

CMR NWR Community Working Group Meeting Minutes for December 15th, 2011 Fort Peck Interpretive Center Fort Peck, MT

Attendees: John Chase, Ron Garwood, Jason Holt, Laurie Riley, Jeanne Kirkegard, Terry Selph, Dyrck Van Hyning, Monte Billing, Mary Jones, Mark Good, Bill Berg, Aaron Johnson, Rick Adams, Paula Gouse, Server Enkerd, Rick Stellflug, Dave Pippin, Steve Wanderaas, Don Woerner, Jared Eatman, Irene Rathort, John Daggett, Shannell Kurchner, Dean & Tanna Rogge, Pat Gunderson, Leonard Swenson, Phoebe Patterson, Kit Fischer, Heidi Finke, Melissa Hornbein, Steve Schindler, Karl Christians, Carie Hess, and Bill Milton.

The CMR NWR Community Working Group held our 11th meeting on December 15th, 2011 at the Fort Peck Interpretive Center, Fort Peck, Montana with 35 people in attendance. Coffee and pastries were available prior to the start of the meeting.

Facilitator Bill Milton opened the meeting at 10:10 a.m. by asking the grounding question **from your view what indicator would best measure change in the vitality/ health of the (hypothetical) “CMR Regional Ranch”?** The participants were seated in a circle and each person introduced themselves and answered the question in turn. Participants’ answers were as follows:

* rangeland health/ wildlife numbers, * wildlife noting good variety of native wildlife and plant species, * population, * in general range health/ habitat, * increase in wildlife and good condition on rangeland, * range in good health
*rangeland health, * not wanting to trade grass for trees in the aspect of wildfire, * a refuge that contributes to the local community, * healthy diversity of wildlife/ sentinel plant growth, * diversity in the economic uses of the landscape, * seeing healthy and functioning riparian areas, * a goal of providing the best habitat for wildlife, * how much public use it supports,, * economic stability (ie. enough revenue coming in to cover expenses going out), * knew what we owned, property rights, * responsible visitor use, * the Board of Directors to run effectively and efficiently and not become divided, * rangeland health by native plant species, increased multiple use and good stewardship, * rest rotation and multiple use, * noxious weed control and good vegetation, * comments from all users, * commitment to monitoring , * healthy landscape/ diversity of wildlife/ plants, wildlife, * habitat, and multiple use, * how the refuge fits in with the entire community(from hunters, producers, managers) economically and holistically, * species of diverse plants, animals/ economic stability, * what the public is getting out of the refuge.

Presentation by Pat Gunderson, Region 6 Supervisor, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks.

Pat started with the FWP mission statement: *Montana FWP, through its employees and citizen Commission, provides for the stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks and recreational resources of Montana while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations.* He also said the state is responsible for passing laws and regulations to regulate time, place, and manner of private taking of animals, their authority is exercised as a trust for all people in Montana, and not for the benefit of government nor third parties. State power is exercised under the broad concepts of police power (state enforcing laws) and public trust. He explained that the FWP, by law, supervises management of all fish, wildlife, game and nongame birds, waterfowl, and game and nongame furbearing animals of the state. Further, FWP is responsible for all state parks and related scenic, historical, archeological, cultural, and recreational resources of the state. Region 6 is the second largest region in size with approximately 28,000 square miles. It is approximately 350 miles from east to west and is made up of 63% private, 16% BLM, 10% Tribal, 7% DNRC and 2.5 % USFWS land and employs approximately 40 full time employees. Region 6 has two main programs: wildlife and fisheries.

The wildlife program focuses on habitat, population management, and recreation access, enforcement of laws and landowner relations.

- Focus on partnerships with private and public landowners;
- Utilize Habitat Montana, Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program, and other programs to affect wildlife habitat;
- Focus on recreational opportunities for the public;
- Maintain simplified hunting seasons for the public;
- Utilize liberal seasons to manage wildlife populations within habitat and landowner tolerances;
- Partnerships include:
 - private landowners – FWP’s key partners in Habitat Access and Expertise,

- hunters and local conservation groups,
- state, federal, and tribal staff are also key,
- Canadian partners,
- NGOs.

The Fisheries program is focused on habitat, population management, and recreational access, enforcement of laws and water quality and quantity.

- Utilize Future Fisheries Program and landowner and agency partnerships to affect habitat;
- Focus on recreational opportunities for the public;
- Maintain simplified fishing seasons for the public;
- Manage Fort Peck, Fresno, and Nelson reservoirs, Missouri and Milk Rivers and many small ponds;
- Species include pallid sturgeon, paddlefish, walleyes, Chinook salmon, lake trout and catfish;
- Partnerships include:
 - Private landowners - FWP's key partners in Habitat Access and Expertise,
 - Fisherman and local conservation groups,
 - state, federal, and tribal staff are also key,
 - NGOs.

Pat showed the group slides on a pronghorn study, 2010-11 seasonal snowfall as well as wildlife population status on:

- Mule deer -▼ of approximately 25% in overall populations = ▼ of 60% in antlerless quota.
- White-tail deer - ▼ of approximately 25% in overall populations = ▼ of 60% in antlerless quota (an additional decline in late summer was due to severe Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD) outbreak).
- Pronghorn antelope -▼ in overall populations in all R6 Hunting Districts ▼40-90% =▼ quota by 60%.
- Elk – Elk in Region 6 rarely have losses due to winter conditions – above average populations – maintained liberal antlerless licenses.
- Fisheries – rising waters in Fort Peck Reservoir have provided quality spawning and brood habitat for many species of fish, flooding rivers provided outstanding conditions for spawning fish, paddlefish fishery above Fort Peck is very healthy, small ponds suffered winter-kill conditions last year but have excellent water levels at present.

He talked about the fishing economics for Region 6 and shared data from 2008 (latest year available):

- Anglers spent an estimated \$240 million in Montana on transportation, lodging, food guide fees and other direct purchases excluding license fees.
- Non residents account for more than 50% of the revenue from fishing.
- Anglers in Region 6 spent \$8 million and residents account for 84% of the revenue.

He talked about the hunting economics for Region 6 he shared data from 2008 (latest year available):

- Montana hunters, R and NR, spent about \$292 million in MT on transportation, lodging, food, guide fees, and other purchases, excluding license fees
- Residents account for 57% of the revenue
- Hunters in Region 6 spent \$26.9 million. Residents account for 40 percent of the revenue. Non-residents account for 60% of the revenue
- Bird hunting is king with \$14.4 million in revenue in Region 6 and 76% of that coming from Non-residents

He then briefly discussed the FWP relations with the CMR Refuge:

- Cooperation in various surveys, research and enforcement activities.
- Annual discussions on quota-levels and seasons.
- Differences in some objectives for big game animals.
- Differences in some big game season structures.
- Differences in Scale of Management

Bill then opened up the Q & A with Pat Gunderson.

Lunch was served

Bill Milton had the group break into smaller working groups of 4 - 5 people each and had them answer 2 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) what concerns or questions came about from the presentations?

Group Summaries:

1. Group 1:

Q1: Sage Grouse in Canada, working together (ex: black footed ferrets, swift fox), the take on hunting to preserve numbers in certain wildlife.

Q2: amount of unknowns – future plans w/ financial, economical, political constraints, analogy regarding managing on broader scale- parallels w/ what this group is trying to do, need to look at broader picture, populations outside of this area determine where we go with decisions ex: sage grouse in Reno, Do the agencies know how to maintain our good with sage grouse numbers?

2. Group 2:

Q1: amount of money generated from hunting in region regarding residents and non residents, extremely high mortality rate in the area, movement of antelope, learned about blue tongue and EHD, managing wildlife populations across large landscape is difficult.

Q2: how does the FWP & USFWS do business together, what cooperation exists and is that enough? Possibility that sage grouse could end up on the endangered species list and what affect would that have on management, what affect would potential energy development have on sage grouse, will CMR be able to manage grazing differently, oil boom people may not trash the CMR they may grow to love it, new constituency, what issue are we going to tackle as a group?

3. Group 3:

Q1: impact on populations from flooding/snow/ disease, how reliant FWP is on private landowners to provide wildlife habitat and access in region 6, overall percentage of private land, impact of EHD on whitetail populations, contribution of hunting to the economy/ local economies, extent to which we are working with Canada on x-border wildlife management.

Q2: how many different options on sage grouse endangerment/ recovery, possibility that hunting would be curtailed – economic impacts, how to provide wildlife/ habitat corridors to connect different areas, how FWP balances management needs of wildlife populations with economic/revenue generated by hunting, how to protect antelope populations from death by trains/ cars, impact of one bad season of future revenue/ tourism/ hunter traffic.

4. Group 4:

Q1: There was quite a bit of data, MFWP didn't coordinate with local Government agencies, like County Commissioners, public reaction to data, like the loss of white tail deer to Epizootic Hemorrhage Disease, manage State Parks better, hunters take less than 5% of sage grouse during hunting season, didn't know hunting season length in CMR is different from rest of hunting districts, learned of the \$292M revenue from recreation, hunting, fishing etc, 57% is from local residents, bird hunting revenue, 76% comes from non residents

Q2: Why different length of hunting in CMR and outside CMR, MFWP, why manage a species a certain way by using hunting (wolves in western Montana), compensation to land owners for damage, only part of value compensated, goal of MFWP is more opportunity for species that don't exist in area.

5. Group 5:

Q1: Big game populations down, revenue coming in is mostly resident, EDH problem vs. blue tongue

Q2: Last 10 years more work with NGO's – don't forget about the locals- what are they inheriting, micromanaging of hunting should be now, FWP reliance on hunting dollars.

6. Group 6:

Q1: Economics – instate vs. out of state Big game = residents produce more dollars, Birds= non-residents produce more dollars, percentage of land distribution- much more private, brome and fire cycle responsibility for sage grouse decline, shipping grouse to Canada.

Q2: Brome and fire cycle responsible for sage grouse- maybe more natural reaction or increased predators, maybe deer reduction (disease) is a good thing- need to reduce numbers to increase numbers of native shrubs, think that EHD outbreak is result of climate change, high mortality of antelope in high snow years, need stronger partnership between CMR and FWP, CMR management needs more input from locals, more public meetings & public scoping, need to consider locals and local conditions, need enough wardens for both CMR and FWP and they should work together.

Bill then asked the group to identify one issue (project) that you would like the group to explore working on. The answers were:

- Collaboratively complete a phase planning process that would ultimately establish a healthy viable manageable year round population of wild bison on the Refuge.
- Pilot project, develop plan for unit of land maybe several allotments that included private, BLM and CMR lands to benefit:
 - rangeland management
 - livestock production
 - wildlife populations
 - local economics
 - various recreational opportunities
 - community benefits
- Articulate one management/community goal we can all agree on and develop plan to implement that plan.
- Propose pilot project to utilize a portion of the CMR in order to see the benefits that a Conservation District can contribute.
 - To help meet the goals of local communities, CMR and Stakeholders.
- Multiple use of all public lands and good stewardship management practices.
- Have a role in protecting our communities and environment from “negative” impacts.
- Areas to start discussion list many topics & priorities possible more information on hand - start discussing topics.
- Focus on Sage Grouse issues.
- Pick a project and implement.
- Not losing site of getting processes and roles, what is part of our glue.
- Work together on noxious weeds.
- Support USDA Sage Grouse in 6 County area - explore ways to work with communities, landowners etc.
 - Derive benefits - the area is important for Sage Grouse.
- How can we help the CMR Refuge & regional landowners work together better.
- Better access to the CMR. Open up closed roads or repair some of the areas in need of it.
 - Work towards more of the CMR being available to people who don't have ATVs.
- Come to agreement as a group about the range uses over the 6 Counties.
- Increase public awareness of the aspects of CMR.
- CMR should have their top priorities healthy rangelands.
- Better communication about what the Refuge can & can't do and who they are.
- Focus on the health and/or management of the rangelands to sustain all the wildlife.

- Approach CMR - public involvement in decision making process (ie. Road closures).
- Range management - Sage Grouse on CMR.
- Sage Grouse.

We discussed potential speakers for the forthcoming meeting(s). We will invite a panel of speakers to present on sage grouse for the February meeting in Circle. We discussed conducting a tour of the riparian reach Bill Berg suggested the group may want to address for a restoration project and a potential speaker on the project for the Apr meeting in Jordan.

The next meeting date was announced as February 9th in Circle.

The group adjourned at approximately 3:10 pm.