

Region 7 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting

July 10, 2024 – R7 HQ

CAC Present: Bob Hagedorn, Ed Joiner, Ed Bukoskey, George Luther and Andrew Wright

Staff Present: Brian Burky, Jamie Hould, Brett Dorak, Mike Backes, Justin Feddes, Brad Schmitz, Marla Prell, Erin O'Connor and Vanessa Zeitner

Guests: Tom Herzog and Art Hayes from Mule Deer CAC

Brad began the meeting by introducing a few faces folks may not be familiar with – Justin Feddes, who is our Acting Warden Captain, and Jamie Hould, Region 7 Parks & Outdoor Recreation (POR) Maintenance Manager. Art Hayes and Tom Herzog from the Mule Deer CAC will also be attending today to update us on that group.

Brad noted that Warden Captain Todd Anderson has retired. We will be hiring for Todd's replacement in the next week or so.

Parks & Outdoor Recreation

Brian discussed that park incidents are up this year so far – there's been a couple motor vehicle accidents with injuries, a homeless person, a mental health crisis situation, and drug and alcohol issues. We're hoping the rest of the summer is quieter.

There is now an MOU in place with the City of Miles City for a boat launch close to town. Brian noted that the local Walleyes Unlimited group is highly motivated, and everyone has been great to work with. As far as the Lower Yellowstone River access project goes, there is a couple potential sites by Hathaway, and we're getting a bit of traction there. This is within a 40-mile no access gap on the river, so we're hopeful this works out. FWP purchased the Wildcat North site last year. Recreationists currently have access from the river, but we presently have an issue with vehicle access that we're working through.

The eastern part of our region has been busy with night sky viewing at Medicine Rocks, trivia nights at Makoshika, etc. We are planning for a new campground at Makoshika. The Makoshika yurt is now available and has been seeing good use. Usage of the archery range is up, and we are working on plans for an update there. Rifle range use is up slightly. Progress on the Train Depot visitor center, a project from the last legislature is unfolding slowly. Recently, an architect has been chosen and we are working on getting an inspection done on the inside.

Tongue River Reservoir State Park (TRSP) is very busy this summer. The cabins have arrived and may be available this fall or definitely next spring, and Brian believes they're going to be quite popular. The 148th anniversary of Rosebud Battlefield is coming up and the park is getting lots of walk-through use. The Natural Resource program from Chief Dull Knife College in Mule Deer is working at TRSP again this summer. This has been a neat program and a good partnership for the last four years.

Maintenance

Jamie oversees maintenance at five State Parks, eight Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), 23 Fishing Access Sites (FASs), the regional office complex, employee housing, visitor centers, and four public water systems. He has a crew of 10 – four full-time staff and six seasonals. He's a little short-staffed this summer but is doing alright. New hires include Joe Hinton who is based out of Makoshika SP and replaced Erik Dion as the full-time the Eastern Maintenance Foreman, and Kelly Peters here in Miles

City. Kelly works for Maintenance starting in the spring until early fall and then works for Travis in the Block Management program through the fall. Jamie is currently missing a seasonal maintenance worker at Makoshika. Jamie then gave an overview of how his position evolved.

Maintenance staff track their hours and tasks through a software program that tracks hour-by-hour, location and the task(s). This helps depict what it takes to effectively operate all of our different sites.

Current funded projects include headquarters display upgrades, ADA door upgrades, duct work cleaning, interior painting, lighting upgrade, and repair and sealing of the parking lot. The HQ landscaping and sprinkler system update project is complete. There is a boundary fence project at Elk Island WMA that is in the works. For FAS's we're working on some minor upgrades at Fallon Bridge which consists of working with BLM on a hardened parking surface and adding a latrine. Some historical preservation stuff has to be taken care of first. The Intake water system upgrade project was finalized last fall. The new system held up through its first paddlefish season, which is a good sign. Earlier this spring the Stipek boat ramp received some repairs. A rip rap project was completed to hopefully save that ramp from being lost to the river in the future. We are seeing if the rip rap holds up before any more improvements will be made at that site. The South Sandstone erosion control project will involve the shoreline needing some rock installed. Regarding Parks, the Lower Yellowstone River visitor center project is ongoing, as Brian mentioned. The Makoshika campground looks to be a great project. There is some money available for repair of the switchbacks at Makoshika, which has become a constant every year as that road system is failing. Maintenance staff currently are in the midst of a statewide sign upgrade project.

Some of Jamie's day-to-day tasks include maintaining and starting up our four public water systems, cleaning boat ramps in the spring, and County and private contract weed spraying. Our yearly dam inspections are coming up with the DNRC next week; our region owns three dams - Gartside, Johnson, and South Sandstone reservoirs. Also in the immediate tasks is hazard tree removal projects at Intake and East Rosebud FAS's and work on a pedestrian bridge at Makoshika that needs shoring up.

Wildlife

Brett began by noting that we ended lion season with a harvest of 35 out of a quota of 45. This region hasn't reached that quota since it was increased to 45 in the 2014-2015 season. Snow coverage and weather are always factors with lion harvest. We finished bobcat season with 228 cats harvested; trapping conditions were generally good.

Our black bear spring season took a while to fill. Recently, we've had several bear issues including one in Colstrip, and we are tracking all of that. Biennial elk surveys were completed this winter. When we surveyed HD 700, conditions were optimal. A total of 1608 elk were observed, which is in line with the new population objective range and is right at the bottom of the range. Last season had adequate cow harvest and above average bull harvest. We noted a decrease in bulls from the previous survey. In 2022 we observed a total of 211 bulls for a ratio of 28 bulls: 100 cows and this past winter we observed 202 bulls and had a ratio of 25 bulls: 100 cows. This is the third survey across six years, because we conduct biennial surveys, where that number was below objective. HD 702 grows elk; when surveyed 2,630 elk were observed. Numbers are increasing, especially around the Hysam hills and Little Wolf Mountains. Spring mule deer surveys were well-timed with good moisture and habitat conditions. A 20% increase in total observed mule deer from last year was observed, which is a slight bump, but we are still 40% below long-term average (LTA). The overall fawn ratio increased from 2023

and was 57 fawns:100 does (48:100 in 2023). As a region, we did not adjust our B license offering. We did decrease our white-tail B tags from 8500 to 6000.

Fisheries

Mike provided an update on the recent paddlefish season, which was a bit different this year. The last couple years, harvest has been usually slow the first few weeks, but this year was busy. Fish were scattered throughout the entire LYR system rather than gathered around Sidney. We had an estimated harvest of 782; harvest was 776 in 2023. Forty-three percent of harvest was female. The top three harvest locations this season were Sidney Bridge (206 fish for 34% of harvest), Powder River confluence (186 fish for 30%), and Intake (63 fish for 10%). The Tongue River confluence harvest was 29 fish for 5%. After June 15th only 21 fish were harvested; it seems anglers just quit coming after that date. The fish were still there but there was little angler effort. The contracted fish cleaning station at Intake remains popular.

FWP is in the midst of our 2025-2026 fish regulation cycle. The regulations will be issued for two years at a time moving forward. Public scoping occurred in April. The tentative regulations will be out for public review the first or second week of August with public meetings taking place in late August. This will be the second opportunity for public comment. The tentative regulations will then go to the Fish & Wildlife Commission during their October meeting. One thing of note is that proposals to adjust some of the paddlefish regs is substantial. Mike then gave a brief overview of some proposals:

- Tongue River Reservoir – striking language about 6 hooks, SMB limit, crappie limit
- All sturgeon over 40” must be kept in the water at all times.
- Cleaning fish for transportation – if ice fishing or boat fishing anglers could take head off, guts out, and fillet but leave skin on
- Paddlefish proposals:
 - Region 6 is looking to separate the Missouri River below Fort Peck from the yellow tag and form its own paddlefish season. We would still share the 1,000 fish harvest cap with for the Sakakawea paddlefish population.
 - Yellow tag-centric changes:
 - Anglers could fish the Yellowstone from the North Dakota state line to Black Bridge FAS and Sullivan Creek (just downstream of Calypso Bridge) to the Tongue River confluence. This is 116 river miles that fish can occupy every year. Catch and release fishing would be expanded from Intake FAS only to the 116 river miles identified in by the two rivers sections above.
 - The season would close June 15 rather than June 30.
 - Paddlefish snagging from a boat only allowed if boat is beached on a riverbank or exposed Island. Once a fish is hooked boats can be used to chase and land the hooked fish.
 - Mandatory reporting by phone hotline or MyFWP only and required before transporting fish away from the harvest site.
 - Close paddlefish snagging within the Powder River.
 - All tag changes:
 - Prohibit sonar for use in paddlefish angling. Sonar allows anglers to basically hunt down and pick out certain fish. This fundamentally puts excess pressure on female paddlefish since they are typically larger and therefore, more sought.

- Limit paddlefish hook use to a barbless single hook.

Mike provided an update on his crew's recent pallid sturgeon work. Crews did a boat tracking run from Hysham to Forsyth this morning and found a 14-year-old pallid sturgeon near Sanders. This is the first one documented upstream of Cartersville Dam or in Treasure County. They have also been following eight telemetered pallids in the Powder River; two went all the way to Wyoming. A female spawned somewhere in the Powder River and two used the Tongue River. Crews are doing larval sampling which will be done this week. They have noted fewer numbers this year.

Brad noted that the Intake fish passage has changed Mike's world. It's a positive thing to have passage but we have had to react to it, and there has been social impacts we couldn't have planned for.

Enforcement

Justin Feddes explained how he is currently the acting Captain since Todd's retirement. Other than the captain position vacancy, Enforcement is good staff-wise. The captain spot should be filled by the end of month. We have a new Forsyth warden, Tanner Mitchell, who lives near Hysham and transferred after several years in the White Sulphur Springs district. Tanner has been a great addition who hit the ground running. Two of our last three vacancies were filled by wardens from out west, which is the opposite of what it used to be. Justin stated that at their annual Seminar it was apparent that numerous western districts are struggling with vacancies due to cost of living, etc.

It's been a busy year so far. Wardens have been doing lots of assisting with educational activities and water safety patrols, especially on the Yellowstone since the river began clearing up. Tongue River Reservoir State Park is always busy in the summer. They've also been working with Region 6 wardens to help with patrols on Fort Peck. The public seems to be getting used to changes in the paddlefish fishery. Bear conflicts have been numerous lately, especially around Colstrip and south. Wardens have been discussing with the Northern Cheyenne Tribe about issues they've been having, and there's also been recent incidents south of Broadus as well as south of Wibaux. He sees a need to work on completing some training on dart guns and traps with the Wildlife staff. Wardens have also been working with Block Management to help with contract completion this spring and will assist with getting new signs and materials to landowners if need be.

There's several large-scale investigations that they've been working, and a few that were recently completed. He praised the Region 7 Enforcement crew for the work and great job they've been doing on those.

The recent DUI crashes at Tongue River Reservoir were something that the warden there assisted with, but they are actually under the County and not his duty.

Equipment issues have plagued wardens here lately, especially with jet boats that are aging out. Just is looking to re-motor some of the Woolridge's which would allow them to work the river better than what they can do now.

There is currently a proposal to add seven warden positions throughout state; this has to go through legislature so it's hard to say what will happen. If it works out, there's a possibility to add a Circle and/or Colstrip warden.

Brad noted that generally, the train of thought is to give bears a chance unless they get in trouble. He feels we need more public education on how to deal with bears. Bears haven't been

something that folks in this part of the state typically deal with much, but issues are popping up more and more all the time – education will be key. Justin added that the issue we have here with relocating bears is that we don't have a lot of places to take them. The Custer National Forest is the most feasible option to get bears away from private properties, but the problem is that there's other bears in that area and younger bears end up getting quickly pushed out.

Regional Supervisor

Brad mentioned that Todd retired after 22-23 years with FWP. He has done a great job for us, and we will miss him. The Block Management program has found another home; it used to be under Field Services years ago, then moved under Wildlife, then went to POR, and now it's under the Regional Supervisors.

Brad noted that our Commission process has become more streamlined, but we are hearing that the public has a hard time accessing the Commission. Accessing Commissioners in general has tightened up a bit. The Commission meets every other month and more often than not, their agenda is pretty tight. Staff help but we ultimately don't make decisions – the Commission does. Brad then explained the process for commenting at Commission meetings. To comment at Commission, you have to sign up ahead of time. Commentors need to have their thoughts in order as time to speak is quite limited.

The next Legislative session is coming up in 2025. We will have another CAC meeting in the fall or early this winter and will invite legislators. Brad then explained the zero-base budget process.

Comm Ed

Marla highlighted that a recent change for Comm Ed is the hiring of a new strategic communications person in the Director's Office, Garrett Turner. This is an effort to drive our message more and share our successes in a more strategic way.

She has been spending more time in Hunter Ed, Trapper Ed and Bow Ed programs this year, especially with our new coordinator in Helena, who is great. FWP has returned to the requirement for an in-person field day for students under 18. Region 7 currently has 69 Hunter Ed instructors, 27 BE instructors and eight Trapper Ed instructors.

In the Aquatic Ed world, we will have served 634 kids in 20 communities by the end of summer through our Kids Fishing Day events. Fifty-three staff members, many overlapping, from all different divisions have assisted. During these events students learn about Fish ID, casting, hypothermia, and water safety. We are working to extend this programming into classrooms with contractors. Education events like nature hikes, backyard birding, hides and skulls presentations, and a Becoming an Outdoors Woman event at Makoshika have also kept her busy.

Lately, she has been catching up on field staff work and highlighting those programs. Bear Aware month and the youth pheasant hunt are coming up in September, and she is planning for a teacher workshop in October. Fire restrictions will be coming to the forefront next week when we begin our interagency fire coordination calls.

Admin/Front Office

Erin reported that since the group met last, Admin staff have conquered the annual 'March Madness' period. This is the busiest time of year with new licenses going on sale, application periods opening up including for nonresident combos, and staff participating in the Licensing call center. The call center was much improved with call times being decreased and the general attitude of customers being

very positive; Erin attributes this to improvements in the Online Licensing System. We spent a lot of time educating folks, both on the phone and in person, on the changes to the Region 7 antelope licenses and the restriction on mule deer doe harvest.

Admin staff have been tasked with some additional duties including assisting with manning the Licensing call center year-round, some quality control work on Block Management contracts and changes in our uniform ordering process.

We recently completed fiscal year-end responsibilities and a zero-base budget exercise. Looking ahead, July should be fairly quiet. Once we get into August, any remaining surplus licenses will go on sale OTC starting August 12th and the early archery antelope season opens August 15th. Then we get into the fall busy time with the upland game bird and fall turkey opener on September 1st and the archery opener on September 7th and with that we're full-on into hunting season with the antelope and pheasant openers and general rifle season opening in October.

Mule Deer CAC

Brad introduced Art Hayes and Tom Herzog, who are from this area and were selected for the Mule Deer CAC earlier this year.

Art informed the group that he and Tom went to Helena for meetings in early May. Mule deer are in trouble a bit throughout the entire west, not just in Montana. Eastern Montana is where they're doing some of the best he feels. The group worked to develop a problem statement despite having difficulty deciding which concern was most important. Concerns included things like advanced technology, disease, habitat and climate, predation, increased hunting pressure, season structure, competition, etc.

Tom thanked everyone for what they do. He noted that FWP folks have lots of responsibilities and different powers pushing from different directions, and he has much appreciation. His biggest takeaway from this meeting is communication and he's so glad to have someone here as well as someone in the new position in Helena now. He feels more and better support is needed for wardens, and that someone should go to legislation and ask for more funding across the board. He'd like to see mandatory reporting for big game species and thinks that could contribute to better-informed decisions.

Art added that he thinks our harvest surveys need to be better and sooner and asked Brad for his thoughts. Brad conveyed that nothing on the group's list of concerns is necessarily new to him. Some of the concerns have gotten harder, mostly due to political and social blends. He asked if there's something new, something that we're possibly overlooking or haven't heard before. He's not seeing anything that is a surprise which he believes is good. How do we fix some of these things? To him, that's what's harder.

Art concluded by saying that there is strong support for leaving at least some OTC resident tags. He feels the attitude for season structure has changed a lot in the last 30 years.

Roundtable

George: The T&Y Board is meeting this afternoon to discuss how to get water through the louvers on the Tongue River. Rubbish is stacking up there and becoming an issue. Some of the louvers are completely out now as they can't deliver water otherwise. He may visit further with Art about the mule deer CAC stuff if he gets a chance. Deer around Colstrip are looking pretty decent; heading towards the Custer National Forest populations are thinner. Turkeys are doing good. He had a couple outfitters approach him about a few things – hot button topics. There is lots of coyotes out there – there's more dens than he's seen the last few years. He's not sure how that affects mule deer. There seems to be lots of

antelope on the ground. He has heard a few concerns from folks about the sagebrush leases. Folks want to know what rights are tied up with those and for how long. Sagebrush leases carry a recreational aspect and as such, public use comes with them.

Ed B: There seems to be a good pheasant population in his area. There's been a mountain lion around but a local with dogs has been keeping it away. He would like to see fines increased for citations.

Ed J: He got his elk permit. The biggest thing in his area is the prairie dog conservation contract with Galt's; there was a few people that were really upset. Rosebud County got a new drone for their Search & Rescue program that could be available for our assistance if we'd like. They would jump at a chance to help FWP with something.

Andrew: Its really dry in Carter County. The BLM carbon sequestration area has been a big topic of conversation in that country. Where the proposed project is is a big sagebrush and antelope habitat area.

Bob: They're having a good year in his area with lots of grass. He has not yet seen a mule deer fawn but believes this is most likely because of all the cover. There's lots of antelope which is nice to see.

Adjournment

Brad thanked everyone for attending and wished them well on the rest of their summer. We will be in touch later this year about planning for a winter meeting and legislative preview.