

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC
Meeting Minutes & Meeting Summary -- Draft
Mar 11-12, 2024**

Meeting Location: In person meeting at FWP Montana Wild, 2668 Broadwater Ave, Helena, MT 59602 with Zoom participation.

Note: The audio quality on Zoom was poor on Monday.

All presentations are located on UGBEP's web page:

<https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/commission-councils-committees/upland-game-bird-enhancement-advisory-council>

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Brandon Moss, Tom Condon, Jeff Cornell, Rep. Tom France, Jay Hanson, Sen. Steve Hinebauch, Scott Kanning, Tom Keegan, Trent Kleppen, Kerry O'Connell, and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Stephanie Berry, Maverick Cady, Ben Deeble, Brett Dorak, Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes, Bob Jeffrey, Jason Kool, Ken McDonald, Shaun McCabe, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Deb O'Neill, Sara Pearce, Ken Plourde, Rick Sojda, Matt Strauch, Cole Stumpf, Scott Thompson, Garrett Titus, Hunter VanDonsel, and Crystal White.

Monday, March 11

Trent called the meeting to order at 8:55 am. The meeting was delayed because of technical difficulties with Zoom. Trent went over the agenda and informed the public may comment as we go through the agenda and at the public comment period at 4:30 today.

Thirty-four (34) people were present at the 2-day meeting. Introductions were made, and people shared their backgrounds and interests. We welcomed Kerry O'Connell, UGB hunter and Region 3 representative, to her first council meeting.

Trent reviewed the meeting minutes from Baker (9/18-19/2023).

Motion to accept the minutes as presented. Sen. Hinebauch moved; Rep. France seconded to approve. Motion carried.

1. Division/Department update

Ken said it's been fairly quiet since the legislative session ended.

- FWP received a request to delay the upland game bird (UGB) regs season setting until February in order to give greater discussions on nonresident (NR) season dates, and dog training. FWP held 2 informational public meetings in Scobey and Glendive; comments

were received online.

- The FW Commission adopted the Upland Game Bird and Bird Dog Training seasons as proposed by the department with an amendment to shift the nonresident bird dog training starting date from August 15 to Sept. 1. They also gave contingency approval to closing sage grouse hunting in management zone 3 if the spring lek counts fall below 45% of long term average, which would be the third consecutive year of doing so.
- Commission approved the request to transplant up to 40 sage grouse to Alberta between 2024-2026.
- Budget and bills prep. Debbie and regions have asked for increases in operations budget.
- No new bills proposed for UGBEP.

General discussion on Ken's updates.

UGBEP History

Rick N: Welcomed the Council and provided a history of the UGBEP, including legislative audits, and the Council's role. Council continues to be effective about advancing the program, and your work is very much appreciated.

Council Protocol

With regard to the proposed amendments to dog training and NR UGB season changes, Trent recommended that the Council develop "Operational Guidelines" when participating in the Commission or legislature. Determine best way to proceed as a council. Majority rule? Unanimous support/opposition? He observed that referring to the body as the "Upland Game Bird Council" is a bit misleading because it likely infers the Council is subject to all aspects of upland game birds, including regulations, not just the UGBEP.

- Trent reached out to each Council member to get their input on the 2 amendments on NR hunting and dog training. There was unanimous consent to comment on the dog training. For NR hunting, council did not reach full consensus.
- A question to Ken on how best to handle public pressure to respond as a Council? Ken asked Trent how the Council wants to respond? Trent is asking for thoughts on process and queried Council members.

Sen. Hinebauch: There should be consensus; need to learn how to talk to different groups. He appreciates this conversation.

Jeff C: He doesn't feel Council can take a position unless it's a clear majority. If writing a letter, need to include percentage of members in support or not if writing on behalf of Council.

Jay: Agrees with Jeff. Council needs time to figure things out. Council's response to FW Commission should include percentage and a summary of comments. A "no" voice deserves as much recognition as a "yes." Likely, not always a consensus and assumed FWP would appreciate hearing from the Council.

Trent: May need guidelines or bylaws.

Art: For Council business, there is need to take a stand on items close to UGBEP. Some items not directly tied to UGBEP. It's better to have more consensus.

Doug: There are regional differences, need to listen to both sides.

Rep. France: Habitat is more in Council's purview versus hunting management. The Program is a creation of the legislature, and feels Council needs to be careful with hunting regulations. Strong consensus is very important and need a chance to deliberate in person. He appreciates Trent's effort to find consensus. He is sensitive to Council members' time.

Kerry: It's a complex issue. "Consensus" can be a fallacy. The more important part is the process. She doesn't feel the "simple majority" is where the Council should be. Even with a "no" vote, Council needs to support that vote.

Brandon: Given the situation, he appreciated how everything was handled. He acknowledges differences across the regions. He's not comfortable with a "slim" majority.

Tom C: He agrees with Rep. France. The request for input came of short notice. Maybe with more time, it may have worked better.

Trent: Appreciates the Council's time. It would be good to write a letter of support/appreciation to the Commission and Dustin Temple.

Trent requested the following item to be placed on the fall agenda:
Operational Guidelines – discussion and development.

At this time, Tom Condon requested Trent be his proxy and read comments he had specific to Big Sky Upland Bird Association's (BSUBA) public comment on the UGBEP Strategic Plan.

1. Describe 5 or 10-year goals that targeted hunter satisfaction.
2. Project accomplishments as they relate to hunter-days.
3. Qualitative hunter assessment/satisfaction with habitat quality on UGBEP projects.

Follow up discussions:

Rick: If we are enrolling landowners with quality projects with quality access, there's not a lot to assess. Staff only have so much time—do we take time away on the ground for enrolling projects to assess? Have we enhanced harvest/satisfaction? An assessment would be ideal but isn't realistic. Whenever there are changes in economies (gas prices, for example), and if we can't show a relationship in hunter use and project enrollments, would people conclude UGBEP is a failure?

Trent: If the Program was able to add more staff, it would require legislative action. Ken confirmed it would. Regarding research, money to do research could come out of UGBEP funding.

Tom K: He agrees with Rick's assessment. Estimating harvest for UGB is challenging and expensive to get a high confidence interval. It's a serious detriment to time.

Kerry: She prefers more time for staff to do habitat work. It's very hard to find metrics that are practical to measure and that are meaningful. Additionally, can make statistics say whatever we want.

Trent: To increase capacity of UGBEP, it needs to be justified. Is there a way the program can show examples in order to justify certain asks.

Kerry: She likes to get out with her dog even though no bird harvest. It's relative. Quality is about opinion. Hunter-day is a solid metric to use.

Art: Hunter feedback—is there a way to close that loop? How best to reinforce that?

Scott K: Could we utilize phone surveys to include number of days, number of birds on OF projects?

Ken: It's been hard to get too specific, even to the county level.

Send targeted notes to UGB license holders? OnX, or some other 3rd party software, may have some metrics.

Rep. France: He's not sure hunters can measure effectiveness of program. There are too many variables. He is interested in measuring projects that are helping wildlife and UGB.

Ken P: We do projects that benefit UGB, and those practices are cited in the literature. We could collect data but why reinvent the wheel? Staff could spend time doing research or call a landowner. We know these practices work.

Trent is supportive of instant hunter analysis (QR codes) and Survey Monkey comments.

Some drawbacks were discussed, including hesitancy to divulge successful bird hunting. Additional comments on topics outside a survey can create noise. The benefit of survey analyses (time and resources) have to be worth the costs.

Ben Deeble recommended a sign-in box on park and walk projects. We could ask about hunters' observations, successes, and may gain a sense of hunter-days.

Rick S: He is requesting quantifying habitat, not hunter metrics.

4. Lack of enhanced program capacity in Regions 1, 2, 3, and 5.

R5 has a focus area with cooperative agreements. The big issue in R5 is private ground. If FWP were to put another person in R5, would we expand capacity? Likely not. If FWP were to put a new person on the ground, the better location would be Regions 6/7 because that area is proven. Getting an FTE requires legislature, governor, and director's office approval. Partner positions are the better model.

Rep France noted that if we want to expand capacity to build the program, we need money. Asking for FTE is a big ask right now. \$1M for Roosters for Recruitment, perhaps we can ask for that money or perhaps increase fees. NGOs could help with fee increases.

Jay noted that it's difficult to add projects around Lewistown. Similarly, it would be difficult to add projects around Bozeman. It's better to focus on eastern 2/3rds of the State. Dave Nikonow has elevated management of turkeys and mountain grouse. His work helps show how valuable leveraged positions can be for program delivery.

Ken offered a department response to the discussion: FTEs in current locations (R4, R6, and R7) is strategic, legitimate, and valid. The program needs to consider where we get the bang for the buck.

Ben Deeble: Western Montana has world class mountain grouse hunting. Perhaps maps with federally-funded enhancement activities could be included in the UGBEP Access Guide. Wisconsin has maps of parking areas near enhanced areas for ruffed grouse.

Garrett commented that it gets harder for some people to climb hills in search of mountain grouse. UGBEP could provide that information.

5. There is always some confusion with finances. Income should be transparent over a 10-year period. Some people do not have a complete understanding of finances and whether they are sustainable. Have funds been committed?

Trent will visit with the council members that are on Zoom to ensure they can hear okay. For now, Trent will table this topic.

UGBEP Fiscal report and program updates presentation (Debbie).

See link provided on P. 1 to view presentation.

- Review biennium budget, available balance, and current obligations.
- Partner contracts updates
- FY 24 approved proposals - enrollment summary
- VPA-HIP Open Fields enrollment summary

Lunch: 12:30

Regional updates and spring workplans: Matt, Ken, and Justin

See link provided on P. 1 to view presentations.

Updates to Council (3): (Hohler)

1. DNRC/FWP MOU meeting

Debbie and Rick met with the following DNRC staff:

- Kelly Motichka, Ag & Grazing Bureau Chief
- Parker Osterloh, Land Management Section Supervisor
- Erik Eneboe, Conrad Unit Manager

Discussion included identifying ways that UGBEP can be value-added to DNRC and DNRC lessees to conserve upland game bird habitat on State Trust Lands. Our discussions focused on:

- An overview of the UGBEP and project types, including current projects on State lands.
- Overview of DNRC ag and grazing leases to gain a better understanding of DNRC operations.
- Erik underscored that the key to success for UGBEP to work with lessees comes from the local level, fostering those relationships and locating willing lessees. The economic benefits are realized.
- Outreach. The agencies discussed 2 options to expand program information to lessees. Kelly will have internal discussions with staff to identify ways to promote UGBEP. She also requested contact information for Justin, in particular, who will be invited to a DNRC training seminar in eastern Montana held later this spring.

Rep. France conveyed to council and staff that he has begun discussion with Shawn Lewis, DNRC District Conservationist, to create a range improvement plan. He has interest from Stockgrowers. A partnership would benefit permittees and birds. Council and the department will continue to have updates on interactions with DNRC.

2. Exploring projects opportunities on statewide FAS

Debbie queried the State's Fishing Access Sites to determine if any FAS have agricultural leases where UGBEP could do work. Only 1 FAS in Region 5 has a 50-acre hay lease.

Further discussion with R5 staff identified possible FAS that may benefit from enhancement work:

Selkirk FAS (in-between Harlowton and White Sulphur Springs). Along the Musselshell. FAS is 260 acres and there is potential UGB habitat potential. Currently, fields are barren, likely due to effects of drought. There are no weapon restrictions.

Capt. Clark FAS (45 NE of Billings). 149 acres and along the Yellowstone. This FAS is known to have birds.

Bratten FAS (Less than 10 miles W of Reed Point) ~93 acres and along the Yellowstone. May have

potential and worth a visit.

3. Region 3 updates

Debbie is attending an R3 biologist meeting in April to provide an overview of the program and begin discussions on ways UGBEP can be implemented in R3.

Pheasants Forever partner update and introductions. (Hunter VanDonsel & PF Farm Bill Biologists). See link provided on P. 1 to view presentation.

Pheasant Forever staff attending the meeting were:

- Hunter VanDonsel, Montana State Coordinator
- Maverick Cady, Chester (Region 4)
- Crystal White, Billings (Region 5)
- Cole Stumpf, Hysham (Region 5)
- Stephanie Berry, Scobey (Region 6)
- Shaun McCabe, Chinook (Region 6)

For fall Council meeting, a report summarizing accomplishments will be shared.

4:00 Public Comment. Comments were received throughout the meeting.

Closing comments and wrap-up.

Council will have a motion on the public comment on the Strategic Plan tomorrow.

Rep. France recommended inviting other people on the Council tours. For example, Stockgrowers, other legislators, or commissioners. UGBEP projects help build great relationships between FWP and landowners/cooperators. This should be emphasized.

Tuesday, March 12

Trent began the meeting at 8:30.

Discussions began with public comment on the strategic plan and the department's response. The report will summarize comments with department responses. The report will address comments that will be arranged in 3 levels:

- Council's recommended revisions
- Overall comments on Strategic Plan
- Comments outside the purview of the UGBEP

Report will be due to Council April 15. Council will respond by the end of April.

Regarding several comments on overuse of land, Trent advised it is important for the program to retain the respect of landowners. Will revisit public comments later in the day so Council can get back to agenda.

Block Management Program update from Jason Kool

See link provided on P. 1 to view presentation.

Update on National Wild Turkey Federation cooperative position activities from Dave Nikonow.

See link provided on P. 1 to view presentation.

Trent thanked Jason and Dave for their updates. Dave has accepted a new position with NWTF as a District Biologist for Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. On behalf of the Council, Trent thanks Dave for his excellent work expanding the program's presence in western Montana.

USFS, NWTF, and FWP are seeking to fill the vacant position. Dave emphasized that it's important to build relationships across agencies, but it does take time. This will be an important consideration.

Council requested an update on filling the position at the fall meeting.

Presentation on UGBEP pilot projects – Ken Plourde and Justin Hughes

See link provided on P. 1 to view presentation.

Trent stated that it's important for UGBEP to keep pace with NRCS's programs.

Hunter agreed that the project type expansion is beneficial. The PF Team can help promote projects.

Doug, from the perspective of the Conservation Board, said it's great to see collaboration. It's good when agencies are on the same page.

Rick: it's exciting to see landowners trying new technologies/ We're advancing to the next level of farming technology.

Motion to recommend the 5 Pilot Projects to become permanent project types. Jeff Cornell moved; Doug Bonsell seconded to approve. Motion carried.

Strategic Plan discussion (continued)

Written responses from the department by April 15.

Council will respond in a weeks' time and will let Debbie know if a Zoom meeting needs to be set up. Once Council reviews responses, they will be posted on the website.

Discussion on Program Capacity

Rep. France: UGBEP funding is set by statute. Revenue is stagnant but costs have gone up. The

Program is unable to deliver more.

Council requested FWP to identify ways to expand the program. In particular, may consider raising license revenues. These actions could be a prelude to legislative action. Rep. France wants the actions(s) to be a bipartisan bill.

Motion to recommend the Department examine growing the UGBEP significantly as part of the 10-year strategy and report back to Council at the fall meeting. Rep. France moved; Kerry O'Connell seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

Discussion followed.

Adding money to the program by demonstrating need. We could ask the department for additional funding.

Sen. Hinebauch: If there's more bird hunting, it pays for itself.

Scott K: There's a growing call to change license fees. Now is a perfect time to explore funding UGBEP. Also consider, what if licenses tank?

Doug: Need to be careful on how much is asked for.

Logistics for fall 2024 meeting and council membership needs.

Fall Meeting discussion: Region 4, 5, or 1? Trent will discuss with council members and will let Debbie know.

Jeff Cornell will be rotating off the Council but will stay on if the Council meeting is in Region 4. He shared his observations extremely worthwhile experiences while on the Council. The Council is made up of people who are passionate about birds. Very impressive to have 2 active legislators on the Council.

Action/Agenda items:

- The department to continue to provide Council with updates on interactions with DNRC.
- Provide the Council with a summary of the PF Montana Team's accomplishments (as submitted in the quarterly or annual reporting).
- Council to discuss and develop "Operational Guidelines" when participating in the Commission or legislature.
- The department to provide Council with updates on interactions with DNRC.
- Council requested an update on filling the NWTF/USFS position at the fall meeting.
- Department to examine growing the UGBEP significantly as part of the 10-year strategy and report back to Council at the fall meeting.

Chairman's closing remarks.

Trent thanked everyone—we have a great Council with great connections to stakeholders. Please think of additional agenda items and let him know.

Motion to adjourn the meeting. Sen. Hinebauch moved; Doug Bonsell seconded. Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned at 12:10 pm.