



2016-2017

Annual Work Plan

Missouri River Conservation Districts Council
1101 11th Avenue, Helena, MT 59601
(406) 454-0056
mrcdc@macdnet.org

I. MISSION:

A partnership of diverse interests working to ensure the vitality of both the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge and the surrounding communities.

II. PURPOSE:

To convene a balanced group of stakeholders to discuss natural resource management of the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, recognize conflicts among user groups and agencies, identify and work collaboratively toward solutions, and provide a discussion forum for increased understanding, cooperation, and partnership among user groups, agencies and other interested parties.

III. GOALS FOR THE SIX-COUNTY REGION:

Goal 1 - Describe the quality of life you would like to see be predominant in the region in 5 to 10 years.

We want this region to maintain a diversified economy within which a prosperous agriculture industry is sustained and local communities are prosperous with stable populations. We desire an atmosphere where agencies, local government, NGOs, and citizens work together to create positive outcomes for the community and citizens: focusing on common ground, mutual respect, and community-based decision making, where people are committed to the working group and access to public land is ensured for both the public and producers.

Goal 2 - What kind of production will be needed to sustain this quality of life?

A diversity of unique goods and services to support economic and social values will need to be produced from a working landscape that maintains its scenic value, healthy soils, and ecological integrity. We must also identify and implement best management practices that integrate local ecological knowledge, succession planning in all entities, local working groups to address challenges, incentives to practice conservation, steady tax base to support infrastructure and responsible, well-educated citizens.

Goal 3 - What does the landscape need to look like to obtain your production?

We desire a landscape that provides habitat for diverse and healthy wildlife populations, where further conversion of native prairie is discouraged, and where the needs of natural resource dependent industries are balanced with conservation. In short, healthy agriculture lands cooperatively managed for the benefit of the resource, wildlife, industry, and community.

Project I: Discussion on bison and how that looks from a local perspective:

What is the ultimate goal of this project? The ultimate goal is to begin talking about something that is uncomfortable in an open / honest way. Through education and having experts come present on bison and their behaviors, folks are better able to participate in discussions at the management level and to provide input based on facts, not fallacy. This forum will also provide the opportunity to get beyond a simple “Yes” or “No” in relation to bison.

A committee will be formed to facilitate a discussion on bison related issues by the larger group. Instead of “tasks” being defined, what developed was a list of questions related to bison that the committee should address.

Formation and make-up of the committee:

- Form a bison committee with diverse membership and a clear, defined purpose
- Committee should have representation from each county in the Six-County region
- Membership on the committee will be solicited through the August Fort Peck meeting, but will remain open to those who develop an interest as the discussion progresses
- The committee has no decision making power and will not develop any positions for the full CMR CWG.
- The committee will develop a structure for the discussions on bison and select experts in the field to address the full working group on specific topics or questions of the larger discussion.

Tasks of the Committee:

- Determine facilitation needs and ground rules.
- Gather information from experienced people/organizations that will capture the complexity of the situation from all sides of the issue.
- Provide regular opportunities to have a discussion about bison and the complexity of the situation on the agenda of CMR CWG meetings.
- Work through the Conservation Districts to gather local perspectives and what the cause of the conflict is from each perspective.
- Be consistent with conversations and keep the committee going

Discussion topics/questions: (In no particular order)

- Who is responsible for developing and maintaining the necessary infrastructure?
- Name all the issues that could arise and designate managers/responsible parties for these issues
- Address tradeoffs with agriculture and wildlife
- Financial compensation for landowners and where that money comes from
- Review past processes and why they have failed or were successful
- Current bison management strategies and better management where bison occur now
- Local buy in and support
- Clarifications of whether / when bison are classified as wildlife or livestock
- Can the CMR CWG develop a plan for how a community moves forward regardless of the decision made about bison?
- Create plan for how to deal with bison trespass (have the partnerships in place to create this framework)
- Legalities of bison on private land

- Population management
- Current ordinances
- Maintaining habitat for all wildlife
- Disease
- Who is liable for damages, etc?
- Developing a vision for reasonable bison restoration
- Containment – what does this look like?
- How to deal with litigation

Project 2: Weeds

What is the ultimate goal of this project? The CMR CWG will encourage collaboration and act as a forum to bring people together on weed issues. The CMR CWG will also coordinate support for efforts to find funding and will organize tours to see both successful weed treatments and problem areas.

After small group discussion it was determined that “Yes, a committee should be formed to address weed related issues in the Six-County Region”.

Tasks for the Group:

1. Coordination
 - a. Follow the model of the Montana Saltcedar Team and expand to new watersheds and species
 - b. Act as venue for connecting people and opportunities
 - c. Local coordination of projects and partners
 - d. Coordinate between weed districts, counties, conservation districts, etc.
 - e. Create and build partnerships and points of contact
 - f. Local working group will work as a facilitator for providing support for local weed projects.
2. Education
 - a. weed identification
 - b. herbicide action
 - c. biological control
 - d. new innovative management techniques
 - e. Education of people that recreate on public lands
 - f. Education of those recreating with ATVs and other off-road vehicles
 - g. Need: Skilled applicators on a local landscape – who is training them?
3. Other activities
 - a. Field trips to see first-hand the problems and the successes
 - b. Menu of weed resources/funding sources for weeds (SWCDM is doing this already, but we can provide support and input)
 - c. Assess or inventory of current weeds and where they are likely to spread....create in a useable format
 - d. CMR / public lands weed management, talk about what is happening, and what is not
 - e. Expand to aquatic invasives and partner with FWP on boat inspections

No New Projects Identified at the Meeting

Project 3: Tourism and recreation

What is the ultimate goal of this project? Gather information about current tourism activity within the 6-county region and the economic impact, both positive and negative. Explore ways to promote the area and increase economic inputs from tourism.

It was suggested that agriculture needed to be added because it is directly related to tourism and recreation. We should wrap the discussion of tourism, recreation, agriculture into 1 issue and discuss it in the context of infrastructure.

1. Gather information about current tourism in the 6-county area:
 - a. How much tourism is happening
 - b. what are the costs, and impact to local economies
 - c. Economies of seasonal recreation: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter
 - d. Are there opportunities for infrastructure improvements to benefit tourism and agriculture?
2. Promote the local area:
 - a. Explore local attraction application for smart phones (\$ for the Lewistown app came from the Montana Tourism Foundation).
 - b. Engage with local tourism groups/people, e.g. Missouri River Tourism Council.
 - c. Discuss the possibility of forming a Friends of the CMR Group
 - d. Work with groups to create a 6-county attraction map
 - e. Pair tourism advertisement and promotion with a consistent / positive message for agriculture
 - f. Form a coalition of chambers of commerce to create a geo-tourism map
 - g. Encourage private entities to develop agri-tourism
 - h. Highlight important fossils, bird species of the area, and other attractions specific to the region
3. Begin a discussion on a sales tax and the benefits and detriments
4. How can we balance tourism with maintaining the quality of life of rural, Eastern MT? (i.e. solitude, remoteness, and privacy)

Action Items: Rachel will contact the different tourism councils

We will follow existing research projects that are exploring the costs and benefits of tourism with efforts to compare apples to apples in numbers (both in direct benefits and costs and indirect benefits and costs)

The planning committee will work toward a concrete task for the full CMR CWG.

Gain a better understanding of tax revenues and their uses in counties.

Jeremy Sage would like time on a future agenda (possibly October) to present a more detailed account of his project

Project 4: Strategies for returning young people to the land and community

What is the ultimate goal of this project? Determine how local communities can influence young people returning to the land and maintaining the sustainability of locally-owned/managed ranches.

1. Succession planning:
 - a. Have a dialogue about regulations such as tax laws, etc.
 - b. Promote succession planning in the region – help fund and promote locally organized succession planning workshops
 - c. Compile a list of resources/professionals in estate planning for rural Montana.....should this be an estate planning menu?
 - d. Explore the Wyoming model to pair/connect young aspiring, agriculturalists with landowners.
 - e. Build programs for apprenticeship to get young people into farm/ranch management and ownership
2. Capital investment and opportunities:
 - a. Community co-op – attracts young people, and helps with capital investment through sharing equipment, land, and labor.
 - b. Highlight success stories of people who have come back to the ranch and how they overcame the capital barrier to do that. E.g. Malta local newspaper has a section that describes people who came home and who and why they were able to do that.
 - c. Poll university students to see what is needed for them to return to the land

Julia Haggerty would like time on the agenda to present on a research project dealing with this topic

Project 5: Economic conditions and trends in the 6-county region

What is the ultimate goal of this project? Gather as much relevant and accurate economic and demographic information on the 6-county region as possible. This information will feed into the other projects defined in the work plan.

1. Continue to provide input to the draft economic analysis that Travis is preparing

Project 6: CMR Sage Grouse Committee

What is the ultimate goal of this project? Facilitate conversations amongst a diverse membership on issues related to landscape scale management.

1. Continue efforts to produce and distribute the Conservation Menu
2. Continue the conversations of how local information can be assimilated into larger management decisions.

Explore the potential for offering easements for a variety of different time periods.....work with the Montana Sage Grouse program to share this information.