

Western Montana RAC Meeting Notes

Butte Field Office

3/31/2009

RAC Members Present: Dan Lucas, Mack Long, Sam Samson, Richard Young, Michael Gibson, Nate Finch, Francis Auld, Corby Anderson, Mitzi Rossillon, Karolin Jappe-Loendorf, Russell Kipp

RAC Members Absent: Jack Kirkley, Steve Flynn, David Schulz, Wayne Farley

BLM Staff Present: Tim Bozorth (Dillon Field Office Manager), Nancy Anderson (Missoula Field Office Manager), Rick Hotaling (Butte Field Office Manager), David Abrams (Public Affairs Specialist)

Guests: Joni Packard (Forest Service - Regional Recreation RAC Coordinator and Fee Program Coordinator),

The meeting was called to order at 9:15 a.m. Administrative details were taken care of and introductions were made.

RAC Overview (History/Purpose/Responsibilities):

For the benefit of new RAC members, Rick Hotaling gave an overview of the RAC:

The original Resource Advisory Council (RAC) came about when President Clinton took office and agencies were given instructions from the Department to work on grazing regulations – it was called rangeland reform. Out of those grazing regulations came the idea of a Resource Advisory Council; to advise the BLM on grazing issues. Later, the RAC's role was expanded to giving the BLM advice on all department resources. The RAC was started during the Clinton Administration, it was carried through with George W. Bush's Administration, and the indication we have from the Obama Administration is that they like the RAC.

The RAC was set up with 3 diverse categories (category 1 – the general public land users which represent grazing interests, mining, timber, commercial recreation, etc.; category 2 – the historical, non-governmental organizations; and category 3 – state and other elected officials – county officials and public at large). It was designed that way to get all those different groups at the table, talking about the variety of issues facing the BLM and trying to reach consensus on giving advice to the BLM. The very first job this RAC was given was to develop the Standards & Guidelines, for livestock grazing. In fact all the RACs across the Western United States were given that charge. So we developed those standards which are still in use today by all the BLM offices, for how we evaluate our rangeland assessments.

Since that time, the RAC grew beyond its roots and has taken on a lot of other issues, including travel management. The Western RAC was responsible for the state-wide joint EIS on Off Highway Vehicles that the Forest Service and the BLM produced, based off of recommendations from this RAC. A lot of the travel management that is being done by both the Forest Service and the BLM is a direct result of the emphasis given by the RAC. Then we went into our planning process and the RAC was really involved in assisting us with our different Resource Management Plans – the one in Dillon and the one in Butte. We are now into the phase of implementing those plans so we've moved on to the next generation of work load.

The purpose of the RAC has always been to give advice to the BLM and provide us with some direction the RAC would like the bureau to take on some issues. The only thing the RAC is prevented from providing the BLM advice on is personnel matters and how we spend our budget. Everything else is open for advice. We have a charter that we renew every so many years.

Dan Lucas added that the power in having a diverse group is bringing a broad range of opinions and thought processes to come to some resolution on things. The frustration in that at times can be it takes time to work through some of these things. To give you an idea of the time it took to develop those standards and guidelines – it took about a year and a half to get that done. So a word of advice from Dan – don't get frustrated when things take some time to work through because if an issue comes to the RAC it's because there is probably public interest in the issue and it's not something you can sit down and simply get done. It will take some discussion time.

The RAC voting system is – thumbs down if you don't like the idea; horizontal thumb if it “doesn't exactly light your fire” but you can live with it; and thumbs up if you like it. What we strive for is for everyone around the table to either have a sideways thumb or thumbs up. Tim pointed out that the managers don't vote.

Dan said it's been a great working relationship with the BLM and the RAC. Some of the things the BLM can use the RAC for are hot button issues and it's a good place for the RAC to act as the sounding board and provide for some input that is broad based. So it gives the BLM the opportunity to say they do have broad-based input. And there are subgroups built for some issues, like we had with the North Hills Shooting issue. So not only can the RAC bring issues to the BLM but the BLM has been very good about bringing issues to the RAC. The RAC input really does have an influence on decisions, so you're not sitting here wasting time.

Tim Bozorth gave examples of subgroups for the Dillon RMP – there were subgroups on wild and scenic rivers, on areas of critical environmental concern (60 some areas were nominated for ACECs), and travel management. What we said going into that process was that the subgroup could come up with a recommendation and the RAC would make a consensus recommendation, and that's what would go into the Preferred Alternative in the RMP. And that's what we did, especially for travel management – that's what we are implementing now. Another one was Reservoir Creek, which was a contentious Allotment Management Plan revision and we had a subgroup come together who came up with a recommendation that we have been implementing.

Rick asked if there were any questions regarding the RAC. He said the regulations state that if the RAC provides a recommendation to the BLM and the BLM chooses not to follow that recommendation, the RAC has the authority to write a letter to the Secretary of the Interior telling the Secretary that the BLM is ignoring the RAC's recommendation. That has never happened with this RAC. Rick mentioned that the North Hills shooting issue is a difficult issue, which the RAC gave the BLM a recommendation on.

Dick Young brought up the quorum issue, which can be problematic. Rick said that without a quorum the RAC cannot make recommendations to the BLM. A quorum means there has to be a majority of representation from each of the groups. In fact the lack of a quorum was one of the reasons the RAC did not have a meeting in September. Other reasons for not having a meeting in September were issues with GovTrip (the government's electronic travel system), a delay in signing off on the appointments of new members, and a temporary halt on the Federal Register Notices. Russell asked what constitutes a quorum. Rick responded that you have to have a majority in each category. So, three in each category is required for a quorum.

Election of New Officers Discussion:

Nancy said nominations are now open until April 13th. Dan and Dick cannot be reappointed because they have already done two terms in a row, so at least two positions need to be filled. The other folks can be re-nominated for another three year term. David Abrams has the nomination packet electronically, so he can send that to folks if they know of anyone who might be interested in serving on the RAC. The two categories nominations are needed for are “at large” (Category 3) and conservation (Category 2). Corby, Nate and Steve can all be re-nominated for another three year term if they are interested, but they need to get a packet and get a letter of recommendation turned in. Nancy mentioned that they prefer to have two nominations for each position.

Dan Lucas facilitated the Election of Officers:

Nate Finch nominated Mack Long for the office of Chair for the next year.

- **Mack Long was selected for Chairman of the RAC.**

Mack Long nominated Nate Finch for the office of Vice-Chair

- **Nate Finch was selected for Vice-Chairman of the RAC.**

Field Office Overviews:

Missoula Field Office Update (Nancy Anderson):

The Missoula Field Office is primarily forested, so a lot of the work in the office has to do with timber sales and fuel hazard reduction. The field office also manages Garnet Ghost Town and about 10 miles on the lower Blackfoot, so there is also a pretty big recreation program, along with listed species like the Canada Lynx, Bull Trout and Grizzly Bears. Work is planned based on the watersheds; the office is laid out by watersheds.

Ecosystem Management at the Watershed Scale (EAWS)

We issued the Decision Record on our Rock Creek Environmental Assessment (EA). This EA covers 11,700 acres of public land. It also included 11 rangeland health assessments. The protest/appeal periods have passed and there were no protests or appeals.

We have begun work on the Marcum Mountain EAWS. This assessment covers approximately 13,000 acres of public land. We will be holding a public meeting the end of April in Ovando to discuss the project. The EAWS will be completed this year and the EA/Decision Record is scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2010. That includes about 6,000 acres the BLM recently acquired from the Nature Conservancy as part of the Blackfoot Community Project.

Partnerships

Multi – agency Integrated Restoration Strategy – this effort, being led by DNRC, is focused on bringing various state and federal agencies together to work on priority landscapes. The group has identified an area in the Blackfoot as its next project area. Agencies are trying to coordinate projects and look at implementing projects by 2011. Dick Young asked if the Blackfoot had gotten involved and Nancy responded that the Blackfoot Challenge may be somewhat involved (the Challenge is involved in terms of helping to coordinate). Both Nancy and Mack Long are on the board of the Blackfoot Challenge.

Ram Mountain Allotment (out of the Rock Creek Assessment) – Dan Lucas has been involved with this as well. We have been having a series of meetings with our leasee and 3 extension agents to develop a grazing plan for the allotment. Our rangeland health assessment showed that it was not meeting standards and we have been working cooperatively to develop alternatives to consider in our EA. Nate Finch asked what the main issues are with the allotment and Nancy responded riparian and some upland issues. The allotment is forested, with some natural openings and the cattle congregate in the riparian areas. Nancy and Dan said the permittee runs 160 cows on the allotment, for about 400 AUMs on BLM from May 20th – October 31st (it's intermingled with private). The allotment did have an AMP, but it wasn't working, so other strategies are being looked at now, such as a deferred rotation. Russell asked if the riparian area is the only water source and Nancy responded that there are other sources; Dan said it should work out with the timing (deferred grazing) and there are some alternatives as far as off-site water or with fencing.

Clark Fork Integrated Weed Strategy – The Department of Interior and ARCO have signed the Consent Decree for the Clark Fork superfund site. The Missoula Field Offices manages 15 scattered tracts along the Clark Fork River which were covered by the decree. We will be receiving approximately \$300,000 as part of the settlement which will be used to treat weeds. The Consent Decree was the result of over ten years of negotiations. We have begun coordinating with Missoula County to conduct a survey of the Clark Fork to map weed infestations as a first step in the process.

Forest Management

Garnet salvage/Ax Men – This sale was purchased by R&R Conner in November 2007. Work on the sale began last year. Approximately 3.5 MMBF of bug-killed timber will be harvested in the 4,100 acre contract area. We also issued a permit for filming the operation. Episodes of the operation have begun airing on the Ax Men television series on the History Channel (8:00/Mondays). Garnet Stewardship Project – this project is treating approximately 300 acres around the ghost towns of Garnet and Coloma. The majority of the merchantable volume has been removed. Approximately 2 miles of interpretive trail is being constructed under the contract.

Bear Creek Flat Timber Sale and Flint Rock Timber Sale – these two sales were offered last year. No bids were received. We're looking at other options to get some of the work done.

Hoodoos Timber Sale – we plan to offer this sale in mid-May (approximately 5 MMBF on 900 acres). DNRC is offering a sale in the same general area.

Dillon Field Office Update:

The Bureau of Land Management is planning several prescribed burns in the Dillon area during the upcoming spring months. The burns are planned for the following areas:

- 1) The Highland Mountains, near Camp Creek and McCartney Mountain—approximately 30 miles north of Dillon—approximately 500 acres in size. The primary objective of the prescribed burns is to reduce the number of young conifers that are encroaching sagebrush/grassland habitat. The burns will also promote habitat biodiversity.
- 2) The Horse Prairie area, near Bannock Pass—approximately 35 miles southwest of Dillon—approximately 200 acres in size. Objectives are the same as above.
- 3) The Wisconsin Creek area, near Sheridan, MT—approximately 300 acres in size. The objectives of this prescribed burn are to reduce conifer encroachment, and also reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland-urban interface.
- 4) Barton Gulch, approximately 6 miles east of Ruby Reservoir—approximately 200 acres in size. The multiple objectives of this prescribed burn are to consume slash generated by a recent BLM timber sale, reduce hazardous fuels, and to enhance forest health.

Dick asked if the BLM does the burning – wouldn't that be part of the contract in a timber sale? Tim said in this case it's not part of the contract. Nancy said that a lot of times, the purchaser contributes the money to have the BLM do the burning (contributed funds). It is their choice. The slash is often not burned until a year or so after the sale. Sam asked about weed control and Nancy said you often have contributed funds for weed control or road maintenance.

The timing of these burns is dependent on weather and fuel conditions. Generally, the spring prescribed burning season wraps up in June due to vegetation green-up. The prescribed burns will be implemented by fire mangers and firefighters from the BLM, the Forest Service and the Montana DNRC.

Like Missoula, we are doing our rangeland health assessments, our watershed assessments on a watershed basis. We started in Upper Horse Prairie in 2002 and this summer we will complete watershed assessments in the Big Hole and Madison watersheds. So we will have done close to 900,000 acres of assessment. We are developing the EAs for the watershed assessments conducted in the summer of 2008 and plan to get those out this summer. These were the East Bench, Rochester Basin and East Highlands Watersheds.

Beaverhead West (91,000 acres and 51 grazing allotments) and Red Rocks (53,000 acres and 23 allotments) EAs were signed last fall and have been appealed by the Western Watersheds Project. A hearing is scheduled for October 20th in Dillon on Beaverhead West.

We are preparing the EAs for last year's watershed assessments in Rochester Basin (32,500 acres and 22 grazing allotments), East Pioneer's (27,000 acres and 16 grazing allotments), and East bench (20,000 acres and 12 grazing allotments). We have renewed all Term Grazing Permits.

Seasonal hires for this summer include: Park Rangers in Dillon and Ennis, 4 Weed laborers, an archeologist seasonal, 4 Range techs, 3 Bio Techs, 3 Forestry techs, 1 Fish Tech, and as many as 8 laborers. 26 total.

We have recently had our Law Enforcement Officer move to Billings, a Long Term Career Seasonal Park Ranger and Permanent Park Ranger move on and we have filled these vacancies. We have also filled a new position which

is a Long Term Career Seasonal Laborer. Dick asked if the Park Ranger does any law enforcement and Tim responded no – Dillon only has one Law Enforcement Officer.

We recently completed the communication site plans for two new communications sites (Antelope Peak in the Centennial Valley and Sierra east of Dillon) as part of the Interoperability Montana Project to upgrade communications. The construction of these sites is funded by the Department of Homeland Security and the State of Montana. We are working with Beaverhead and Madison Counties on this project. Dick asked if it is a cell phone tower and Tim responded no – you can't do that with this money. This is a state project. They've also done quite a bit of work up on the High-line.

We completed the Mauer Mtn. site and are working with Madison County on the Virginia City Hill site.

We have three areas we will offer for timber sales this year, Shale Creek near Polaris, N1 on the north side of the Centennial and Phase 1 of the South Tobacco Roots. Shale Creek is 230 acres and 800 MBF. N1 is 85 acres and 140 MBF and Phase 1 of the STR is ~720 acres and 4.5 MMBF The Price Creek/Bean Creek Aspen Treatment/Salvage on 1,200 acres involving 2.5 MMBF will take place this summer.

In conjunction with MTFWP we have implemented the joint Special Recreation Permits for commercial use on the Madison River. The Madison River is the most heavily fished river in Montana 167,000 visitor use days in 2007. ~190 outfitters will be under SRP in 2009.

Work on recreational facilities on the Madison River includes:

- Construction of the Windy Point Boat Launch.
- At Canady Boat Launch we are making modification to address erosion from last falls high water.
- At Story Ditch we are graveling the road and parking area with $\frac{3}{4}$ minus.

At Palisades we are finalizing the design for maintenance of the campground and boat launch. This construction will take place in 2010.

The land exchange for lands on the Big Hole River is proceeding, which is about 92 acres on the Big Hole just to the West of The Notch.

Last summer Geophysical Exploration was conducted west of Lima. The project involved State, USFS, BLM and private lands.

The project to remove mine tailings from Rochester Creek (NW of Twin Bridges) has been completed – the tailings were trucked to Golden Sunlight Mine and processed. BLM will conduct the reclamation of the site consisting of spreading topsoil and reseeding. This was a previous abandoned mine reclamation project prior a claim being filed upon the tailings.

The Mountain States Transmission Intertie Project, a 500 kV line (NW Energy) from Townsend to Midpoint Idaho is in the Draft EIS Phase. The Draft is expected to be out sometime this fall. The alternatives for analysis have been selected. Dick and Sam asked which route they had picked. Tim said there is different than the energy corridor. NW Energy has to have a preferred alternative identified. DEQ will have a preferred alternative in the Draft. The BLM does not identify a preferred alternative in the draft. There have been some routes dropped that the BLM didn't consider viable. The BLM thoroughly looked at everything that was suggested. Michael asked if some of the routes coincide with the corridor. Tim responded that the corridor is only on federal land. There were a couple of segments identified along the interstate, down in the Monida/Lima area that were worked on with the Washington Office and the contractor to identify where those corridors should be and part of Northwestern's proposal is in those corridors, both in MT and ID.

Since 2006 there have been 145,680 acres nominated for oil and gas leasing. 78,205 acres were leased to date. Dick asked if some of the leases were in Riparian areas. Tim responded that there are set-backs on all streams and

riparian areas for fisheries, etc. There were some areas nominated that were in close proximity to the Beaverhead, but none of those were leased. Karolin asked why, when Montana has more oil and gas leases than North Dakota, why is North Dakota's revenue so much higher? Tim answered – because theirs is worth a lot more. In North Dakota, you can get thousands of barrels a day from some of the wells. In Montana, where they are leasing in Beaverhead and Madison counties, they have never had a producing well and they are bidding \$2-\$10/acre whereas in ND, they are bidding \$2,000/acre. We have more leased acres in MT, but the land has less potential for oil and gas development. For instance in Beaverhead County, there have been 44 dry holes drilled in the last 25-30 years.

Corby explained that energy and mining is a risk-based industry. If they knew what was deep below the surface of the earth, they wouldn't explore – exploration is a very expensive proposition. He said that one of the first expenses to be slashed is exploration because there is no immediate payback. Karolin asked about how the recent earthquakes could affect oil and gas and it was suggested that she talk to Mike Stickley at MT Tech.

Tim said they still don't have an application for a permit to drill so there have been no wells proposed. Nate asked if there had been some seismic work done and Tim responded yes – the seismic work that was done last summer. Tim said if there were to be a permit to drill, they would have to go through the environmental assessment process.

Michael asked about the Madison user fee, commenting that there were some concerns raised on the process. Tim responded that they had done a lot of education up-front on that. It has gone pretty well for the most part. There was some concern and they are still trying to figure out how to make the log books more user-friendly and maybe fulfill more than one objective, but they haven't found a way to not have the log books as a check for whether or not things are getting reported. That was part of what industry wanted in the first place – a check on whether or not people were reporting their trips. Considering the effort that went into enforcement last year, the compliance from people last year and the feedback the outfitters provided to FW&P and BLM on the process, it went really well. The Madison River Foundation will be hosting a session on the Madison in mid-May and BLM and FWP will go to that and listen to what the guides have to say. Michael asked if there had been any decline in outfitter use last year and Tim responded no. Dick asked if they are still looking at the possibility of limiting trips on the Madison. Tim said some survey work has been initiated on the Madison, to look at displacement and visitor satisfaction and that work will continue this year. There has not been a group put together to initiate meetings and start the formal process, but the data collection part of river management rule process is under way. Limiting use is only one of a host of options down the road. After the Beaverhead/Big Hole process, there is a whole new process that FWP goes through, but it's different than what went on there. Mack Long said they are doing it on the Blackfoot now – it's called the RRAFT (River Recreation Advisory For Tomorrow) Committee, and it's made up of a cross-section of land owners, general river recreationists, outfitters and guides, BLM, FWP and some at-large members. They are looking at various issues and have been working very hard to try to come up with the next step in the process. But they are not doing that on the Madison yet.

Butte Field Office Update:

The Record Of Decision (ROD) for the Butte Resource Management Plan (RMP) is currently in Washington, awaiting approval from the Director of the BLM. It was actually done January 15th. It is a non-controversial RMP. Any controversy will most likely be centered on the travel management portion of it. It is not a major energy RMP. The potential for oil and gas here is very low. We hope the ROD will be signed soon; RAC members will receive a copy of the ROD when the press release goes out with it.

Butte Field Office (BFO) Weed Management Plan: An EA is being put together that will address how we will address weeds in the BFO. We now have a weed person "on board" who is working on this – that plan will soon be released for review.

A Whitetail Basin Land Owner (near Whitehall) sprayed herbicide to eliminate sagebrush. When they eliminated it on the private land, they also eliminated it on BLM ground. The BLM was in the process of doing an exchange with that individual to acquire their private ground. We ended up with money for damages that were done to the public land, so we are working on a restoration project to restore that sagebrush habitat out there.

We are continuing with our rangeland health assessments. We don't do them by watershed because we don't have the large blocks of land; we do them by allotments. We have, however, undertaken some landscape type issues – we are trying to incorporate our rangeland health assessments into a landscape with other issues. The next big area we are going to work in is near Townsend, in the Elkhorn Mountains – the Iron Mask property we acquired a couple of years ago. We need to develop some management for it which includes implementing decisions from the RMP.

One of our big issues is the Maiden Rock Phosphate Mine closure. This is an area where they started mining for phosphate at the base of the mountain and mined up until “they could see the roots of the grass above”. We have sink holes that have developed, areas that have caved in, a land bridge that crosses over a trench that is about 1200 feet deep. So we are working on a plan to do an abandonment of that area. This is not just a single mine site. It is actually several miles long, with over a hundred different features. Corby asked if the PRP was Tech Cominco. Rick said yes – it was theirs. They mined the site in the 1980s and abandoned the site. The BLM released them as the PRP because it was not considered a hazardous site at the time – it is an abandoned mine. The BLM accepted their abandonment of the mine in the 1980s and gave their bond back to them. At the time, you couldn't get into the mine; some of these features just started developing – it just started eroding away. We have a contractor who went out there last summer and surveyed the site. It runs for several miles. There was a mine shaft out there with dynamite in it (from a different mine). The BLM and the ATF blew up the dynamite last year and closed up that mine shaft. Dick said, so this will be a reclamation site? Rick said yes, it is a public health and safety hazard. Fortunately, it is not easily reached and cannot be seen from the river or the railroad track. Russell mentioned that there were three mines in that canyon – the Maiden Rock, the LaMarche and the Trapper Creek mines.

Still working on the North Hills Shooting Issue – we have an EA we are ready to go forward with. We are currently in the process of briefing our State Office. Once we decide the direction we are going to take, we'll start writing the Federal Register Notice if we're going to implement a shooting restriction there. The Bureau signed an agreement with various sporting groups and before we can do any shooting restrictions, we need to contact the sporting organizations to let them know we are considering proposing a shooting restriction.

An issue we will be bringing to the RAC is the Dohoeffer Cabin – a cabin site on Bear Gulch, approximately 1-2 miles from the Big Hole River. It is an old lease that was issued in the 1950s to WWII and Korean War veterans from a lottery. With this recreational lease, the leasee was required to build a cabin on the land, and was to maintain the lease for the life of the leasee. This individual built his cabin in 1954, but has recently passed away. The lease is now terminated and we now have a private cabin on public land. We need to determine what to do with the cabin; how it will be managed. We are now working with the heirs of the Dohoeffers, to see if they would like to remove the cabin, as it is considered private property. If they decide not to remove the cabin, then the cabin and the property will go to the BLM. If they decline to move the cabin, we will be coming to the RAC for recommendations. One of the options we don't have – we cannot reissue the lease or transfer the lease to the Dohoeffer heirs. Dick asked if the BLM can buy the cabin. Rick and Tim explained that the only option the Dohoeffer heirs have is to remove the cabin or it reverts to the government.

Wise River Project – we issued the ROD on that a couple of weeks ago. The project goes from Wise River to Divide, on the south side of the river. It is a forest restoration project in which we are addressing issues including, spruce budworm, south mountain pine beetle, the Doug Fir beetle, and encroachment of some of the Aspen stands – trying to open it up to increase elk habitat. We will start working on the implementation of that this year.

Spokane Bay Recreation Site – this is a boat-in only site on Hauser Lake in Spokane Bay. We will be putting in some docks and toilets there.

The next project we'll be taking on is related to the cooperative project Nancy mentioned that started in Butte and ended up on the Blackfoot. Along with that, we will be working on the area from Jerry Creek to Johnson Creek, on the North side of the Big Hole. The Forest Service is going to start on their portion working with DNRC on the Mt. Haggin Game Range and we will start on the BLM portion which is basically from the Big Hole up to the Forest Service Boundary, between Jerry and Johnson Creek. We will be starting that next year.

We are finishing up the Graymont Mine, which is the Indian Creek Mine expansion, a limestone mine out of Townsend. The draft EIS was out for public comments. We are now working on responses to the comments.

The Limestone Hills Withdrawal is no longer in the Butte Field Office. It is now in the Montana State Office and they are almost ready to ship it to Washington, where they will start writing the legislation to transfer Limestone Hills National Guard Training Area to the Department of Defense.

Dick asked if the BLM is doing anything about the beetle kill. Rick responded that the BFO has done two large projects in the last year. One was around the Great Divide Ski Area just outside of Helena, where the BLM did a fairly significant timber harvest to thin out a lot of the dead and dying trees. The other major project was up the Big Hole River, up Deep Creek. The only problem is that some of the lumber mills have shut down, so they are not accepting the timber. We need to get the trees to the mill, to get the bark stripped to kill the beetles; otherwise, when the cut trees are left sitting, the beetles are still viable and will fly. We are actually shipping some of the logs to Smurfitt-Stone so they can use them for pulp. The Wise River project is also in part, to address the pine beetle infestation. The problem is that the beetles are moving too fast to keep up with – there is more than we can ever deal with. Dan brought up the fact that Canada has a worse problem than the US. They are looking at the possibility of losing 80% of their forest. They are cutting theirs and dumping it on the US market. Tim added that all our forestry treatments are forest health based. None of them are commercial, just for the lumber. Dick asked if anything that is being done is really effective. Rick said the BLM is doing a combination of thinning and then using pheromones and there has been some limited success with that combination. The BLM is working with the Forest Service entomologists to come with treatments. Dick asked about funding from the stewardship plan or to co-venture with a lumber company and Rick said the BLM is working some aspects of trying to do that, with biomass for the schools, etc. The big issue is to get the bark stripped off.

Nate asked what the foresters are saying regarding a timeline since these infestations have always been cyclical. Tim responded that the Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF, which is about 3.5 million acres, had a million acres that was bug kill in 2007; in 2008 that went up 600,000 acres. So now they have 1.6 million acres of the 3.5 million that is dead and that is the progression. Nate commented that doesn't mean all the trees are dead in those acres. But Rick said that you lose everything of a certain size (5" or greater); however, in Canada they are finding that the bugs are getting into the smaller trees as well. Rick said it simply needs to run its course – there's not a lot we can do about it. As far as the fire issue – they are only a fire issue for a couple of years while the needles are still on the trees. Once the needles drop, the fire danger drops significantly until the trees fall over.

Three Tier – the Bureau made a decision last year to change the organization structure from Two Tier (Field Office and State Office, with the Field Offices reporting to the State Director in Billings) – to a Three Tier Structure (Field Office, District Office, and State Office). Based on that, we are implementing the Western MT District (Butte, Missoula, Dillon). There will also be the Central MT District, the High-line District and the Eastern MT District. In this District, we have made the decision that we are not going to bring in a new District Manager. There will be Rick, Tim and Nancy as Field Office Managers and then Rick will be the District Manager for the Western MT District. The District Manager will be the designated federal official for the RAC.

Forest Service (FS) Recreation Fee Proposal Briefing: Joni Packard (Regional Recreation RAC Coordinator and Fee Program Coordinator for the Northern Region for the Forest Service - all of Montana, Northern Idaho, and North and South Dakota). There were no formal fee proposals for the RAC, so Joni gave an overview and an update on the fee program and the Forest Service Recreation Program. Since 1952, there has been a statute in place (the Independent Offices Appropriations Act) that directed all Federal agencies to charge or access a fee whenever a user receives a specialized benefit. The Forest Service started charging recreation fees for campgrounds in the early 1960s; in this region, we started charging in the 1970s. We collected those fees under the Land and Water Conservation Fund and those fees all went back to the treasury. In the mid-1980s, Congress realized that the agencies weren't keeping pace with the increasing use and maintenance of the facilities, but they didn't want to keep increasing the budgets for the main land management agencies. So they implemented an

experimental program called Recreation Fee Demo. Under that program, the agencies were allowed to test the idea of fee retention, so the fees were then retained by the agencies. As part of the legislation, the agencies were encouraged to be entrepreneurial, to be creative. In this region, we took a conservative approach. We piloted the idea of retaining fees for our rental cabins and we piloted the Ski Rendezvous at West Yellowstone (a 50 kilometer ski trail system). There is also the Heritage Expedition at the Nine-Mile Ranger Station, where we teach people backcountry skills. The fee authority under the fee demo program expired. There were some things that worked well and some that didn't. There was some controversy with some of the projects that were implemented under fee demo, such as charges for simply using the National Forest, charges for trailhead parking and overlooks, etc.

In 2004, Congress decided to continue allowing the agencies to charge and retain recreation fees. We added another federal agency – the Bureau of Reclamation. But because of some of the controversy under fee demo, Congress also gave some side-boards. They added additional public involvement requirements, for the Forest Service and BLM – working with a RAC, mandatory federal register notices if there is a new fee site, and each of the agencies have to put together public involvement guidelines in terms of outreach to the local communities. There are places we can and can't charge fees. For the Forest Service and BLM, we can charge for standard amenity fees (day use area), expanded amenity fees like for a cabin or an interpretive tour, we can charge for special recreation permits and can retain outfitter/guide fees. We can't charge an entrance fee (the NPS and USFW can). We can't charge for people who are just passing through an area, or for overlooks or just for parking.

The fee program continues to be controversial. We have a couple of national groups who are very opposed to charging fees for recreation facilities on federal lands. There are also a couple of local folks who are opposed to fees. Senator Baucus has been pretty strongly opposed to fee increases – he is very concerned about public land access. Last year Senator Baucus introduced legislation to appeal the Recreation Enhancement Act authority, but that didn't proceed very far. We continue to meet with the Senator and other congressional delegation members.

We have been working with this RAC to come up with a process and a methodology to allow us to charge fees appropriately, but also allow us to increase fees across a range of different fee site types that allows us to keep pace with inflation and continue to provide the services and facilities the public wants.

Joni gave out handouts, with an overview of the number of developed recreation fee sites, by forest. Under the Western MT RAC, we have 7 National Forests that we bring fee proposals from to the RAC – the Kootenai, Flathead, Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Helena, Gallatin, Lolo and the Bitterroot. The fee program for the Forest Service nationally generates about 60 million dollars in fee revenues and we spend close to the amount we bring in. Those fees nationwide go to operations and maintenance of campgrounds, rental cabins, day use sites, group use sites and some habitat restoration. But this region only brings in about 2.5 million dollars with the recreation fee program. In 2008, we brought in about 2.6 million dollars; we expended about 2.3 million dollars. It's divided into 3 categories. The special use permits includes things such as the Ski Rendezvous, Lolo Pass (the winter parking and cross-country ski trail system up there). We are also able to retain fees under REA for special recreation events like the Race to the Sky event. And we retain our outfitter/guide fees. We have over 800 outfitter/guides in the region that we collect fees from. Those fees go into permit administration and are also used for trail maintenance. The intent of those fees is to provide services the outfitters and their clients would be benefitting from, but typically where they are going is where the public is going as well. There is also a category called developed recreation sites, which includes cabins and campgrounds. In this region, we bring in about 1.4 million dollars with the rental cabin program and the campgrounds. It also includes a couple of Visitor Centers. And we sell interagency passes.

The amount of revenue we bring in is the second lowest in the nation. But this revenue covers about 20-30% of the cost of providing our recreation program here in this region. We have 12 National Forests and one National Grassland in this region. There are over 1600 developed sites throughout the region. 24% of that is where we charge a fee; 76% of the sites are free to the public. The recreation fee program also allows us to offer and provide services at non-fee campgrounds. The bulk of the program revenue in this region is from cabins, campgrounds and the outfitter/guide program. Last year we presented 38 fee proposals to the RACs; 30 of the proposals have come before the Western MT RAC and there was almost unanimous support for the fee proposals we've presented.

Last spring, Joni presented to the RACs, the concept of a regional fee schedule. This year we need to bring the FS fee sites to a par with where they need to be based on inflation. There are sites across the region where there have been no fee increases since the late 1990's so they are not keeping pace with the cost of doing business. Through the regional fee schedule concept, we want to roll all the fee sites into the schedule and look at anything we think might become a fee site over the next 5 or so years and put that on a schedule and then propose fees based on that pricing tool that we developed last year. And then get on a regular schedule of increases tied to inflation. So we don't have a "sticker shock" because we haven't raised fees in 15 years. We want to have a draft fee schedule to present to the RAC at the June meeting and then want to roll that out for public involvement and get feedback. The idea would be to have a fee schedule set in 2010 for cabins and campgrounds and day use sites, but then we wouldn't raise those fees for 3 or 4 years.

We were getting feedback that the public perceived the FS was raising its fees all the time, even though we were only doing them five at a time. People were seeing the news releases and thinking we were raising fees, so they were confused. The few proposals that we have been bundling and bringing to the public and to the RAC have been taking a long time, so we have a big bottle-neck of fee proposals that we need to get implemented, so we can use those funds to maintain those sites. But we also realize we want to give folks the big picture so they can see what's coming down the pike. We also want to show the sites where we aren't charging any fees. The hope is we'll present that to the RAC and roll it out to the public for comment. And then do an official proposal to the RAC by the fall meeting. Depending on public comment and feedback from all the RACs, we would look at implementing in time for summer of 2010.

We have received positive feedback in this region. Senator Baucus has indicated that for his office, there are no issues here in Region 1. His concerns are with broader application of the program outside the region. Dan asked if in the interim – will the RAC be getting any fee increase proposals this year in addition to that or will this be a catch-all that will be implemented. Joni said it will be a catch-all except for one fee site. At the May meeting, the RAC approved the Rock Creek Stock Campground on the Bitterroot. We want to re-present that to the RAC because there needs to be more public involvement on that. All the others will be rolled into this regional fee schedule, so you will see it all at the same time.

Dick asked if there is any target number as far as how much of the costs would be covered by the fee revenue. Joni said there isn't anything in statute or in the FS policy as far as saying that the program is going to be 100% cost recovery. We do want to be as self-sustaining as we can, but we are trying to determine internally what the percentage would be. Dick asked what the concerns were from Senator Baucus. Joni said that Baucus is concerned that the agency doesn't charge for access. But we are charging for campgrounds and cabins. Dan said you need to consider what the competing fees are, with similar amenities within that similar area. There is a limit on where you can go. Joni said that under the statute all the agencies are required to look at comparable fees, so they are not undercutting the private market. FS could actually be higher with a campground that has more amenities. The benefit of the fee program is that it allows the FS to be more self-sustaining because they have revenues they can carry over and it gives the FS the ability to plan with that budget.

Dick asked if paying for parking is considered access; the ski trails for example. Joni explained that at the ski parking areas, you are paying for the amenities at the ski area, such as plowing the parking lot, grooming the trails, etc.

Special Recreation Permits (SRP) – examples of what the fee dollars do:

- In the winter of 2007, on the Custer National Forest, there were huge wind events with thousands of acres of blow-down that blocked access into the Beartooth/Absaroka Wilderness. REA fees retained from outfitter/guide receipts, in addition to other funds, supported the seasonal work force necessary to clear the trails.
- Ski Rendezvous – Gallatin National Forest. The REA revenue fees contribute about a third of the cost of the ski program there. The community chips in so the businesses contribute about a third of the cost, and then the community puts in for grants. The community wants to propose raising the fee for the Ski Rendezvous for annual passes for family and individuals, and this proposal may be coming to the RAC

soon. They also want to look at expanding the ski trail system. For the West Yellowstone community, in November, the ski trail system is the sole source of economic activity for that community. The REA fee revenues from special recreation permits are also used to help fund the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center.

- Lolo Pass – a cooperative partnership the FS has with the State of Montana and Idaho. SRP REA receipts are used to groom 8 miles of cross country ski trails and provide signing and services/supplies for snowmobile trail patrols and avalanche monitoring.
- FY 2008 sample accomplishments with outfitter/guide receipts:
 - Flathead NF: 100 miles of trail maintained, permit administration.
 - Gallatin NF: 100 miles of trail cleared, improvements to parking and stock facilities.
 - Kootenai NF: permit administration, weed spraying, trailhead and trail improvements.
 - Lolo NF: permit administration, weed treatments, outfitter-guide camp inspections.
- Crystal Park Mineral Collection Area (Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF) – an area set aside for the public to enjoy digging for quartz and amethyst crystals. The fee is \$5.00/day. They may be coming to the RAC at some point, requesting a small fee increase.

Dan asked where the fees go for special use permits, like Discovery Basin. Joni responded that those are under a separate statute. Those monies all go back to the treasury, so the FS doesn't see that money directly. Karolin asked about improvements on river access points. Those sites are managed by Fish & Game, the BLM and private. Russell pointed out that some of the launch sites on rivers are unimproved sites that are user created. Russell asked about cabin rental revenue – were there more user days in 2008? Joni said she still wants to give an annual report to the RAC, looking at occupancy of cabins and campgrounds.

Mitzi asked about the FS considering closing some campgrounds. Joni responded that the FS will try to keep as many campgrounds open as possible. In the Recreation Facility Analysis Process, the FS identified places the FS was looking at closing or shortening seasons, but they are still not implementing that in full yet. On the schedule where the sites are listed, Joni said she could also show the sites they intend to close due to low use. There are sites that don't warrant the investment it would take to keep them open. For example, on the Mc Gruder Corridor there are some toilets which require an all-day drive for a private contractor, to get them pumped out. So it doesn't make sense to spend that kind of money on something that doesn't get that much use. People can still use the area; they just won't have the same amenities. With limited budgets, we need to prioritize and look at where we are putting our fee dollars and we'd rather invest money for amenities in areas that get more use.

Dick asked what the incentive is to keep open any of the non-fee sites. Joni responded that the FS is committed to offering a full array of sites. They want to make sure there are still more primitive recreation opportunities for people. The FS looks at the fee program as a way to provide the recreation opportunities the public wants – it is a tool.

Joni commented that working with the BLM RACs has been very valuable because of the diversity of perspectives brought to the table.

Next Meeting(s):

June 18th, 2009 (Butte)

September 3rd, 2009 (Dillon) – tentative date, to be confirmed at the June 18th meeting.

Agenda Items for the Next Meeting:

- Abandoned Mines Reclamation (Maiden Rock and possibly Rochester)
There was discussion about the State of Montana losing money because the abandoned mine money comes from taxes on coal and those taxes were reallocated; MT was using that money to take care of hard rock mines and now that money has to be used for coal. They are trying to get that changed. But it didn't get changed for this year's budget, so for 2010, the State of Montana has taken a big hit in their budget. Rick said the BLM could give a presentation on the AML program if the RAC wanted, including discussion on Rochester.

- Access – priorities, manager, travel management implementation, consistent/universal signage
Dick asked if the BLM would like the RAC’s input on access issues. Nancy and Rick said there will be a position that has been advertised and each office has submitted their priorities. Sam said related to access is universal signage – signing “Designated Routes” seems to be the best way to go. Rick said a subject for the RAC to discuss could be travel management implementation. The RAC might want to look at addressing consistency within the Butte, Missoula and Dillon Field Offices.
- Dohoeffter Cabin Update
- Economic Stimulus Package Project Updates
- FS Regional Fee Schedule Proposal
Joni asked the RAC about the Rock Creek Campground on the Bitterroot (in the Lake Como Recreation Area) that was voted on earlier by the RAC. The RAC decided that since they had already agreed to the fee increase, the FS should go through with the increase, so long as there is no new public involvement that presents significant controversy.

Russell requested a history or summary of the RAC for new members – the past subjects that have been discussed and the actions that have been taken.

Joni suggested the Ski Rendezvous for the November RAC meeting. Rick said it doesn’t need to be set up as a RAC meeting; it could be set up like the Como Lake Field Trip. Joni will look into some possible dates and arrangements and let the RAC know.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:10 p.m.

Mack Long, Chair

Date: