3, other than Canyon Ferry WMA (CFWMA). She suggested other measurements of success such as crow counts for metrics, hunter sign-in box, a place for hunters to make comments.

Council Discussion

Trent came in a day early to accompany Pat Howe on a tour of the Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area. They looked at McMasters and CFWMA, walking around and discussing possibilities for UGBEP projects.

Tom Keegan asked Hunter how Pheasants Forever measures their success? Hunter replied that Montana has lost 1.5 million acres of CRP since 2010. Thousands of acres of rangeland has been lost, there's extreme drought, weed expansion/range degradation. Success is striving to keep what we have intact. He feels we're doing great things across the state. Can measure the outcome with acres.

Art added that the number of landowner's inquiry about enrolling in the program. It will be key to look at interest.

Trent asked that the MCA referencing council is in the front of the strategic plan.

Under the section *Council Recommendations for Future Consideration*, Council requested the recommendation for developing quantitative tools be added.

General discussion on future edits/revisions. If the plan is general enough, we would not need to revise on a frequent basis. Doug Bonsell requested that the Strategic Plan is looked at once a year, especially since council memberships change over time.

Deb O'Neill read the purpose of the Strategic Plan. The general goals and vision won't likely change over time.

Trent confirmed that the last version of the plan reviewed by council Oct. 22, 2022. FWP can rework sections affected by the passage of HB 74. Trent asked Council to get final edits to Debbie by May 1.

Tom Keegan recommended that metrics/measurements should be identified in the annual work plans where they can be more formalized.

Discussion wrap-up. Trent stated we need to wrap up the plan and move it forward to the public. Any edits, please get to Debbie. Rick Sodja's recommendation for a quantitative tool will be in the future consideration section. Any further comments will be addressed at close of day.

Jeff asked a question about R4 working with Bureau of Reclamation. Matt will look into it.

Trent asked the habitat specialists to delineate “new” access and habitat acres.

UGBEP Fiscal reporting, updates and statuses

Debbie provided updates to the council. The presentation with all summaries are appended to this document.

UGBEP Regional Updates

Matt, Ken, and Justin presented their work plans on planned activities for this field season.

Discussion concerning methods for determining hunter pressure.

Council discussed concerns about hunter pressure on smaller project acres. Smaller acreages (~200) may have an increase in hunter numbers. How can we ensure that there is hunter satisfaction. If poor experience, we don’t want that to reflect on the program.

Art stated that this was the case in the Mission Valley. Trent pondered if it was possible to “meter” access or have sign-in rosters. Perhaps a call center? These are challenging thoughts.

Jay brought up Sen. Flower’s SB 388 that targets hunters who stay in Montana for 3 – 4 months. In 2022, Coffee Creek had a record 555 BMA slips returned. Most comments were positive. People have different perspectives of satisfaction.

Council will keep this concern on their radar.

Conservation Update – Deb O’Neill, Special Projects Manager

During the 2011 legislature, a bill passed in appropriations to acquire a conservation easement along the lower Yellowstone River. Price is approximately \$4 million for river access, habitat, and recreation projects. Initial acres proposed was 800 acres. Pheasants Forever contributed \$25,000.

Hunter VanDonsel, Maverick Cady and Crystal White – Pheasants Forever updates

Hunter thanked the department for its partnership. He gave an overview of PF staff’s presence in Montana. Currently, the Farm Bill Biologist (FBB) positions have had significant turnovers. Hunter has been in the process of filling these vacancies.

Updates:

- Hunter recently hired Stephanie Berry to work in Scobey as the FBB.
- He gave an overview of the BLM / PF / FWP partnership on the Yellowstone WMA and Pompeys Pillar.
- Showed the Montana CRP graph, showing the decrease of CRP over the years.
- The PF FBB priorities focus on CRP, conserving intact sagebrush-grasslands.
- Hunter remains active with NRCS’s Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPS) and other programs that emphasize Focused Conservation.
- Hunter discussed several funding sources:

- Bipartisan Infrastructure Law: USFWS was appropriated \$10 million per year for 5 years to partner to conserve sagebrush grasslands.
- North American Grasslands Conservation Act of 2022. This act establishes a grant program to provide landowners with voluntary economic incentives to conserve and restore grasslands.
- Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA): First introduced in the 117th Congress A projected 1.3 – 1.4 billion dollars each year to conserve habitat. The reintroduction of this bill continues to gain momentum in the 118th Congress.
- Hunter introduced 2 “new” FBB. Council met Maverick Cady, stationed in Chester, and Crystal White, stationed in Billings. Maverick and Crystal introduced themselves and described their work they are doing on the ground.

Block Management updates with Jason Kool

Jason thanked the Council for their time and continued commitment to the UGBEP.

He reviewed the various access agreements available, including the program's flagship, Block Management. In addition, there are:

- Public Access Land Agreements (PALA) Agreements that opens or improves access on isolated parcels of state or federal lands for hunting or fishing.
- Elk Hunting Access agreements (EHA) provide landowners with an elk license, permit, or combination thereof in exchange for allowing free public elk hunting access as described in a signed agreement approved by the commission. These permits and licenses are valid only on the landowner's property.

Jason shared an Acre/Payment graph showing a decrease in acreage over the years but an increase in payment (use). The primary reason a landowner leaves Block Management is from a land sale.

Jason provided an overview of how Block Management is funded. Council discussion followed regarding LandTrust.

Strategic Plan Discussion

- FWP staff will review plan regarding HB 74 discrepancies.
- Council has opportunity to put together any final edits and send to Debbie.
- Debbie to send status update May 1.
- Once edits are incorporated, plan will be sent to Council.
- Will need to add MCA on Council in front of plan.
- Quantitative / measuring tools will be added to recommendation page.
- Emphasis that plan is a living document.
- The plan can be worked through in 4 to 5 years but Council and the Department will touch base annually on the plan, updating objectives and strategies as needed.
- Maps need to be updated.

Art Soukkala: Annually need to bring up work plans. We need to document for the long term so we have a record of the plans. It's possible to waste a lot of time and money trying to quantify success. Success could be quantified by landowner retention.

Jeff Cornell: Supports the changes in the plan going forward.

Tom Condon: He agrees with Rick Sojda and to move the plan forward.

Doug Bonsell: He is not looking to change as the way it is written is fine.

Rick Sodja: He would like to see in the plan a periodic progress review. He recommends putting something in the plan that will lead to objectives. There also needs to be an implementation plan.

Tom Keegan: He feels what was discussed as a council is fine.

Jay Hanson: Need to be aware that Mother Nature influences "success." Acres seem logical to quantify success.

Trent Kleppen: We need to move forward with the plan with potential staff edits pertaining to HB 74.

Motion: Add the MCA involving council and the strategic plan in the front of the plan, any additional edits submitted to Debbie, FWP is to add or modify strategies and objectives that are influenced by the passage of HB 74, add quantifiable objectives to the "Future Considerations" section in the plan on current page 100.

Doug moved, there were no seconds to the motion.

Motion: With the provisions addressed earlier by Council members listed above, Doug moved, and Tom Keegan seconded. Motion passes.

Trent thanked everyone and noted that not everyone on Council is satisfied.

Tuesday, March 28.

Trent called the meeting to order at 8:30 am.

Council reflected upon discussion points from yesterday's meeting.

- Ken's updates were interesting.
- Finishing up the Strategic Plan.
- Program updates and statuses
- Habitat Specialists' presentations

- Council's discussion on recent changes with hunter pressure. Council will not address this issue now but will keep it in mind for future consideration.
- Hunter VanDonsel's updates
- Jason Kool's updates on Block Management
- Public comment period

Council discussion on Region 3 (R3) and expanding projects.

Historically, there were a handful of shelterbelt projects around Townsend, Three Fork to secure access. Results were mediocre as it's very dry country. Most work has been done on Canyon Ferry WMA by reclaiming some disturbed ground.

- Opportunity for UGBEP: The biologists are the first point of contact for potential projects. Note that access will always be an issue in Region 3.
- Dave Nikonow provided a summary of projects in Region 3. There was one project complete in 2022 where UGBEP funded the conifer removal to re-establish aspen clones. Prescribed fire occurred on Bull Sweats and Beaver Soup, which average 3,000 to 5,000 acres a year.
- Rick Sodja feels there is a "ton of opportunity" but there's not a high enough priority because of a lack of leadership to establish active UGBEP projects in Region 3. He would like to see an UGBEP biologist position in R3. Thinks one possibility is to share a biologist position between regions 3 and 5. He suggested inventorying all Fishing Access Sites in R3, define the limiting factors. FWP also needs to look at Yellowstone Valley, Madison Valley, and the Shields (Sheep Mountain to Judith) for UGBEP projects to enhance habitat for forest grouse and sharp-tailed grouse. There are overgrazing issues that need to be addressed. Rick S. said there were tens of thousands of acres at MSU Norris that would have sharp-tailed grouse opportunity. Dillon area may have opportunities for sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat renovation.
- Topic of over-grazing. Brett Dorak pointed out that FWP does weigh in with counterparts and asked Rick S. what he thought was a solution. Rick proposed inventorying grass condition and to get State agencies together and recognize the issues.
- Discussion on DNRC and FWP – relationships are more localized and individualized.
- Tom Keegan added that there are 2 ways to impact at a large scale. One is having a federal biologist with interests in T & E species where they can move the needle for upland game birds and other species.
- Rick Northrup added that the program can make an impact locally, but a global impact is beyond the scope of UGBEP.
- Jeff Cornell does not know R3 very well but has been in touch with conservationists and hunters. His contacts hunt mostly Canyon Ferry WMA. There are a lot of feral cats and skunks. Is there a way to do predator control? Regarding State lands throughout Region 3. If there is enough money in the budget, hire a specialist to contact lease holders on State Lands. Managers would know "favorable" lessees with areas needing work. Even if working with 1 lease holder is successful, it may have a spillover effect for other lessees. Boots on the ground is needed.
- Regarding predator control, Rick N. worked at CFWMA for 5 years. Always a pipeline of predators next to the river. There was an active predator control program but it was ineffective and expensive. Tom Keegan added it's a waste of time and money. With quality habitat,

predation will not have a huge impact. Brett also added that it's grounded in the scientific literature that predator control is expensive and ineffective.

- Doug commented that these comments tend to lay a lot of blame on ranchers and lumping all ranchers together is not constructive to building relationships. There will be fall out.
 - Every 2 – 3 years, State lands evaluate the conditions and will at books. Agencies are very responsible.
 - "Land prices are not in line with production. We don't want to kick off people who care about the land." He feels Council needs to "turn this around."
- Trent stated that we don't want to make Ag feel defensive. A lot of what we're talking about today is in policy, and council does not have a lot of sway.
- Pat Howe stated we all need to work together.

Discussion on Region 3 staffing:

- Tom Condon feels the program needs someone on the ground between R3 and R5, and Rick S. echoed another position is a great step in the right direction.
- Jay Hanson is feeling pessimistic about Region 3. The population growth is troubling, PF Gallatin has trouble spending money. 53% National Forest between landscape and peoples is a battle.
- Tana said there is always growth but likes how Rick S. outlined possibilities. Region 3 needs a dedicated biologist and a reason to have work done so hunters stay in R3.
- Rick mentioned the Fairweather FAS and feels FWP is not interested.
- Jay Hanson said the Wilsall area used to be great hunting for forest grouse. There is still great hunting. He does not recommend splitting a biologist between R3 and R5. Tana also does not support splitting a biologist between R3 and R5.

Trent: It's very rare for resident hunters in R6 to travel to other regions. He did come down early to tour with Pat Howe some of the projects in CFWMA area, including McMaster's. It was fairly snowy. Trent observed plenty of cover, not much (grain) food sources. About 1 to 1.5 miles across the road, there appears to be opportunities to improve nesting cover. There is Block nearby (Cox Ranch) and there are sharp-tails and huns in the area.

The Tongue River Pheasants Forever (TRPF) chapter invested dollars and leased BLM ground so they could have habitat controls on property. Justin added that the PF chapter acquired State Land and holds the lease. Property is idled from haying and grazing, and they planted food plots through an agreement with UGBEP. Opportunity - If Gallatin Chapter is interested, they could secure a lease and work with UGBEP.

Another example, Sandstone Chapter of PF planted 2,300 trees with Doug.

Jeff: We need to tread lightly when a state lease comes up as we don't want to push anyone out of a lease.

Public Comment

Tana Kradolfer: Thanked to Rick Sodja. What he listed is what she would have listed for concerns and solutions. FWP needs to give bird hunters a place to stay. She made the request to Council to recommend having a biologist in R3. Shields Valley has huns and sharp-tailed grouse, some BMA had the best hunting but now has become a dog park for Bozeman guys. Would like Arthun BMA rested. The landowner was approached with creative ideas. Suggested a sign-in to help manage hunters. Tana asked about sign-up bonuses such as USDA's SIPs (Signing Incentive Payment) and PIPs (Practice Incentive Payment).

Pat Howe: We have a large population here but also a lot of land. McMasters has 2 springs, sharp-tailed grouse lek, 4,000 acres, Bureau of Reclamation, and Block. Hunters are set for days. It would be good to put up a camera on the lek to monitor, also monitor buffaloberry near springs.

Canyon Ferry is a showcase for upland game bird hunting. Birds are on areas most guys don't go to. It would be good to get another person like PF Habitat Specialists. It's important to get grain food sources near winter cover. To get onto CFWMA need to drive in on access points. It would be good to have tickets to learn what was harvested so that we can have a better understanding of use and harvest.

Council follow up:

Trent: What is the feasibility of adding an FTE to R3.

Rick N. responded that the department asked for a wealth of FTE's this session, none have been approved (short answer). The long answer is that we have a model that works – PF and UGBEP. The main reason why we put positions in 4, 6, and 7 is because we can open up public opportunity on private lands.

Ken: Access is first component and where we need to focus. If we push our will on private landowners, it will backfire. Doug appreciates this answer.

Rick Sodja motioned Council's support to have a specialist in Region 3 with FWP to work on details. Jeff seconded. Motion carries.

Dave Nikonow, Cooperative Wildlife Biologist for NWTF and USFS (Missoula) gave a presentation on his work. He provided an overview of his projects, focusing on mountain grouse and wild turkey. He also provided an overview the Region 2 Strategic Plan, forest management on public lands, and focus areas and implementation. Target treatment areas include ponderosa pine savanna, Montana grasslands and shrublands, aspen and cottonwood forests. His work areas are apart of the Helena – Lewis & Clark National Forest (benefitting wild turkey), Lolo National Forest, and the Bitterroot National Forest.

Council discussion on forest management techniques that benefit forest health and wildlife species.

Trent and the Council thanked Dave for his efforts.

Council discussion on project caps.

Habitat Management Leases are capped because they can get pricey and they were intended to be small, idling habitat productive for game birds but still complementing ag operations. Doug pointed out that most HML cooperators are not doing it for the money. Some cooperators will idle ground regardless of projects/money.

Jay Hanson added that the specialists are salesmen, and it's okay to break the bank.

**Next Council meeting dates and logistics
September 18 and 19 in Baker**

Action Items

- Move DNRC discussion to fall meeting
- Motion for R3 to utilize a full time habitat specialist
- Update on the Strategic Plan
- Update on doing a statewide inventory item of FAS

Council Comments

- Jeff Cornell – Looking forward to Baker
- Tom Condon – Thanked everyone, lots of items addressed
- Doug Bonsell – “Doing a bang-up job”
- Rick Sodja – People are doing a great job
- Tom Keegan – “Nothing to add”
- Jay Hanson – “Nothing to add”
- Art Soukkala – “Nothing to add”
- Trent Kleppen – Thanked everyone for their efforts and expressed his gratitude to all who work with UGBEP.

Motion to adjourn, Rick Sodja moved and Art Soukkala seconded. Motion carried.