

Western Montana Resource Advisory Council

December 11, 2023, Online (via Teams)

BLM Western District Staff Present: Katie Stevens, David Abrams, Amanda James, Erin Carey, Lindsey Babcock, Corey Meier

RAC Members Present: Jean Belangie-Nye (Chair), Clayton Elliott (Vice-Chair), John Peck, Dave Williams, Eric Clewis, Sean Steinebach, Mark Peck, Dennis Milburn, Juanita Vero, Lois Steinbeck, Mike O'Herron, Dave Kumlien, and Mike Korn.

RAC Members Absent: Kathryn McDonald

David Abrams opened the virtual meeting at 1 p.m. after noting all RAC members (except for Kathryn McDonald in Category 3) were present online. There was brief discussion about topics for the next meeting (Jan. 11, 2024) in Missoula, including the fee proposals from the Dillon (for the Madison River) and Missoula (Garnet Ghost Town) field offices; and updates on grizzly bear and wolverine listings.

Public Comment Period:

Chair Belangie-Nye opened the public comment period at 1:03 p.m. No members of the public joined the meeting online at any point, but the channel was left open for anyone who joined the meeting in progress.

Butte Business Plan Briefing and Discussion:

Butte Field Manager Lindsey Babcock went over updates to the fee table in the business plan, described public outreach efforts during the comment period, then shared some of the public feedback garnered during that period.

Lindsey: At our last meeting, we talked about the priorities for the Butte Field Office recreation program going forward are twofold: focus on increased fee compliance; and modernize/maintain our existing facilities rather than build new things. We discussed that a significant labor increase is needed in the Butte Field Office to operate and maintain the sites that we have and how fees could support that. In our proposal, we initially talked about establishing six new fee sites. However, one of the outcomes of our public comment period was that we realized we missed a site because it's technically in the Dillon Field Office, and that's our Maiden Rock site. And so, we are including that in this proposal because it's along the Big Hole River corridor. So the new fee sites we're looking at are: Carbella, Crow Creek, Dickie Bridge, East Bank, Maiden Rock, Galena Gulch, and Upper and Lower Toston. At the previous meeting, we also talked about creating a day use fee and season pass in the Big Hole similar to what we have up at the

Chain of Lakes. And then the last component of our fee proposal is extending the fee season by three months, from April 1st to November 30th.”

Lois Steinbeck: When I read the business plan, I noticed that the previous RAC had approved the fee increase, but it was not implemented. Why not?

Lindsey Babcock: We talked to previous managers and asked that same question; generally, they felt like they didn't have the staff to support implementing the fees at that time.

Katie Stevens: That was before Lindsey and I were here and we both felt we needed to do something to address that regardless of the staff work. We will plan for the staff work and get it covered.

Lois Steinbeck: Okay, thank you.

Lindsey and Katie then discussed market analyses and the detailed staff analysis it would take to support those recreation sites. They also talked about fee compliance and the field office's expectations in that regard.

Vote on Butte Field Office Fee Proposals

Clayton Elliott moved to adopt the fee proposals—minus the Big Hole River sites—as presented by the Butte Field Office in its revised business plan. (The Big Hole River fee site proposals were voted on in a separate motion). Dave Williams seconded the motion. During discussion, RAC members praised the strength of the business plan, and offered some concerns for continuing to protect resources at the sites.

Vote was unanimously in favor of the non-Big Hole River portion of the business plan.

Clayton Elliott then moved to adopt the Big Hole River portion of the business plan (seconded by Dave Williams) with this discussion: “I just have a couple of concerns about this part of the proposal right now and I want to begin by commending Lindsey and her team for improving this greatly. Every step of the way, I think we've gotten better and closer. But a couple of things come to my mind and some of these are from my constituency and people here in the Butte area who use the Big Hole quite often. First I worry about the lack of a comprehensive view of the structures for day use activity in the Big Hole. I ant to set aside the camping piece of things, but the Big Hole is complex, jurisdictionally, and *where* you're accessing the Big Hole is going to determine which types of fees you need to do. One of my concerns around day use fees has been to what extent do we translocate that pressure to somewhere where there's not existing infrastructure to be able to handle it? I just have this concern that there will be people who, rather than paying fees, will just move their activity elsewhere along the river to other properties where they're going to cause resource degradation. I still have some heartburn around the enforceability of this day use fee and how we're going to navigate, given resource constraints. I fully understand you have to “spend money to make money” and I get that you're not going to have the resources to be able to enforce this fee until you collect more revenue to be able to do it. So we have a little bit of a chicken and egg syndrome, sure; but I'm just not sure that we're quite ready for it yet. There's some more planning that I would like to see done.

Lindsey Babcock: I really appreciate those comments and honestly I have some of the same thoughts from a comprehensive perspective. The Butte Field Office has recognized that we are due for what we call Recreation Area Management Planning in the Big Hole. That's on our three-to-five-year plan, but it is separate from the fee proposal. Part of the reason for that is that the fees are just focused on those sites that have these extra amenities and the highest regular maintenance cost. So even they're more than related, they're kind of two separate planning processes. I also wanted to mention that the multi-agency pass is tricky for us because on the Big Hole where Fish, Wildlife and Parks is charging users at BLM sites, the BLM has no interface with that funding.

Members and staff then had a discussion about multi-agency passes, fee collection procedures, and conservation licenses.

Clayton Elliott: The analysis and roadmap of where we're headed on the recreation planning I think would help ease some of my concerns. I'd like to know how we're moving recreation across this landscape and what sort of pressures those fees could put on that movement. Obviously the Big Hole is a big conversation these days in my world, but it would be helpful if we thought about recreation similar to what we have done on the Madison River, where you really are taking a landscape watershed approach, trying to bring all of the jurisdictions and partners together to think about that across the landscape. I think you have to do that on the Big Hole as well because as each agency is taking their bite it becomes very hard and confusing for the general public to navigate that.

Vote was 12 in favor, one nay for the Big Hole River portion of the business plan.

Wrap-Up:

After further brief discussion of the January meeting agenda and meeting place, the virtual meeting was adjourned at 1:55 p.m.

Approved by: _____

Date: _____

Jean Belangie-Nye, Chair