

CMR NWR Community Working Group Meeting Minutes for April 14, 2011 VFW Building Jordan, MT

Attendees:

Bob Nansel, Dean Rogge, Tanna Rogge, Kit Fischer, Dennis Jorgensen, Damien Austin, Karl Christians, Bill Berg, Rick Potts, Bruce Peterson, Steve Becker, Steve Wanderaas, Mark Good, Nathan Hawkaluk, Virginia Murnion, Mike Waite, Dallas Currey, Jeanne Kirkegard, Don Woerner, Dyrck Van Hyning, Ken Alto, Jason Holt, Melissa Hornbien, Scott Syblan, Darla Stanton, Janet Guptill, Kirk Anderson, Rex Phipps, Doug Weeding, Ron Garwood, Monte Billing, Doug Stanton, Brett Dailey, Mike McKeever, Karla Christensen, Debbie Johnson, Sue Fitzgerald, Steve Forrest, Rod Coulter, John Trumbo, Sylvia Trumbo, Frank Edwards, Bill Dutton, Carie Hess, Amanda Lammers.

The CMR NWR Community Working Group held our 7th meeting on April 14th, 2011 at the VFW Building in Jordan, Montana with 44 people in attendance. Coffee and doughnuts were available prior to the start of the meeting.

Facilitator Bill Milton opened the meeting at 10:07 a.m. with introductions and a review of the purpose, background, and rules and then asked. ***How far did you have to drive to get here and what organization do you represent?*** The participants were seated in a circle and each person introduced themselves and answered the question in turn.

Bill then reviewed the agenda and introduced the speakers for this meeting.

Rick Potts, new CMR Refuge Manager was the first to speak and gave a little of his background. He stated that his interest goes back to the 70s when he was ranching and wanted to find a common ground where ranching and wildlife could coexist. He stated that 85% of the American people today have no idea what it is like to be on the land and live from the land. They don't understand how things work. The key to stewardship of the resource is that people are engaged and he said that he could tell that was the case with those that took time and expense to be here today.

Dennis Jorgensen, Program Officer, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-US National Great Plains Program, talked about the WWF's approach to conservation in the Northern Great Plains. He started by stating that he feels sometimes people get the wrong idea about what the WWF does.

WWF - US was established in 1961 and has 1.3 million members in the US World Wildlife Fund – US is the US affiliate of the WWF International network which has national affiliates in over 30 countries, supported by members, private donors and foundations. WWF's way of conserving the planet's natural resources has a foundation in science, it involves action at every level – from local to global – and it ensures the delivery of innovative solutions that meet the needs of both people and nature.

The diversity of life isn't evenly distributed around the world. It is concentrated in certain areas, making them a greater priority for conservation. WWF-US completed a global assessment in 1998 in which they identified the "Global 200," which are areas of abundant and representative biological diversity around the world that can be conserved in the next 50 years. Working in all 200 places would be beyond the abilities of any one group. The WWF narrowed its focus to 19 places in the world based on the diversity and abundance of life they support, the challenges they face, and WWF's ability to contribute positive change within the next decade.

The Northern Great Plains is among these 19 places because of its one of a kind wildlife and because it is one of the most intact temperate grassland regions in the world. The Northern Great Plains is North America's largest intact grassland and is an important grassland globally. The region spans 5 US States (MT, WY, ND, SD, and NE) and 2 Canadian Provinces (Alberta and Saskatchewan). Its rivers and streams include some of the longest reaches of free-flowing rivers in North America. It consists of mixed-grass prairie and sagebrush steppe, and within it are found uniquely American wildlife including burrowing owls, sage grouse, swift foxes, prairie dogs, pronghorn antelope, bison and black-footed ferrets among others. Jorgensen stated that this is where the WWF's Northern Plains Program has worked since 2000. He stated that the staff currently consists of himself, 8 other staff members based in MT, 1 member based in Rapid City, SD, 1 based in Marshall, MN, and 2 based in the head office in Washington, DC.

Jorgensen noted that the WWF brings science and solutions together and works with diverse partners to contribute to the wisdom of the grassland stewards by sharing the latest scientific discoveries for the benefit of landowners, resource managers and healthy human and natural communities in the prairie landscape. The WWF partners with diverse individuals and organizations that share common goals and bring knowledge or resources that contribute to achieving those goals.

WWF works with landowners and landowner coalitions, tribes, academic institutions, NGO's, local, state and federal governments. He presented a photo of a long-billed curlew, the largest shorebird in North America. A landowner who ranches just east of Zortman has become a resident expert on finding curlew nests. He just drives cattle across the Matador and when they part for what seems like no reason he knows he's got a nest. The rancher had always wondered where curlews migrated for the winter and recently WWF was able to tell him that once they leave MT they fly down to the TX panhandle and then make their way to the Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico. In one case a tracked curlew flew about 1800 miles in 24 hours straight, from MT to Mexico at about 75 miles/hour. None of which would have been learned without all the partners including landowners who allow WWF access and keep a close eye on the wildlife on their places. It takes many and diverse partners to get the job done right.

Private lands and the efforts of private landowners are important for sage grouse. Eastern MT is a stronghold for sage grouse and there are still many impressive leks (breeding areas) out there, but speaking to locals you learn that things have definitely changed. Last year's count of males on leks turned up only 90 males and over the three years prior the population had halved each year leaving biologists to estimate that if bird numbers declined by the same numbers in the next two years they would be extinct. MT hasn't seen it yet, but putting energy development first does have consequences for the land and the resources it supports.

To strengthen populations in MT, WWF was asked to work with a ranching coalition, Environmental Defense Fund and The Nature Conservancy to submit a Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) proposal to NRCS. NRCS committed funding for work on private lands in south Phillips County, MT and to date ranchers have removed 18 miles of fence, flagged 24 miles of fence, installed escape ramps in 26 water tanks and six ranchers have had NRCS range inventories conducted on 47,000 acres and they're discussing NRCS grazing prescriptions for sage grouse on their private lands.

A rancher in south Phillips County once told Jorgensen that when he was 13 years old he saw his first pronghorn and he takes pride in seeing large herds of pronghorn move through his ranch these days because it's another sign that good stewardship has made a difference to the wildlife in the area. He told Jorgensen that much of the old sheep fence that's still standing on ranches running cattle is there because ranchers don't have the time or money to replace or modify those fences. When WWF was asked to

sponsor an NRCS CCPI in South Phillips County they said yes. Once the program started the rancher took the opportunity to modify those fences on his ranch. In total the CCPI contributed to 18 miles of fence removal and 9 miles of modified fence on private lands.

WWF has been involved in tracking the migrations of pronghorn in North Central MT and this past winter observed migrations of over 250 miles south. During the 250 mile migration pronghorn crossed the TransCanada Highway, The Milk River, MT Highway 2, the Amtrak railway line (700-800 killed while camping out on the rail lines due to deep snow), they crossed the Missouri River and Fort Peck Reservoir, and MT Highway 200, not to mention 100s of fences.

Ranchers don't often get paid for growing wildlife, but they could. After listening to ranchers discuss why they should bear the cost of producing a public good, whether it be a hunted species or a species that people just come to observe or photograph, WWF is thinking of ways that ranchers could potentially be rewarded for producing wildlife. WWF is not telling them how to do it but informing them about which species are scarce and valued, thus letting the rancher decide whether and how to do it, while ensuring that the economic incentives are in place if they choose to and are successful.

This region offers some of the most intact and biologically significant expanses of native prairie left in North America. As a result, it has potential to serve as a stronghold for many scarce species, including grassland birds which are among the fastest and most consistently declining birds in North America. With over 75% of intact grasslands in the Northern Great Plains in private ranchlands, the greatest potential for conservation, restoration and management of habitat for grassland species is with private landowners.

Some people are concerned about climate change, and if the climate does change as predicted it may have some unexpected consequences for vegetation that will affect wild and domestic grazers. WWF works to identify and build upon the best available science to inform resource managers and contribute to informed alternatives and solutions.

WWF also plays a role in the conservation and restoration of numerous native grassland species including the plains bison. They recognize that the number of bison in conservation herds has not grown beyond 20,000 since this number was reached in the 1930s, and few herds consist of genetically pure bison. WWF believes that renewed bison restoration efforts are necessary for the preservation of the species.

In collaboration with private producers WWF has developed guidelines for bison production herd management to set out guidelines for the ecological management of bison. WWF functions as a science advisor to the American Prairie Foundation in management of their bison herd in south Phillips County MT.

Kit Fischer, National Wildlife Federation (NWF). NWF is America's largest conservation organization. In 1912, J.N. "Ding" Darling, an editorial cartoon writer, published a New York Times cartoon that united anglers, hunters, hikers and members of garden and conservation clubs throughout the country.

NWF works with more than 4 million members, partners and supporters in communities across the country to protect and restore wildlife habitat, confront global warming and connect with nature. Glacier-Waterton Lakes National Park, Charles M. Russell (CMR) National Wildlife Refuge, Yellowstone National Park Ecosystem and Red River Basin are just some of those locations. Northern Great Plains

goals include conserving a diversity of prairie wildlife species, improving wildlife habitat, engaging the sportsman community and reducing wildlife conflicts with livestock.

The CMR Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) generated over 15,000 comments from the NWF, has widespread sportsman support, and supports change in the grazing regime to benefit wildlife populations. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership with the support of local hunting and angling groups identified 17.4 million acres of important recreation areas in MT. Montana sportsmen include 232,000 hunters and anglers spending \$2 million a day. These sportsmen annually spend more than the cash receipts from wheat, MT's top crop (\$721 million vs. \$688 million).

The NWF Wildlife Conflict Resolution Program is a fair market approach to change grazing patterns, where they can turn opponents into partners and provide a positive win-win solution for both ranchers and wildlife.

The CMR Grazing Retirements (non-use) Program revitalizes native plant communities to benefit a variety of wildlife species. Many areas on the Refuge are not meeting habitat objectives consistent with the USFWS "wildlife first" mission of the Refuge. The Program provides ranchers with an option of a dependable grazing alternative.

NWF hired Moore Information Opinion Research (used by Representative Rehberg) to conduct a phone interview on "How do Montanans View Bison Restoration." Four hundred interviews were conducted by telephone among a representative sample of voters statewide in MT during February 23 & 24, 2011 with a sampling error of plus or minus 5% at the 95% confidence level. Fischer displayed graphs of the survey results.

Next steps for wildlife include support of the MT Dept Fish, Wildlife and Parks in developing a state bison management plan, addressing local concerns and concerns of the livestock industry, and developing local partners.

After lunch, meeting facilitator Bill Milton had the group break into smaller working groups of 6 people each in order to answer 3 questions. The groups were given about 20 – 30 minutes to gather their answers.

Q-1) What is one important thing you have learned?

Q-2) Is there value in creating an ongoing collaborative dialogue forum about free-roaming bison/ wild lands changes facing the area and for interested participants to develop practical affordable solutions to the issue? Answer Yes or No and state why.

Q-3) Is question #2 where the CMR NWR Community Working Group is headed?

Group Summaries:

1. Group 1:

- Q1 – A lot is happening in local communities that is unknown to residents and that affects the community and what people love about it. People think that they are informed, but most are not as informed as they think. Hunting and Fishing is a \$700 million industry. Who is funding this? Donated money?

- Q2 – Yes, because:
 - Management issues are unresolved and local knowledge is important;
 - CMR might not be the best place;
 - Containment ideas need to be worked out;
 - ONLY IF it stays within the purpose of the CMR working Group.
 - Q3 – Yes, need to solve this and then move to other issues. Big concern is if we get in a wreck it could affect operations dramatically, can't afford uncertainty, get this under control from the beginning.
2. Group 2:
- Q1 – Emphasis on habitat, plenty of controversy, varied opinions.
NGO's websites have different emphasis for raising funds than offered today.
NWF membership at 4 million exceeds 210K family farms/ranches.
Bison introduction precedes planning.
 - Q2 – Yes, educate ourselves and others, new information, agendas.
 - Q3 – Yes, but with more concentrated effort.
3. Group 3:
- Q1 - Local (communities within the 6 counties) concerns have not been considered in the concept of introduction of bison; impression that bison introduction is going to happen. Surrounding landowners will have to "learn to cooperate;" different interest groups have different ideas for the same landscape; diversity of views on sustainability and ability - given limited access (and local desire/need) on wildlife viewing as an economic benefit to community; higher cost of livestock grazing on CMR contributing to non-use.
4. Group 4:
- Q1 – Never heard of sage grouse in a fence, WWF worked with ranchers in NE for diverse opportunity, knowing the position of others, the potential of wildlife viewing, WWF partnerships with local ranchers
 - Q2 – Yes, but need to get FWP to our meetings.
5. Group 5:
- Q1 - Montanans favor bison on CMR; what Dennis and Kit do; Montanans want huntable bison herd; WWF/NWF do not influence grazing fees; our curlews go to Mexico; hunting and fishing is bigger than wheat production.
 - Q2 - Is there value in creating an ongoing collaborative dialogue forum without discussion of bison: 1- no and 4 - yes. Is there value in creating an ongoing collaborative dialogue forum with bison: 3 - no and 2 - yes.
 - Q3 – Yes but after we've made it work on the CMR.
 - Bison would distract from issues we can agree on but we cannot ignore the bison in the room.
6. Group 6:
- Q1 – Presenters perspective was that fencing creates a high mortality in sage grouse, that a poll was done statewide for bison reintroduction
 - Q2- Yes, but we need to see everyone's position.
7. Group 7:

- Q1 – Mission of NWF; WWF is involved in APF's project on bison restoration; for NWF cattle are second priority and wildlife are first priority; NWF's goal is to eliminate cattle grazing in the CMR; NWF & WWF need to discuss NWF's new bison campaign to understand their interpretation of a 3 million acre landscape.
- Q2- Yes, it has value but not sure whether that is where we are headed, great to develop joint messaging, this is a forum for education, great to understand local perspectives.

Most of the working groups agree that the bison issue will be a conversation stopper, but if it was left out the dialogue could flow and compromise could be attained. Most all of the workings groups felt that the entire group is headed in the direction of bison but when and how are undetermined. Everyone in the room felt that the bison issue would be too heated to be able to progress forward. A lot of attendees would like to see a local poll done on the bison reintroduction.

The next meeting agenda was discussed. Bill Milton asked if this process of hearing from the different groups should be continued and, if so, who should we hear from next. The entire group thought that this process is good and brought up the following names for presenters NRCS/USDA, Water Commission, County Commissioners, MT Wilderness Group, DNRC, FWP, APF, BLM, CDs. Steve Wanderaas from McCone County was asked to present a proposal on how to get a local poll done. It was thought to have the MT Wilderness Assn and the APF present at the next meeting. In closing Bill Milton asked everyone to state what worked well and what could be done better.

What worked well:

- ❖ Moderating
- ❖ Presentations
- ❖ Staying on task
- ❖ Tone of meeting
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Good representation
- ❖ Respect
- ❖ Productivity
- ❖ Overall format

What could be improved:

- ❖ Break up the working groups more as some people get stuck in the same group meeting after meeting.
- ❖ Need to focus on what is agreed on.

The next meeting date was announced as June 2nd in Winnett.

The group adjourned at approximately 3:00 pm.