**Where:** Zoom Virtual Meeting

**Opening:** 1:00PM

**Attendance:** 26

**Self-Introduction:** Liv Holt, acting facilitator, had everyone introduce themselves and share what they or their affiliation organization has been up to in the last year and what they would like to see the CMR CWG work on in 2021.

**CMR CWG Reports:**

* **McConeCD & MRCDC:** Steve Wanderaas reported that the U.S. Corps of Engineers is still drafting the EIS for the Fort Peck Test Flow to benefit pallid sturgeon. He recommended folks interested in learning more about the issue speak with Liv Holt or Dick Iversen. Steve also reported that McCone County has 65,000 acres of CRP, half of which has expired already, while the other half is set to expire within the next two years, so they’re trying to form partnerships to retain that grassland. McCone also hosts an AIS contract with DNRC, which helps fund the two inspection stations that they help run – the Big Horn Inspection Station near Hardin and the Powder River Inspection Station near Broadus. McCone CD also recently had a conversation about the overpopulation of mule deer in FWP Region 6. There was agreement that more antlerless tags need to be made available and any barriers to acquiring tags need to be addressed as well. This might be an issue that could be discussed at future CMR CWG meetings.

McCone CD’s administrator, Diane Black, was also in attendance and reported that McCone CD administers a Soil Health Grant, which is active and accepting applications. They request all applications for soil health projects be sent by December 16th.

* **BeefMT:** Tienna Canen introduced herself and gave a report for the new beginning rancher program called BeefMT. She is based out of the Circle/Glendive area and is the program’s project manager. The 2-year program is being modeled after SD’s BeefSD program, which holds 4-6 meetings for class participants/year covering topics such as marketing, ag policy, livestock genetics, land acquisition and transition planning. These trainings will be comprised of both in-person meetings and virtual webinars. BeefMT is in its first year of planning and is currently looking for project partners. If anyone’s interested, they should contact Tienna.
* **NRCS:** Tom Watson, State Conservationist, reported that while NRCS is not centric to the CMR, it’s important that they remain engaged in local groups such as the CMR CWG, because, as he emphasized, voluntary conservation is best delivered locally. NRCS is currently doing their best to funnel out remaining EQUIP dollars through the Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs). In response to McCone’s expiring CRP, he noted that Montana Focused Conservation actually had 2 or 3 TIPS focusing solely on expiring CRP in 2021 and is encouraged by the County getting a head start on the issue. NRCS also has been trying to engage other local groups, such as Winnett ACES and the Musselshell Watershed Coalition, and are in the final stages of rolling out their revised soil health strategy.

Kyle Tackett was also in attendance for NRCS and echoed Tom’s comments.

* **The Nature Conservancy:**Kelsey Molloy, based out of Malta, reported that The Nature Conservancy has been working with landowners in the Musselshell Plains on bird surveys, and have actually doubled the amount of surveys they’ve completed this year. The results from those surveys should be available in January or February. She also noted that their candidate conservation agreement with assurances program, which is aimed at managing land for grassland song birds and sage grouse, has almost 150,000 acres enrolled now. The grassbank at the Matador is doing well, though they did have a hard year for grasshoppers. TNC is also currently working on an easement in Musselshell County, which just got partially- funded through MSGOT. The long term goal of the easement is to lower the price of the property so a group of young producers can purchase it. This is similar to TNC’s second creek project in South Phillips County where they purchased a property with scattered pieces as well as a few surrounding properties, so that local producers could purchase the land and integrate it into their own operations.
* **Senator Steve Daines:** Robin Baker, field staff for Sen. Steve Daines out of the Great Falls office, reported that they try to be involved in the CMR CWG meetings as much as possible. The CMR area includes about 3 different field rep areas, however, so there are a few other faces that may hop onto future meetings. She reported that Alison Vergeront, Sen. Daines’ ag liaison and field representative for the Hi-Line, has transitioned into a role with Montana Grain Growers, and Robin is currently covering those issues while they search for a replacement.
* **Winnett ACES**: Brent Smith, coordinator for the Winnett ACES, reported that the group has had a busy year. Their beef in schools program is continuing to be very active, helping guarantee local schools are eating local beef. They’ve also continued working on ag education, both for producers and consumers. They’re currently working in partnership with the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance to increase the capacity in this endeavor. The group’s wildlife working group worked closely with MT FWP to modify management practices in hunting district 410, specifically to target the elk population. In response to this communication, FWP altered their quotas and tag distribution and the group looks forward to seeing if this has an effect on the population in the future. He also reported that Laura Nowlin has been busy with the Community Enhancement Committee, and just completed a feasibility study for the rehabilitation and restoration of the Petroleum County Courthouse. It will turn the top floor into office spaces and living quarters. In 2019, they had their first grassbank test run with six producers. They’re working closely on this project with RSA. He also reported that Winnett ACES has been able to benefit 19,000 acres of grazing land by putting in 9 miles of wildlife friendly fence, 15+ miles of pipeline, and 12 stocktanks with plans to do more of these projects in 2021. They were also able to assist in modifying 13.5 miles of fencing for sage-grouse and antelope. Overall, these projects constituted a $270,000 match from local landowners. Winnett ACES also received grant funding to hire a Pheasants Forever rangeland biologist this next year.
* **Musselshell Watershed Coalition:** Laura Nowlin, coordinator for the Musselshell Watershed Coalition, reported that the group’s main function is to operate as a communication forum for the watershed. MWC hosted two Big Sky Watershed Corps members who helped with salinity monitoring in the area and weed mapping in Petroleum and Wheatland County. She also reported that they’ve been involved in the effort to fund gauging stations as critical infrastructure. On the Musselshell, they work with a wide range of partners who all pay into the use of the gauging stations. She recommended that the CMR CWG join this conversation and promote the continued use of gauging stations on the Missouri River as well. MWC also completed a floodplain reconnection project in the Roundup Reach – an area that was regularly experiencing flooding. Now that the area has been reclaimed, they’re considering turning it into a county park. Laura also noted that the Coalition received grant funding to do strategic planning. They’re also updating their Musselshell Watershed Plan, which is an opportunity for any individual or organization along the river to submit projects, such as a bank restoration or weed projects. That process is just beginning now and will eventually serve as the group’s work plan. MWC is also very involved in the Central and Eastern MT Invasive Species Team.
* **Ranchers Stewardship Alliance:** Laura Nelson, project leader for RSA, joined her first CMR CWG meeting to report that the RSA has experienced a lot of growth in the last year. The group went from 0 employees to 4 employees in one year – 3 part-time and 1 full-time position that will start in mid-January. She noted that their biggest wins have been seen in their Conservation Committee, which is a collaborative effort of every state or federal governmental entity, NGOs, and landowners involved in the area. Since receiving NFWF grant funding three years ago, the group has worked with 38 ranch families to impact more than 50,000 acres – whether that be grazing land enhancement or restoration. Starting in 2021, RSA will be hosting a Rural Resilience webinar series on the third Thursday of each month featuring various speakers to discuss topics from grazing management practices to soil health. They’re also starting a Ranch Stewards book club, which will include monthly meetings and webinars. RSA will provide the first 20 books for those who want to join the community effort! Laura also noted that one of the group’s biggest long-term goals is to have a rancher-owned, rancher-led grassbank for beginning ranchers. Overall, RSA wants to cultivate a culture of mentorship – providing good opportunities for new stewards. Their annual meeting is coming up on January 12th in Malta.
* **American Prairie Reserve:** Daniel Kinka, wildlife restoration manager for the APR, noted that they had a successful field season this year. They were also able to accomplish the first of five swift fox reintroductions on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which served as a facilitated migration of the species. He also discussed the APR’s Wild Sky program which promotes wildlife friendly ranching outside of the reserve, such as paying landowners for photos of wildlife on their property. The program had 8 participating ranches encompassing 40,000 total acres in Central Montana. In 2020, APR spent a lot of time trying to improve the Wild Sky program.

Damien Austin also joined on behalf of the APR. He noted that they’ve started the renovation project of their building in downtown Lewistown, estimating their completion date sometime in the summer of 2021. The space will include conference rooms, kids play room, and exhibit area once completed. While 2020 had a slow start, APR did experience their highest visitor numbers this year. They acquired the Blue Ridge property in South Phillips County, which they’ve opened up for hunting opportunities, and also harvested 25 bison between their other properties. APR is currently getting ready for a bison gathering in January, and Damien welcomed anyone interested in attending to get ahold of him.

* **Montana State University – Resources & Communities Research Group:** Dr.Julia Haggertynoted that they have multiple publications coming out soon that build on work that’s been done with the CMR CWG and the surrounding region; one of which is a literature review that considers what a conservation agenda might look like in Central Montana given the science of many different factors, such as rangeland management and climate change. Another paper focuses on how high net-worth ranch owners approach ranch and wildlife management. She also noted that she’s been active in a project that focuses on rural water infrastructure in the Judith, which has a lot of parallels to things she’s witnessed in the CMR region as well. In 2021, they’d like to bring the Grasslands Resilience Working Group back for a fieldtrip like they’ve done in the past. One topic she would be interested in the CMR CWG engaging in is the FWP elk planning process next year.
* **Garfield County Commissioner:** Jerry Collinsreported that Garfield County is trying to finish up the Lodgepole Fire FEMA grants that the County received in 2017. They had a smaller fire that almost went through Jordan this summer as well. Garfield County has a nursing home clinic, so COVID has been a topic of concern for the community. He also reported that the county would be introducing another bison bill through MACo that will address per-capita fees during the next legislative session.
* **Petroleum CD:** Carie Hess, administrator for Petroleum CD, said that Petroleum County Conservation District is working on their 4-year long range plan. In 2021, she’s hoping she can get a few of her board members to begin participating in CMR CWG meetings as well.
* **Dan Scott Ranch Management Program – MSU:** Rachel Frost reported that they recently accepted four new students into the program that will start with internships this summer. She said the group is diverse; three women and one man will make up the class, all with varied aspirations - some wanting to return to the family ranch and others to pursue professional ranch management positions. The program hosted a successful virtual conference with Bob Milligan to discuss leadership for farm and ranch employees. They’ve also been working closely with Winnett ACES and others on the new BeefMT program to offer expertise from MSU and Extension, as well as foster a relationship between the Dan Scott Ranch Management Program so that the two programs are complementary and not duplicative. She noted that they’re always looking for intern ranches as well! Their outreach program will continue through the New Year with a webinar series on the Endangered Species Act occurring on January 26th.
* **World Wildlife Fund:** Claire Hood reported that they secured funding in late 2019 to restore approximately 80,000 acres of marginal cropland back to grassland. They are still looking for additional acres, however, and encouraged anyone interested in seeding marginal cropland back to grass to let her know. There is potential for additional funding to be offered in 2021. She did note that they had seen an increase in perennial cover (any cropland that’s been restored) in the Northern Great Plains of about 440,000, but 550,000 acres of grassland were still converted in 2018. This information is all included in their Plow Print, which can be found on [www.plowprint.org](http://www.plowprint.org). She also noted that the conversion rate was higher in Central MT than in the surrounding Northern Great Plains, which could be a result of higher commodity prices. WWF also started the Ranch Systems and Viability Planning Network in 2020 which is an effort to work across 1 million acres by 2025 to increase grazing management planning and adaptive management using monitoring, technical assistance, and education and cost-share support. She also shared that WWF hired a new program manager, Alexis, for the Sustainable Ranching Initiative this week. Lastly, Claire notified the group of her plans to pursue veterinary school which will prevent her from working full time starting January 8th. She also recommended the CMR CWG look at the Central Grasslands Roadmap as a potential meeting topic for 2021.
* **Petroleum/Fergus County NRCS:** Mike Lucas reported that Petroleum County is working on a fuel-reduction TIP that would address 1,800 acres of private land as well as 2,700 acres through cooperation with the BLM. In Fergus County, they have a forestland improvement TIP in the Little Snowies as well as a low-tech restoration TIP near Black Butte and Bear Creek area. They’ve also been contributing technical assistance to the Winnett ACES Conservation Committee. He also noted an RCPP is being submitted for big game habitat improvement in Blaine, Phillips, Valley, Fergus and Petroleum Counties. This could include fencing projects and grass seedings. He encouraged anyone interested in developing potential TIPS to reach out.

Reba Ahlgren was also into attendance for Petroleum County NRCS.

* **DNRC Rangeland Resources Program:** Stacey Barta, coordinator for the Rangeland Resources Program, reported that they’ve been highly impacted by COVID because of the associated travel restrictions and limits to social gatherings. Instead, she’s taken advantage of the extra time in the office by working on their monthly newsletter. She also noted that the Program has partner agreement funding available if anyone is interested in putting together workshops or tours that she could help facilitate in 2021. She’s also working on the Program’s first ever strategic plan as well the first ever biennial report and administrative rules for the Rangeland Improvement Loan program. Lastly, she delivered the news that she’s working with Rachel Frost on putting together a grazing school in Bozeman next year.
* **Healthy Watershed Consortiums Initiative:**  Autumn Christenson introduced herself and the work that she does through the HWCI. Her focus is to build capacity for protection initiatives within the Missouri River watershed. She works closely with the Missouri River Conservation Districts Council by helping implement the Ranching for Rivers program they run in partnership with SWCDM.
* **Garfield County CD:** Dean Rogge shared that they had a successful year at Garfield County Conservation District, despite COVID. They continued operating the AIS inspections stations at Flowing Wells and Wibaux and intercepted multiple infested boats. He noted that they have another year of data collection on their pilot monitoring project. He said he can only hope for more rain, better cattle prices and fewer grasshoppers next year!

Dusty Olson also joined on behalf of Garfield County CD.

* **Fergus County Commission:** Carl Sielstad, Fergus County Commissioner, noted that he’s enjoying the warm weather in Fergus County and that it’s allowed them to get quite a bit of work done in the road department. He also said that they’ve hired a new weed coordinator, so he recommended bringing her back up to speed with the salt cedar work that’s been done. Lastly, he said that like, Jerry, they’re gearing up for the legislative session.
* **CMR National Wildlife Refuge:** Paul Santavy, project leader for the CMR NWR, introduced himself and the CMR NWR, which is one refuge in a 6-refuge area. He noted that it had been a challenging year for the USFWS and NWR but that they did have a fairly good field season, despite COVID. They did experience a few program casualties – limited partner engagement and fuel management reduction program as they were prohibited from doing their prescribed burning in the spring. It did allow them additional time to plan for fire suppression season and how COVID plays into those management plans. Overall though, it was a fairly quiet fire season, which allowed them to send their fire teams to other fires in California and Colorado. They just finished 21 miles of fence reconstruction from the fires in 2017 and are set to start another 14 mile rebuild.

He also noted that road maintenance has been a focus for the CMR NWR, with over 700 miles of road within 6 counties. He said they were able to make really great progress on those roads before hunting season, however. While they’re unable to track the number of visitors they have each year, they believe this was one of their highest visitation years to date between hunting season and camping.

They continue doing salt cedar work along the Missouri River bottoms and this year was their second year of Japanese brome monitoring. He noted that the invasive grass has increased in prominence since the 2017 drought, so they’re trying to build a better understanding of how vast the infestation is. They had intended to do a late fall treatment, but the storms in late October set them back a year. Lastly, he noted the large impact the invasive grass, ventenata, could have on the landscape.

Tom Watson noted that there are several targeted implementation plans focused on these grasses in eastern MT.