



**Region 7 CAC – Winter Meeting Notes
December 13, 2023**

Present: FWP - Mike Backes, Todd Anderson, Brett Dorak, Brian Burky, Marla Prell, Erin O'Connor, Miles Muscha and Vanessa Zeitner

CAC - Ed Joiner, Ed Bukoskey, Andy Wright, Glenn Heitz, Liz McFarland, George Luther and Megan McKeighan

Marla began the meeting by thanking everyone for coming. Brad is out sick so we will do our best to conduct the meeting in his absence. She asked that everyone introduce themselves since it's been a while since we've seen some folks. Marla then mentioned that we will be delving into terms and vacancies within this group after the start of the new year. If anyone knows of someone who may be interested in our CAC or has a suggestion, please let us know.

Parks & Outdoor Rec Update

Brian said that visitation numbers at R7 Parks are trending up. They're still down a bit from the peak we saw during Covid but overall are up from 2018-2020 figures. Makoshika has a new yurt; it is furnished, in a neat location with an incredible view and will be available for rent in the spring. We are working on an archery range upgrade at Makoshika. This is exciting for the community. There is some grant possibilities for additional funding for this upgrade that are being looked into. Makoshika has lots of programming for people of all ages and interests.

Tongue River Reservoir State Park use is trending up. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe has had a natural resource field station at the park the last few summers which has been successful and includes students from Chief Dull Knife College. There is currently an EA on installing three cabins at the park that is out for public review. These cabins will be located down by the marina.

Staff is currently working on a burn program at Rosebud Battlefield State park. This is a bit tricky as we have to be careful of cultural resources. It is believed that there may be a burial site of cavalry members within the park; this is currently being looked into. Cadaver dogs have been used and have indicated a couple different possibilities.

Medicine Rocks State Park has some trail work planned to accommodate future Night Sky programs and viewing.

Pirogue Island State Park recently suffered considerable vandalism. A latrine was damaged, fencing was torn down and shoved into the latrine hole, and other damage was caused; an investigation is ongoing.

Use is up at the region's Fishing Access Sites. There has been a few incidents of minor vandalism issues, including a recent issue with trash at East Rosebud.

Block Management has had a successful year. Our program is up eight new contracts which amounted to 41,000 acres. In total we have 2,070,000 acres available for hunting access. The region also has a couple Elk Hunting Access agreements that opened up an additional 45,000 acres.

Exciting news for the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition – the 328-acre Wildcat North purchase has been approved. This group toured the Wildcat South property last year. It has been purchased by MOLF and we are optimistic that we will be involved with that property in the future. Additionally, there are three or four other properties we've been looking at. These may or may not work out, but we are performing due diligence. Acquiring land is very complex and time consuming.

Ed Bukoskey noted that we should add some cameras at Pirogue and some of these other places that are experiencing vandalism. Miles noted that when the vandalism occurred at Pirogue Island there was cameras but unfortunately, we couldn't get anything off them due to shiny headlights obscuring the view. Todd added that they are working on leads.

Liz noted that the Tailwater campground at Tongue River Reservoir is very nice; she was recently there, and it seems refreshed and kept up quite nicely. She added that it is a very enticing place to visit.

Wildlife Update

Brett briefly discussed the EA process for the Wildcat purchase; he received approximately 300 comments. The Land Board approved the purchase so are now in the final stages of acquiring that property.

Region 7 was a CWD priority area this year. We've had 18 positives this year as of today's meeting, one of which was on the Wildcat North property. Prevalence is highest in whitetail. Most detections were in the Broadus area, we did have our first detection in HD 703. There was another positive just outside Colstrip and we also had our first detection on Fort Keogh. We will look at management plans and what we do moving forward once all results are back as there may be a few trickling in yet from the end of season and muzzleloader season. The region submitted 100 roadkill samples, of which all have been negative. There was a second symptomatic mule deer in Baker that was euthanized this summer. The Wildlife staff and Marla worked together this fall to put on some CWD training and outreach days in Colstrip, Miles City and Baker. There is a possibility of holding one in Broadus next year.

Numerous check stations were conducted throughout the region this fall. Harvest in general was down for deer, at to above average for upland game birds, and antelope harvest was up a bit. Compared to last year weather was nice except for the end of October and presented lots of good opportunities for folks to get out.

We are currently in the winter chase season for lions; harvest is at three, two of which were from the fall season. Our fall bear season ended at 13, ten of which were males. There is lots of turkeys out there! Regarding game damage, we have had a few complaints already. If the weather takes a turn, that number will surely increase.

The Fish & Wildlife Commission is meeting tomorrow. Our region proposed instituting two moose licenses, which was scaled back to one with a range of 1-2 animals. Overall, comment received supports having this season. There has been lots of moose observations the last few years, which seems like it's becoming more of a residential population and less transient animals than in the past. There is four amendments proposed from the Commission. Two for HD 700 elk permits, one from Commissioner Tabor and one from Commissioner Cebull, both are to increase the permits from 200 to 250 for the 700-20 and to increase the 700-21 from 660 to 800. There is an amendment from Commissioner Tabor to prohibit antlerless mule deer harvest on public land and private lands enrolled in Block Management.

The fourth amendment is from Commissioner Lane to divide the Region by the Yellowstone River to a north and south unit for antelope with separate either-sex and doe/fawn licenses.

Liz asked the CAC members how they feel about how the Commission is being run in terms of amendments and commenting and determining agendas. She feels that it doesn't seem science-based and instead seems very political. She is uncertain what happens with comments going into the portal in the timeframe that the Commission sets up. You take time to send in comments and you don't know where they go or if they've even been received. Adding amendments is confusing and conflicting. It's difficult to find time to follow amendments when they happen daily. The timeframes on last minute amendments are absurd. This seems like a failure of public process and doesn't incorporate principles of good public comment opportunities. Commissioners are making public process reprehensible. Is the current process for public feedback the kind of process this CAC wants to support? Does anyone have time to read and digest amendments?

George stated that he has gotten questions from members of the public wanting to know how to get comments on amendments in on time. He feels the timeline was extremely short on some of the amendments. He would like to know why we here are getting amendments from Commissioners in other regions. He feels there needs to be a larger window and the public needs more info on what is driving the amendment. We all know about the social and political sides of it. He feels the Commission should have its own internal rules concerning timelines for amendments. If an amendment is not within a certain timeframe, it needs to wait until the next meeting. The last Director said they wanted more involvement from CAC's. This CAC wasn't given enough time to digest, respond and provide a sound response rather than a knee-jerk one.

Brett continued the Wildlife Update by giving a brief update on his Division's six-month plan. He has been working with Marla to put out "Mule Deer Mondays" on Facebook to get education out to the public via social media. There has proven to be good interest in this and its included biological and management facts on mule deer.

The Elk Management Plan has been updated and is out on our website. This is a Department management plan and doesn't need Commission involvement. Formulation of this plan was extensive and had a lot of public involvement. The goal is for this plan to be in place for 15 years and updated every five years as needed.

Brett noted that the upland game bird and turkey seasons and regulations topic has been pulled from the Commission agenda for the upcoming meeting and will be up in February instead. We will be hosting public meetings for this in early January

Brett's last note was that we have a new Wildlife Biologist in Sidney; her name is Cory Allred.

POR Maintenance Update

Miles presented an update on Jamie Hould's behalf. He began by saying we have a seasonal major maintenance position out of this office that will start in January. This position has been vacant since March, so he is very excited to have someone coming on board. The headquarters recently conducted a facilities condition inventory with Helena staff, in which we identified some projects for the office. This includes new flooring in the entrance and some offices, interior painting, changing hardware on interior doors to be ADA compliant, and some lighting upgrades.

There is some ongoing major maintenance at FAS's and parks. One example is Gartside FAS where we're working on a spillway repair to the dam; this was completed this fall. We're also working on the Stipek boat ramp, rip rapping that before the river takes it away. We lost the Black Bridge FAS road to the river again, so are going to be rerouting that road. Fallon Bridge is a site we share with BLM; we're looking to do some parking improvements and to add a latrine there. The new water system at Intake was put in place this fall, and it will be connected to the new well next spring. Makoshika has two footbridges that are in need of replacement.

We operate on a biannual major maintenance planning schedule and as such, just put in requests for the 2025 legislative year. The focus of those requests is on repairs and maintenance of existing infrastructure. Miles and Jamie recently finished our region's annual noxious weed report. This is a big lift as it is a joint task with Maintenance and Wildlife. Miles stated that this year was the most amount of spraying since he's been here. We also have County weed spraying contracts which work out well. Miles noted the burn on Rosebud Battlefield which Brian mentioned; this has been long time coming. Weed spraying will be coordinated there immediately afterwards. There is a contractor doing the spraying at Isaac Homestead WMA.

This time of year, he spends working on equipment in the shop.

Enforcement Update

Todd began by advising that we have a new warden in Baker, Oliver Gulig. He will be going to MLEA in January. The Forsyth district is vacant as of last week after Logan Moore transferred to a different region. Todd is hearing interest from potential internal transfers to fill that district. He and his staff have gotten back to doing traditional game warden work here, which is great. In terms of violations, this fall was the slowest one he's seen in a long time. He believes this is partly due to no muley doe tags. It was a great antelope season with a good opener, nice weather, and happy folks. He's never seen as many nonresident bird hunters as this year. He kept track of 13 different states that he saw just here in the office. This is a big change for us - more bird hunters were checked than big game hunters in a lot of instances. He and his crew have been hearing some complaints about nonresident working their dogs in the Baker and Plevna country. There is a ton of nonresident waterfowl hunters here and coming through the area as well. He believe this is at least partly because we don't have restrictions on nonresidents compared to the Dakotas. They've made cases on massive over-limits of birds. He's also never seen this many turkeys. Damage issues that we've seen have been handled with hunting which is the best scenario.

Enforcement had a successful out of state trip to PA, WV, KY and WI. Sergeant Feddes and wardens from Region 1 and Region 5 went on this trip. Some of the charges will be felonies. They ended up seizing numerous animals. There is another trip coming up to MN for follow up cases.

Hunters using camera crews for social media-type stuff has become a thing. This is troublesome as socializing hunts will have an effect on people coming here and their expectations, and he feels it sets unrealistic expectations.

Currently, his crew is gearing up for trapping season. There is a new law where some nonresidents can trap in MT; this is a huge change. He think the bobcat market may be stronger this year. It's yet to be seen if there are conflicts with nonresidents and residents competing for trapping locations.

Currently, there is tons of license fraud investigations occurring. Most out of state trips are tied to this type of investigations.

We are working with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and Kqyn Kuka on bear-proof garbage cans. We're also training tribal folks on how to trap their own bears.

Archery season was quiet here – elk were dispersed due to good habitat.

Glenn asked if Enforcement had any problems with drones. Todd replied yes but issues are difficult to enforce. Some people are droning their hunts for social media purposes which poses all sorts of issues.

Fisheries Update

Mike began by remarking that this is the second year of open fish passage at Intake. Pallid sturgeon use of the bypass channel and migrations upstream has exceeded expectations. Mike worked 17 days straight in June babysitting telemetered pallid sturgeon. There was a female pallid that went up the Powder River and then two more that came through Intake. One went up the Tongue, another up the Yellowstone to Cartersville Dam at Forsyth. The one at Forsyth hadn't spawned when captured and inspected; the day after being inspected it went downstream and up the Tongue and spawned there. The one in the Powder spawned. Mike's crew tracked six other pallids in the Powder River that kept them very busy tracking and flying. The farthest one tracked in the Powder River went three river miles into WY.

We picked up a record number of larvae this year. However, it's difficult to visually tell the difference between the two types of sturgeon and paddlefish larvae; larvae are at a lab waiting genetic identification. All in all, this was a tremendously successful year.

We are working on paddlefish regulations now. There are potential big changes coming to paddlefish; we need to coordinate with Region 6 regarding the ability to make changes to all three paddlefish options or simply keep changes centric to the Yellowstone River. We will also coordinate changes with North Dakota. Public meetings and scoping will be conducted in the spring. These proposed changes are for the 2025-26 fishing season. We will propose expanding catch and release opportunities and compressing where anglers can fish on the Yellowstone River. Additional changes will be proposed regarding mandatory harvest reporting.

During the 2023 paddlefish season, 78 fish were caught at Intake, 13% of overall harvest; comparatively before the Intake Bypass Channel, on average 80% of the paddlefish were caught at Intake FAS. We experienced a really late spring rise and low river flow for first three weeks of season, which resulted in the majority of paddlefish being caught at Sidney Bridge. These proposed regulation changes are needed because the fishery is widely dispersed throughout the Yellowstone River rather than the concentrated fishery at Intake Dam that existed before the Intake Bypass Channel was completed. In 2023, the percentage of paddlefish harvest by location were: 21% Powder River confluence, 11% Tongue River confluence, 13% Intake, and 55% from the Sidney area.

Comm Ed Update

Marla reported that statewide CommEd has been working on more efforts to increase landowner appreciation and hunter ethics. She noted the campaign "It's Up to Us. Respect Access. Protect the Hunt", includes billboards, posters, can koozies and stickers, sharing some of the last two with CAC members. There is a portal on FWP's website called "Thank a Landowner" where hunters can write a private message that will go directly to the landowner. Finally, the review of the Hunter/Bowhunter Ed programs has focused intently on hunter ethics and respect for landowners.

The other big item right now is implementing a return to a Hunter and Bowhunter Education in-person field day requirement beginning Jan. 1, 2024. It was the director's decision following input from a committee of instructors and citizens to require an in-person field day for youths ages 12-17. Adults will not be required to take a field day. Marla attended a CommEd meeting in Lewistown recently where they worked on a model for a field day for online students that emphasizes safe gun handling and hunter ethics. The big challenge moving forward will be to recruit and train enough instructors to meet this mandate.

Roundtable Discussion

Ed Joiner said there is lots of coyotes and this may hurt deer populations. He has heard concerns about feral hogs from Canada; he thinks there should be a shoot-on-sight policy. Todd noted if folks have concerns, they should call the Department of Livestock as they are the lead on hogs and are taking it very seriously.

Ed added that he feels like communication about not shooting mule deer does on an A tag wasn't great. He put it on his Facebook and had lots of engagement. He thinks responsible hunters were responsible enough not to do so due to obvious population numbers, but some did it anyway. Elk numbers were up in his area, especially on private property where you can't hunt them.

Megan noted that regarding CAC membership, she may be able to recruit someone from Walleyes Unlimited. She believe there may be an increase in drone footage for photography and advocacy from anti-hunting/trapping groups. She is always an advocate for increasing education in the community and getting young people engaged in the outdoors.

Glenn asked about tagged fish out of Sacajawea and whether we see any here. Mike replied that we put a lot of tags in fish in the river here that get caught there but doesn't recall ND fish being caught here.

George noted that he got out to hunt quite a bit. He had some conversations with outfitters. He also sits on the urban deer committee at Colstrip; he's not sure what harvest is there so far. The mule deer buck with the arrow in its neck in town there was controversial. He noticed a trend of nonresidents seeming confused on trespassing and thinking if property isn't posted its open access, as is the case in other states. People seem to not know what they can and can't do when entering private property but isn't sure what the answer is. People have asked him why they have to have an Elk B tag in 700 and why they couldn't shoot a cow on their General tag. He had heard more reports of lions in certain areas. This seems credible to him as deer aren't staying in some areas. He suggested to some outfitters that they may need to cut their numbers to accommodate current mule deer numbers. Some are agreeing and recognizing the issue. Some people are coming into the state and buying rights to hunt. He feels like we have the proper number of Enforcement personnel on board and is glad to see Todd's crew is fully staff. He believes we will be looking at more wind farm development in the area.

Andy that it was a long hunting season for him. Deer numbers seem low in his area. Elk numbers seemed like less than normal in the Custer National Forest around Ekalaka. He noted that it seems like there's lots of aircraft in his area. The county predator board pays someone to fly. He feels this is hard during hunting season because that person spooks deer while they're shooting coyotes. He

heard about a lot of folks being behind closed gates on the Custer National Forest. There has been tons of nonresident bird hunters in his area. Whitetail numbers seem like they're coming up.

Ed Bukoskey notes that mule deer numbers are low and bird numbers are crazy high. He has trapped lots of coons. Antelope numbers are also high. He recently had a lion close to his property.

Liz stated that she reiterates what others have said. Hunting season had lots of big camps in her area, seemed like mostly nonresidents. It's interesting to her how far people travel to come out here. Deer numbers are down, but there's lots of elk and they seem to be doing well. She didn't see people out during the archery season like usual. She and her husband manage a property for a nonresident owner who happens to be an older widowed lady. They were approached this fall by an archery hunter for access to this property; he was very pushy and unhappy with their answer. They came to find out that this individual then looked up the owner and showed up at her door to ask for access. The encounter wasn't good for a variety of reasons and the lady had a hard time getting rid of this person. Todd noted that he is familiar with this person and there is other issues surrounding them.

She continued to add that people get weird about elk. They had lots of precipitation in their area, so she thinks elk dispersed elsewhere. In thinking about public land hunting, she asks that FWP think hard about Forest Service projects. She has issue with cover being taken down to zero. FWP should help the Forest Service think about the ramifications of that. She, too, is hearing complaints from residents about nonresidents coming here and training dogs on wild birds.

George added that he would like to reiterate that he feels the Commission does not allow adequate time to comment on amendments and would like to suggest they consider a 30-day window.

Marla reminded the group that Ed Joiner is this group's chair. If members wish to work together on compiling their thoughts, he could possibly help facilitate that.

Marla then thanked everyone for coming and added that we will be in touch after the start of the New Year about CAC membership and future meetings. Happy Holidays to all!