

## Western Montana Resource Advisory Council Minutes

May 19, 2015

### Missoula Field Office

**BLM Western Zone Staff Present:** David Abrams, Cornie Hudson, Joe Ashor, Scott Haight, Rick Hotaling, Chris McGrath (presenter)

**RAC Members Present:** Ted Antonioli, Nichole Brown, Dan Happel, Jim Hart, Koy Holland, Jack King (phone), David Krueger, Bob Martinka, Doug Midgett, Paul Putz, Mark Sweeney, Ron Tussing, Bob Walker, Chair.

**RAC Members Absent:** Whitney Tilt, Alan Weltzien

David Abrams, RAC Coordinator, opened the meeting with a review of safety items, travel reimbursement, agenda topics, and meeting ground rules.

New RAC members (Brown, Tussing) were welcomed and all members briefly introduced themselves and explained their role on the RAC.

**Sage Grouse Planning Strategy Update:** District Manager Rick Hotaling explained that sage grouse in the BLM Western Montana District are primarily in the Dillon Field Office. SW Montana is part of the Great Basin Planning Area and SW Montana and Idaho are part of a sub-regional planning effort.

Currently the BLM is getting input from cooperating agencies and Rick said a final document for the public and the Governor's 60-day Consistency Review should be available within the next 3-4 weeks. The goal is still to complete the document with a Record of Decision (ROD) by this fall for USFWS review and prevent the sage grouse listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2010, the USFWS issued a "warranted but precluded" designation for the sage grouse due to lack of regulatory mechanisms by agencies to protect sage grouse habitat.

The federal plan is not fully consistent with Montana's plan because the federal agencies started the planning process earlier than the State. The BLM inserted some of Montana's language into their plan.

Rick is unsure what will happen in September but the plan will be in the hands of the USFWS and the legal system. The project leader locally (MT/ID) has recently changed and Rick hasn't received verification that the new lead has reviewed the recommendation letter submitted previously by this RAC.

Bob W. asked about inconsistency with the State. Rick said that one area was the stipulations on disturbed acres. The BLM also has more habitat classifications ranging from general to primary (leks present) to focal areas. Most of the focal areas are in Eastern MT.

Another difference for the Great Basin area is the FIAT state (fire invasive analysis team), an effort to address the cheat grass and possible treatments. This would mostly likely affect fuels funding for Idaho and Nevada.

All plans throughout the West will be released at the same time. Some offices (Lewistown, Dillon) will amend their Resource Management Plans (RMPs); other offices will incorporate the sage grouse strategy into their plan revision.

Jim H. asked about the chances of listing. Rick said the species may be listed by sub-species but the USFWS decision is unknown. The BLM has worked closely with the USFWS to prevent listing. Recent bird surveys have shown increased numbers most likely due to the mild winter.

Bob W. asked Bob M. his perspective as a biologist. He said he was somewhat familiar with the Governor's recommendations and it was in everyone's interest to prevent the listing if possible. Rick said the MT legislature has funded \$6 million for the Governor's sage grouse plan if the species is not listed; if listed, the money comes back to the general fund.

David K. asked if the document due out is final. Rick said that when the document is published it is followed by a 60-day Governor's Consistency Review followed by a protest period. The BLM State Director signs the ROD.

**Timber Harvest Subgroup Report:** Mark Sweeney said the subgroup made up of David K., Bob M., Koy H., Dan H., and himself met twice since the last full RAC meeting. They met with timber staff from the Butte Field Office (BFO) to develop criteria rating for timber stands. They are weighted criteria to prioritize timber stands considered for harvest.

Scott H. had asked the subgroup to come up with criteria to screen sale/treatment areas to make the best use of resources. Twelve criteria ranging from percent of mortality and the ease of NEPA process were developed, and then weighted from 1 to 5, depending on importance. He said the stand evaluation would be done by professional foresters and need to be compared to other areas evaluated by the same team in order to be meaningful. Scott passed out some examples for the council. David K. asked about the time factor and Scott said he felt it actually saved time and helps to prioritize funding and out-year planning.

Ted A. asked about the status of the pine beetle infestation. Scott thought it was past the peak of the infestation cycle. David K. mentioned he had seen new infestations in the Big Hole area.

Scott said there was lots of discussion on the weighting of criteria and said a different group may prioritize the criteria differently. It needs to be used at the start of the process to be useful.

Bob W. commended the group and looks forward to sharing the information with the State-wide RAC group.

Ron Tussing said the BLM had a logging operation near his residence a few years ago and wondered why it was illegal for the public to take the remaining logs. Cornie said it all depends on the treatment prescription. Logs may be left to encourage shrubs and aspen growth or it may call for slash piling and burning. Also, depending on the timing of the contract, the purchaser still owns the logs until the contract expires. Access may also be an issue.

Rick asked if the subgroup is recommending the weighted criteria process for use in the BFO? Joe Ashor said the Western Zone foresters will be meeting in the next month or two and this process will be a topic of discussion.

Mark moved and Koy seconded that the RAC recommends using weighted criteria as a tool to be used by the BFO foresters for timber harvests and recommends the process to other BLM offices.

**Madison River Recreation Plan:** Chris McGrath, BLM Outdoor Recreation Planner from Ennis, was on the committee that helped develop the draft Madison River Recreation Plan. The plan covers the river from Yellowstone National Park to the Headwaters State Park, excluding the Bear Trap Canyon Wilderness Area. The 101 miles of river are some of the most heavily-fished in the State and are the birthplace of wild trout sport fisheries.

Recreation management has been ongoing on the Madison since the 1950s. Management has taken some twists and turns over the years including a ban on outfitters in the 1980s. Most of the regulations currently in place are due to social concerns such as litter and overcrowding rather than resource concerns. 85% of the angling use is non-resident; 15% is commercial use, mostly on the Upper Madison. Over 60% of resident anglers feel they have been displaced by social issues.

The current plan (developed by FWP and the BLM) will only affect recreation use, not the resources and is currently in draft stage. The plan will have alternatives based on scoping meetings held throughout the area in 2011-12:

- A. Citizen Advisory Committee Recommendations (7 public members, FWP rep, BLM rep). A full list of recommendations is on the FWP website but it includes actions such as river surveys through use of an "iron ranger"; an education program to deal with river etiquette, improve and redesign access sites, provide for wade-only stretches (i.e. no boats).

The Lower Madison is below Bear Trap Canyon and has more problems with recreational floating along with alcohol and drug use. The committee recommended recycling bins, more law enforcement presence with county assistance and regular clean-up events with multiple partners.

This alternative also establishes two thresholds that would trigger management action based on amount of use or user satisfaction. If the established amount of use is exceeded by 10% or more two years in a row or if user satisfaction goes below 80% for two consecutive years, then management action would be taken. Actions range from least restrictive to most restrictive and could include an annual permit, free at first, but a charge permit could be used if another threshold was reached.

- B. Alternative B is a modified version of A and allows the agencies more freedom to choose less-expensive methods of collecting data for threshold standards such as traffic counters. Would recommend a glass bottle ban for the entire river and not just the Lower Madison. It would also modify recommendations on the number of boat ramps and access sites.
- C. This alternative has more restrictive actions identified through public comments. There were an overwhelming number of public comments suggesting that agencies need to put restrictions on use because the threshold has already been reached. Other actions include a cap on number of outfitters and number of clients, cap on boats in certain stretches, resident-only stretches, and prohibiting watercraft in certain stretches, especially the wade-only areas.

Chris said the draft plan is close to 80 pages and this summary is not all inclusive. Recreation surveys date back to the 1980s when landowners were reporting trespass issues. Public dissatisfaction also prompted agencies to take action and develop a plan. In 2011 FWP felt they had staffing available and started the process. A draft plan was submitted to the FWP Commission which approved it in April, 2013. FWP put the plan on hold due to agency deficits and they are currently waiting on funding to finalize the plan.

The draft plan has been revised a couple of times and once they get the okay from FWP, it will be finalized and released to the public for comment. The FWP Commission will make the administrative rules to implement the plan for the State and the BLM will have their rules process to implement if needed.

Bob M. asked about the joint planning process. Chris said the EA will be a joint NEPA document with FWP as the lead agency. Bob M. said recent legislation will limit some items that can be in the plan such as the ban on purchasing additional land. Jim H. asked if funding support needs to come from legislative action (Yes).

Chris said the Beaverhead and Bitterroot Plans are up for a 5-year review and the Madison plan may be put on hold while the review is being completed. Ted asked about a management agreement with the State. Chris said the BLM has a cooperative management agreement in place similar to how the Blackfoot River recreation is managed. There are currently 221 registered outfitters on the Madison.

Doug asked about the Citizens Advisory Committee – is there a vision of what would be a desirable outcome? Chris said the committee is still intact but hasn't met since last year; they will see the plan one more time. Is there a vision to reduce the number of non-resident anglers? That would adversely affect the economies of Ennis and West Yellowstone. The Lower Madison gets lots of resident use and the Upper Madison is mostly non-resident.

Jim H. offered kudos to the committee for their time and effort over the years – some of the meetings were contentious and drew more than 100 participants.

Nichole asked where the report was available (On the FWP website).

## **Break**

### **FO Weed Reports:**

Dillon – Cornie distributed a handout to supplement her report. The information shows program dollars and acres treated. A funding shortfall in 2014 and 2015 prevented the BLM from contributing to county co-op agreements. The BLM cooperates with counties on spray days. In 2015, there are 41 spray days scheduled. The BLM emphasizes treatment in the Bear Trap Wilderness and the Centennials which are cooperative efforts and the infestation has decreased over the last 14 years.

In 2015, the BLM has 4 seasonals in Dillon and 2 in Ennis for weed spraying. The BLM also used biological controls (insects) in conjunction with the Madison Valley Ranchlands Group and Ennis HS.

Ted asked about acres over all. Cornie felt the BLM was holding its own, but weeds are not decreasing overall. Mark asked about using goats for control? Dillon is not currently managing weeds with goats or

sheep. Doug asked about pulling weeds. Cornie said youth groups help with that effort. The Youth Challenge Program located in Dillon is a good resource for labor-intensive jobs.

Koy asked about prioritizing weeds (e.g. annual/perennial)? Cornie said the BLM focuses efforts on where they can be most effective – knapweed, spurge, and hounds tongue are high priorities.

Dan H. asked about treatment in the Pony re-mined area. Cornie said the operators are responsible for three years. Also, crews are out monitoring to look for new infestations. Cornie said a lot of infestations in the Pony area are on private land or mining claims.

Mark asked about education at campgrounds and recreation sites. Cornie said that spray days, work days, and site signage all have an education component. Cornie also said there is a weed education travel trailer available for loan to use at events. Bob W. said that bicycle, OHV groups, and Backcountry Horsemen are all good resources for weed treatment volunteers. Volunteer sprayers need to be with certified sprayers.

Paul asked about funding and the potential for increase. Cornie said with limited funds, the BLM needs to spend their weed money where there is some chance of making a difference.

Bob W. asked about the availability of bio control agents. Rick said insects are expensive to start with but areas can become insectaries to provide bugs for distribution to other areas.

Butte FO: Scott distributed handouts that summarized the weed program. Focus areas for Butte are along the Big Hole River, Scratchgravel Hills, the Rocky Mountain Front and developed campgrounds and recreation sites. Butte's program is smaller than Dillon's with a full-time weed coordinator and a couple of seasonals.

Total 2015 funding decreased \$37K from 2014. There are several county assistance agreements in place for spraying public lands. Twenty spray days are set up for this year, including one in the Limestone Hills near Townsend and one at Holter Lake.

Missoula FO: Joe said Missoula has one full-time weed specialist along with two seasonals and assistance agreements with three counties. Last year, nearly 300 miles of roadsides were treated, along with approximately 400 acres of broadcast treatment.

Missoula County has contracted with Jed Dewey, a retired entomologist, who is monitoring 77 biological control sites on a rotating basis. Weed hotspots for Missoula are the Chamberlain watershed, the Lower Blackfoot corridor and the Cramer Creek watershed.

There is a Crown of the Continent Invasive Species Group which is a multi-agency working group that is developing GIS weed maps based on input from state, federal, and county agencies to track weed infestations and to target areas agencies can tackle together.

Bob W. asked about volunteers and Joe said Missoula has similar efforts to the other offices. Funding grant sources are the State of MT or the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Since the RAC recognizes the importance of weed control, a summary will be provided at future meetings.

**11:30 Public Comment Period**

Patrick Johnson, public visitor, was invited to address the RAC. He said he was here to learn, he was interested in the sage grouse issue, the planning process, and Madison River issues. He is a retired public official who grew up in Montana, spent his professional career in Utah, and has now retired to the Helena area. Doug asked if he was interested in serving on the RAC – (Yes, per Patrick). He is interested in science-based solutions, is open to new information, and tries to strive for consensus along with strong public input.

David Abrams asked the RAC to take note of a new BLM quarterly publication entitled *My Public Lands*. David has an article in the magazine about Garnet Ghost Town.

## **FO Updates**

Missoula FO – Joe Ashor

- MFO trying to update a 29-year-old RMP. They finally received the go-ahead from the Washington Office. The new plan will address issues such as climate change, landscape level planning and T&E species. Currently developing the AMS – Analysis of the Management Situation which documents what has gone on in the past. Hope to have a draft completed in September. Instead of traditional public scoping, the BLM wants to incorporate a public outreach and visioning component to involve the public early on in the process. The visioning process will take place in late Fall 2015. Formal public scoping will be in Jan-Mar 2016 with a goal of involving the public throughout the process.
- MFO has filled six positions since Joe's arrival 8 months ago – 1 law enforcement officer, 2 foresters, 2 admin staff, 1 fish biologist.
- Garnet Ghost Town tried to recruit four couples to volunteer as caretakers this summer. The article ended up on Facebook and generated 9-10K emails and hundreds of phone calls from all over the world. Four couples were hired from local residents.

## **Lunch**

### **FO Updates Cont'd:**

Dillon FO – Cornie Hudson

- The DFO fuels program treated 2,533 acres last year with 800 acres of slashing. So far in 2015, the BLM has treated 775 acres with several hundred more acres slated for treatment in Dyce Creek and Keystone.
- The Centennial Watershed decision document is due out soon.
- The Big Sheep and Sage Creek watershed assessments will be completed this year.
- DFO is implementing a food storage order for the greater Yellowstone area. The BLM can now issue a ticket for non-compliance. David K. asked why. Rick responded that previously the BLM wasn't consistent with other agencies with the delisting of the grizzly bear. A food storage order will reduce human/bear conflicts and the conservation plan requires food storage regulations.
- The recreation fee increase approved by the RAC last year will go into effect this summer except in the Palisades campground where the water system needs work.
- Currently, the drought is classified as moderate. DFO is not asking for reduced cattle numbers on allotments, but have told permittees to be prepared if they are asked to come off early.
- Three timber sales are planned – Birch Meadow, California Cable and Miner Better. Yank Swamp sale that brought in a record high sale price should be logged this year.
- Lakeview Ski Chalet Update – was built in 1965 as a private building and has deteriorated over the years to an unsafe condition. Cornie wrote a decision to tear the building down in 2013

which generated opposition from local residents. Senator Daines' office got involved and wants to broker a congressional land transfer from the BLM to the Centennial Historical Association. In the meantime, the BLM put plywood over the windows to try and make it resistant to deterioration. Access is through private land and the landowner will not allow access to the general public or the BLM. He may consider giving access to the Historical Association.

- A mountain biking group from Bozeman has proposed a 19-mile mountain bike trail in Revenue Flats in the Pony/Harrison/McAllister areas. The pre-scoping outreach generated 100 comments. Senator Daines' office and Madison County Commissioners were both contacted. A public meeting on May 11 attracted more than 100 people both pro and con. The BLM will develop a proposed action and possible alternatives and go back to the public. Issues are weeds, conflicts with cows, and narrow roads. Public perception from some is that it will draw thousands of users. Cornie committed the BLM to have more law enforcement presence in the area.
- The long-term wild horse holding facility near Ennis now has more than 900 horses. It is considered to have some of the healthiest horses in holding facilities as determined by APHIS, who did the evaluation. Cornie said the contractors are responsive to finding stray horses.

#### Butte FO – Scott Haight:

- BLM/FS/MT Trail Vehicle Riders Assoc. have earned an award from the Coalition for Recreational Trails for OHV trail maintenance in the Pipestone area.
- Tom and Bessie Evans, campground hosts at Holter Dam Campground, were awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award. They will go to Billings to receive the award.
- The Iron Mask Final EA covering 26K acres is due out. It covers seven grazing permit renewals and the Indian Creek forage reserve allotment for use by a permittee whose allotment is affected by fire or another vegetation treatment. The document also contains the travel plan with calls for a new trailhead just west of Whitetail Lane west of Townsend. Scott has a concern about the railroad crossing and visited with Broadwater County Commissioners about it.
- BFO has received a mountain bike proposal for the Copper City area north of Three Forks that will be addressed in the Park/Gallatin South Broadwater planning area. The area is popular with target shooters. Bob W. said those areas are popular with mountain bikers because they are accessible earlier in the spring and later in the fall.
- The BLM issued a 3-year right-of-way out of Jefferson City for a private mining claim owner to use one of the BLM's existing roads to haul ore to Golden Sunlight Mine in Whitehall or the mine in Philipsburg for processing. The decision was appealed by an adjacent landowner through the Alliance for the Wild Rockies who filed the litigation with the court system. The BLM received a favorable ruling in March and the court awarded \$1,300 to the BLM for administrative costs which are unusual.
- The McMaster "townsite parcels" acquisition is completed through The Conservation Fund. The Missoula FO, working through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), facilitated the acquisition of 270 acres on the Blackfoot River outside of Lincoln that will be part of the BFO. It closed today.
- 1,100 acres of prescribed burn was completed earlier this year in the Big Hole Valley.
- The proposed Pipestone Quarry expansion project near Whitehall generated no comments on the draft EA.
- The draft Missouri River Foothills Travel Management Plan (east side of Canyon Ferry) is due out for comment next month. The BLM has few routes in the area and made them consistent with connecting Forest Service roads.

- An Armenian Minerals Officer will be hosted at the BFO for two weeks in July as part of an exchange with the State Department. He will be shadowing archeologists to learn about mine regulations and permitting.
- The Marysville Planning Area EA is due out in late summer or early fall for public comment. Lots of potential harvest areas and lynx habitat.
- The BFO did not send out drought letters to permittees. It's a little dry but not critical yet.

**Planning Process Overview:** Rick Hotaling

The new WO planning regulations are called "Planning 2.0" and the roll out has been delayed. Planning for the BLM is mandated through the Federal Land Policy and Management Act or FLPMA. The current process calls for public scoping of issues followed by an activity level environmental assessment (EA) signed by the field manager or district manager or an environmental impact statement (EIS) for resource allocation decisions signed by the state director. For example, sage grouse planning is a resource allocation issue (EIS). Building a mountain bike trail would be an activity level decision (EA). Resource Management Plans (RMPs) determine how much resource will be allowed for grazing, timber harvest, and other uses. Travel Planning is a huge issue and in the RMP, broad travel decisions are made – are areas open, limited or closed? Once the RMP is complete, travel plans look at individual routes and areas to determine the best use of an area, considering the resources. 98% of decisions are activity level with a Field Manager or District Manager signature.

Missoula will file a "Notice of Intent" to plan with the Federal Register publication which will officially start the process to revise the RMP. The NOI starts the scoping process that looks at what changes are needed (if any) and what issues need to be addressed. Activity level plans do not require an NOI.

The draft plan/revision is issued to the public with a comment period (usually 60 days). Comments are addressed or incorporated into the document and republished as a final plan. Protests go to the Director of the BLM and once resolved, the state director signs the record of decision (ROD) for the RMP or amendment. Once completed, minor changes can be completed through plan maintenance rather than a plan amendment.

Under the proposed 2.0 regulations, the basic NEPA requirements will not change; there will still be a NOI, scoping, a draft document and a ROD but there will be changes to the process. There are three goals:

- 1) to make it a more efficient and less costly process;
- 2) enhance opportunities for public collaboration
- 3) plan across landscapes.

The next planning cycle will probably be a district-wide plan rather than by field office.

The BLM would like to see plans that are general in nature to give managers the opportunity to react to changing conditions and uses. New recreation uses are introduced on a fairly regular basis.

The BLM would also like to see more public involvement above and beyond the traditional scoping/public meetings. They will recommend contacting stakeholders well in advance of the start of the planning process. The internet will assist in getting the word out to a wide array of users without having to print documents. Often counties want to be involved on a continuing basis but can't afford the staff or time to engage in the process.



The BLM wants to look at geospatial data to see a wider area than just BLM lands to make it consistent with other agencies.

Our agency has not determined how to deal with “email bombing” which electronically submits hundreds or thousands of emails as separate emails and need to be considered as separate comments. It takes hours of staff time to sort and log all the comments.

Doug asked if personnel turnover increases plan time and if that’s an issue. Rick said yes but some delays are due to WO requests to include other issues for consideration.

### **RAC Feedback to the BLM**

Dan Happel asked about the re-mine projects. He is now a member of the MT Mining Assoc. and heard through the organization that BLM lease fees were increasing. Ted said that was removed from the WO budget proposal.

Paul P. mentioned the historic stamp mill in the Elkhorns and said that traditional interpretive signs are subject to vandalism. He suggesting using a cell phone message that a visitor can dial into if there’s cell coverage. Scott said that the BLM asked to increase information for smart phone apps on recreation sites, trails, etc. There are lots of new opportunities to provide public information electronically. Bob W. said including an American flag decal on the interpretive sign has shown to reduce vandalism. Including cooperating agency logos also helps.

Bob W. mentioned some new recreation toys such as mechanical, wheeled vehicles on groomed snowmobile trails; dirt bikes can now be converted into snow vehicles with the addition of a front ski and a track. Technology changes by the year.

### **Closing Remarks – David Abrams**

Action Items:

- David will put RAC forestry subgroup recommendation into a formal format.
- Continue weed updates.
- Planning 2.0 update.

Next meeting agenda:

- State legislature effect on BLM-managed lands.
- DFO mountain bike trail proposal update.
- Field trip – Dillon?
- Bear Trap float?
- MFO has marked increase in land ownership change – how it affects office business and access issues. (Plum Creek, ranches, land transfers, ROW’s). An issue in all three offices.
- Update - SD Jamie Connell regarding discussions in DC to give RAC appointment authority to State level.
- Update on sage grouse plan.
- Rick said a future meeting possibility is to establish a subgroup to talk about acquisitions and access. It would help the realty staff prioritize proposals. Mark S. asked about land disposals and Rick responded with an explanation about “State Indemnity in lieu of selection”. With Statehood, Montana was given sections 16 & 36 out of each township unless those sections

were occupied. The BLM is working with the State of Montana to either provide land or money for those sections; could amount to millions of dollars.

David A. said that Jack King's and David Krueger's appointments are up this year for renewal. Ted and Alan W. are termed out. There was some discussion on when the terms actually end and it depends on the date specified in the appointment letter from the Secretary of Interior. Bob W. suggested a meeting in September before the end of the appointments with David A. sending out an email poll to find an acceptable date.

Cornie offered to host a field trip in September in Dillon. It was moved and seconded to adjourn at 2:50 p.m.

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Robert Walker, RAC Chair

Date: \_\_\_\_\_