

MINUTES: Western Montana Resource Advisory Council Meeting 9/24/2024

Date: September 24, 2024, 9 a.m.- 4p.m.

Location: Montana Tech, Student Union Building, Room 304, Butte, Montana

Present:

RAC members: Roderick (David) Williams, JM Peck, Dave Kumlien, Eric Clewis, Michael Korn, Dennis Milburn, Jean Belangie-Nye – **CHAIR**, Clayton Elliott - **VICE-CHAIR**, Juanita Vero, Michael O’Herron, Kathryn McDonald

BLM staff: Carrie Cecil, Amanda James, Patricia Johnson, Corey Manseau, Erica Husse, Erin Carey, Lindsey Babcock, Chelsea Lair, Brittany Jones, Ernie McKenzie

Agenda:

Time	Discussion Topic	Purpose	Discussion Leader/Presenter
9:00	Coffee and Catch Up		N/A
9:15	Welcome/Housekeeping Items	Admin	Carrie Cecil, Acting Western Montana DM
9:30	Madison River Recreation business plan fee proposal	Discussion/ Decision	Clayton Elliott, Lois Steinbeck, Dave Kumlien  Amanda James
10:45	BREAK		
11:00	Public Lands Rule	Presentation /Discussion	Patricia Johnson (HQ-Public Lands Rule Project Lead)
Noon	LUNCH		
1:15	Restoration Landscape Updates	Information/ Discussion	Corey Manseau (Missouri Headwaters Restoration Landscape)  Erica Husse (MT/Daks Restoration Coordinator)
2:00	Field Manager Updates	Information	Erin Carey (Missoula FM)  Amanda James (Dillon FM)  Lindsey Babcock (Butte FM)

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2:45	BREAK		
3:00	Public Comment Period	Admin	Chelsea Lair
3:30	Planning for Next Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of Action Items</li> <li>• Next Meeting Date &amp; Agenda</li> </ul>	Discussion	Chelsea Lair
4:00	ADJOURN		

Madison River Recreation Business Plan Fee Proposal

Fee Increases

- Discussion on increasing fees to keep pace with inflation and addressing community concerns.

Accessibility Improvements

- Discussion on plans to enhance access to services and facilities.

Food Storage and Signage

- Need for better food options and upgrading signage for clearer communication.

Operational Strategies

- Questions about managing operational costs and ensuring all stakeholders understand their responsibilities.

Funding and Revenue

- Discussion on how different revenue streams will be managed and reinvested into site improvements.
- Concerns about governmental funding and the expectation for commercial users to contribute, alongside the reasonableness of annual pass fees.

Digital Kiosk Implementation

- Discussion on implementation of digital kiosks for secure fee collection and oversight on payments.

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- The same digital kiosks used at Chain Lakes and Divide are being proposed for other sites, aiming to create a consistent model for BLM sites in Montana.

### User Demand

- Increase in users, highlighting the need for additional funds for amenities.

### Permit Issues

- Issues with permit systems causing delays; the need for easier access to permits prior to arrival is emphasized.

### Outreach and Implementation

- Discussion on outreach strategies for day-use fees, ensuring that fees collected are reinvested into the sites.
- Plans for summer education campaigns using various media to inform the public about fees and regulations.
- The need to clarify the purpose of fees related to conservation was emphasized, as well as the importance of differentiating between types of licenses and how they contribute to specific assets.

### Digital Solutions

- Exploring digital/online options to reduce congestion at busy sites, with a focus on online permit acquisition.

### Timeline for Implementation

- Challenges related to the timeline for implementation, including necessary approvals and comment period.

### Fee Structure

- There were concerns about consistency in fee structures across different sites in the state, particularly comparing sites in Missoula and Helena.
- Discussed the need for additional fees, mentioning daily fees and annual pass options.
- Discussion on ensuring that revenues generated stay at the respective sites.
- It was noted that not all sites receive funding from taxes, which could impact their financial sustainability.

### Subcommittee Involvement

- A subcommittee explored the question of fee structures further, particularly about the decision to apply fees per person rather than per vehicle.

### Review Process

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- A proposal for a five-year or an annual review cycle for the fees and revenue generation models was discussed, emphasizing the importance of assessing the effectiveness and transparency of the fee structures after implementation.
- Emphasized the need to have an ongoing agenda item for the RAC focused on the implementation of the business plan, highlighting the challenges and successes encountered.

### Motion to Endorse

- Jean motioned for the RAC to endorse the business plan, which was seconded and passed unanimously.

### Butte Field Office Update – Lindsey Babcock

#### Business Plan Updates

- An overview of the business plan's implementation was provided, noting an increase in fees across all sites.
- The proposed fee increases, particularly at Chain of Lakes, have largely been accepted by the public.
- Plans for public workshops are in place to allow community members to submit suggestions, with the intention of gathering ideas for water-based business planning.

#### Visitation Trends

- There has been a notable drop in visitation since the previous year, particularly at less popular sites.

#### Digital Kiosks

- Seven digital kiosks have been installed at Chain of Lakes sites, although there have been some technical issues. The Divide site also has a kiosk in operation.
- Questions were raised about the functionality of kiosks at the Divide site, specifically regarding their usability for different types of fees, including camping and day-use fees. Annual passes can also be purchased for all sites at Chain of Lakes.

#### Water Modernization

- Initiatives for water modernization and efficient irrigation practices are being implemented to improve resource management.

#### Permitting

- The permitting process for the Big Hole and Missouri River has been paused due to fishing closures; however, fees have been adjusted for certain permits in selected areas.
- Most permits issued are for fishing licenses, with some permits also issued for sightseeing and other recreational activities.

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- The online RAPTOR system is utilized for permitting, which facilitates the management of these permits.
- Concerns were raised about the permitting process, especially regarding how it affects both recreational users and outfitters. Some outfitters expressed frustration about being denied access to BLM boat ramps.
- There's a focus on balancing the number of permits issued between different user groups, including both recreationalists and outfitters, to avoid conflicts and ensure fair access.
- The discussion highlighted the challenges of navigating state-level regulations and fees, especially in relation to the legislative process and how it can impact local management and user experiences.

### Recruitment

- There are ongoing recruitment efforts for seasonal staff, particularly targeting locals to fill positions.

### Volunteer Recognition

- Long-term volunteers were acknowledged for their contributions and recently won a national award.

### Accessibility

- There was a discussion about the importance of accessibility for individuals with disabilities. This includes considerations for those who are blind, wheelchair users, and others with varying physical or mental disabilities. The complexities of these issues were acknowledged, particularly in relation to ADA compliance.
- While there are resources available for improving access, there is a need to pursue funding to implement these changes effectively.

### Forest Health

- Updates on forest health initiatives, particularly the 230-acre Bighorn project aimed at reducing fuels in urban-interface areas and addressing conifer encroachment.
- Involved in projects that encompass approximately 5,500 acres, focusing on enhancing overall forest health and reducing fire risks.

### Partnerships

- Potential for Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) projects on state lands, which could enhance collaborative efforts in land management.
- Updates were provided on the NAPA (National Association of Public Administrators) Winter project, with mentions of the Sustainable Use of Habitat Resources Management Plan being denied for the plaintiff in full. Implementation is ongoing with partners for various recreational trails, including 35 miles for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, along with two disc golf courses.

### Timber Projects

- The Bigfoot Timber project encompasses around 700 acres, focusing on fuel reduction efforts. NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) processes are in place for this project, particularly in North Hills.
- The Seymour Creek project is part of a TMPs (Timber Management Plans) initiative and is contracted under BIL funding. Public engagement efforts are robust, with access improvements noted for the Soap Creek Gulch Rd area.
- Facing challenges due to mill closures and decreasing product demand, which is causing bottlenecks for fuel reduction projects.
- The loss of mills and associated infrastructure could lead to problems for local economies, particularly for Ponderosa pine management.
- Mill closures are becoming more frequent, impacting local timber operations. The recent bid opening represents the first since 2020, indicating heightened interest in timber sales.

### Land Acquisitions

- Land acquisition talks have been initiated that could significantly benefit summer activities and hunting opportunities in the area.

### Supplemental Regulations

- The discussion highlighted that food storage regulations are part of RMPs rather than supplemental rules, indicating a strategic approach to managing resources and wildlife interactions.
- Reported on active bear conflict management teams working to develop recovery plans within Resource Management Plans
- Efforts are being made to incorporate bear conflict strategies into western offices, with the goal of enhancing bear safety and management.
- A supplemental regulation has been discussed, which includes enforceability aspects related to food storage, proper containers, and the harvesting of carcasses within a mile of campsites.
- Once the new regulations are approved, they will be sent to the Federal Register for public commentary. After the comment period, the regulations will be finalized and enforced.
- There was a discussion on ensuring consistent policies and practices across various agencies, including the US Forest Service (USFS). Massie confirmed that there is a strong alignment and consistency in their approaches.
- Concerns raised about food storage regulations, particularly in urban interface areas, which are primarily private lands. There is a need to expand education efforts to the broader public regarding proper food storage to prevent conflicts with wildlife, especially as urban areas expand.

### Public Lands Rule by Pat Johnson

### Three Main Components of BLM's Approach

- Protection of Important Landscapes: Focus on Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs).
- Restoration of Landscapes: Efforts to restore landscapes back to health and mitigate environmental impacts.
- Science-Based Decision Making: Ensuring that decisions are guided by scientific data and evidence.

### Public Comment and Implementation Guidance

- The meeting also touched on the importance of public comments in the decision-making process, along with preliminary implementation guidance, which includes bulletins, instruction memos, and manuals now available online.

### ACECs

- The meeting emphasized the importance of designating ACECs for effective management, focused on resource protection and enhancing ecosystem resilience.
- The primary purpose of these designations is to support restoration and education initiatives, ensuring that the management practices are informed and effective.
- Key objectives include:
  - Protecting important landscapes designated as ACECs.
  - Establishing regulations and planning directions for the management of these areas.
  - Expanding criteria for designation and management requirements.
- The meeting outlined procedures for addressing ACECs that are nominated outside of the formal planning process, ensuring a systematic approach.
- Questions were raised about how the new rules would affect existing Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). Pat clarified that the new rules do not retroactively change existing ACECs. Instead, they provide a framework for nominating new ACECs or expanding existing ones based on their intactness.
- New ACECs can be nominated based on current conditions, and the process allows for the expansion of existing ACECs rather than altering those already in place.
- There is anticipation for public nominations for temporary management areas, indicating a proactive approach to land management and engagement with stakeholders.

### Partnerships

- The discussion highlighted the importance of maintaining partnerships with Tribes and other stakeholders to ensure that public access and landscape integrity are preserved.
- Emphasis was placed on the importance of engaging Tribal nations in the assessment processes and land management discussions.
- The acquisition of the Glass Creek area is set to close in Winter 2024.

### Restoration Efforts

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- Strategies for restoring landscapes back to health were discussed, emphasizing adherence to principles that address the root causes of degradation. This includes consideration of spatial and temporal scales and coordination across various programs.
- There was a mention of utilizing nature-based solutions and adaptive management strategies, incorporating traditional ecological knowledge from tribes.
- The focus is on prioritizing restoration efforts over a defined timeline, with plans to prepare amendments for priority landscapes every five years.
- Emphasis was placed on the importance of ongoing investments in restoration activities, with specific examples, such as restoring salmon runs, illustrating the need for measurable outcomes rather than just meeting objectives.
- Each state is called to collaborate and focus efforts on restoration initiatives, ensuring that there is a unified approach to trail restoration and implementation.
- There will be a process to assess the progress of restoration goals and determine if additional resources or changes are needed to meet those goals effectively.
- Addressed leasing issues related to restoration, including:
  - How to apply for and process leases.
  - Procedures for terminating or suspending leases.
  - Guidance on bonding for restoration projects.

### Mitigation Leases

- New guidelines for mitigation leases were discussed, focusing on restoring degraded areas. These leases can be held long-term and are renewable, involving various stakeholders, including individuals, businesses, tribes, and conservation organizations.
- It was noted that entities eligible for mitigation leases include those impacted by other land use actions, allowing for restoration efforts to compensate for any degradation caused.

### Assessments and Standards

- There is a focus on developing a robust public database to document assessments. The results of these assessments will be used to inform decision-making processes.
- The development of normal land health standards is a priority, with a commitment to consider land health in all programs.
- Each land use action will be evaluated using results from Watershed Condition Assessments (LUCAS), which assess the condition and intactness of watersheds.
- The goal is to improve the quantity and quality of data reported to the relevant authorities, ensuring that the process is locally informed and makes sense for the implementation of management guidance.

### Next Steps

- The next steps are scheduled for September 2024, including international and state team meetings.
- The FACA (Federal Advisory Committee Act) committee is in the process of being formed, which will provide guidance for national initiatives.

- A full suite of implementation guidance will be provided, which may include webinars and other resources to assist in understanding and applying these standards.
- A pilot program in Montana is set to prioritize these assessments, with implementation expected in the fall of 2024.
- Specific pilot projects were mentioned, including those in the Blackfoot and Missouri Headwaters areas, which aim to enhance the ability to assess data and improve information sharing.

#### Restoration Landscape Updates – Erica Husse

##### Funding

- Updates were provided on funding sources including the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), with specific figures noted: \$# million for fuels and \$56.2 million for restoration, alongside \$30 million from the IRA.
- Various types of funding opportunities were discussed, with a graphic presented to visualize the information.
- Questions regarding BIL funding were addressed, including inquiries about the national map and adjoining regions, particularly the Snake River and salmon recovery efforts.
- Approximately 70% of the allocated IRA funds have been obligated, with upcoming projects that are in the pipeline and awaiting funding allocation.
- The focus will shift to boots-on-the-ground work, emphasizing the importance of tangible progress in restoration efforts.
- The total investment in the Montana areas includes \$9.54 million from the IRA and \$9.2 million from the BIL, alongside \$5 million from other funding sources.
- Local contracts have resulted in approximately \$57.5 million being invested locally, driving restoration efforts.
- Questions were posed about what makes sense in terms of funding and how best to support partners. There was an interest in expanding areas of focus, particularly in collaboration with local partners.

##### Partnerships

- Emphasis was placed on the importance of partnerships, highlighting a big-picture approach that encompasses not just isolated areas but broader regional initiatives.
- The importance of cross-boundary collaboration was highlighted, emphasizing how local communities and various partners contribute to successful investments and outcomes.
- Local partners and vendors are actively involved in restoration projects, with efforts to invest back into local communities.
- Upcoming project focused on fencing for wildlife protection, which has been coordinated with local permits.
- The discussion included a long-term outlook with five-year agreements for partners, emphasizing already invested areas such as Blackfoot-Clark Fork. Private timberlands are now transitioning into public land status.
- There has been a leading effort to establish new guidance focused on protecting youth programs, with partners actively involved in fostering youth engagement.

### Restoration Initiative

- Three specific restoration initiatives in Montana were mentioned: Sagebrush Anchor, Missouri Headwaters, and Blackfoot-Clark Fork.
- All 21 projects chosen for funding were based on strong partnerships. The discussion included the timeline for these projects, from beginning to end, and the processes for tracking outcomes, results, and impacts.
- The discussion highlighted the significance of managing areas for multiple uses, including classic conservation and agricultural practices. Approximately 9 million acres are being managed under the IRA, with 8.45 million acres under the BIL.
- Focus on restoring forests and riparian areas, improving recreational access, and managing cultural resources. Specific projects include working on designated critical habitats for bull trout and other threatened species.
- The conversation touched on what a cohesive strategy might look like over time, suggesting a need for refocusing and aligning goals to ensure effective management.

### Project Selection

- Management boundaries are being defined based on watersheds to enhance ecological integrity.
- A significant emphasis was placed on large-scale projects, including a fuels program aimed at treating 865,000 acres with mechanical and prescribed burns, with 1,000 acres already treated. The aim is to enhance the health of intact sagebrush habitats.
- Upcoming projects include low-tech restoration on small streams, particularly focused on cutthroat and bull trout.

### Ecological Concerns

- Various ecological issues were addressed, such as:
  - Barriers to riparian and sedimentation processes.
  - Invasive species and forest health challenges, particularly with white bark pine.
  - The need for habitat restoration and the impact of conifer encroachment in sagebrush habitats.
- Concerns were raised about roadwork and logging practices that contribute to increased sedimentation in streams, which can adversely affect aquatic habitats.
- Concerns were raised about the impact of certain roads and culvert replacements on fish passage, particularly for some species. It was noted that future management strategies should aim for solutions that fully support aquatic migration.

### Missoula Field Office – Ernie McKenzie

#### Updates

- Provided updates on the management of travel systems, noting that efforts are partially funded by the BIL.

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- A public scoping effort was conducted last spring, receiving about 50 comments on proposed routes, including input from the public, All-Terrain Vehicle users, mountain bikers, and the Nordic Ski trail system in the Gold Creek drainage area of the Blackfoot Forest. There are plans to convert old logging roads into ski trails, with ongoing development aimed at enhancing recreational opportunities.
- Discussions focused on the management of LBF lands and the benefits of prescribed burning for better cross-boundary management.
- Two Wilderness Study Area (WSA) reports are currently in progress, focusing on data collection and land evaluation, with expected completion for these reports in Spring 2025.

### Partnership Collaboration

- The importance of cooperative efforts with local partners and tribes was emphasized, ensuring that all input is considered in the decision-making process.
- The discussion highlighted the Tribal Co-Stewardship program, which has been active for 6-7 years, focusing on reserved treaty rights and land management. Thinning and prescribed fire practices are emphasized for forest health, restoring lands to a state that aligns with Tribal values.
- An MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) for co-stewardship is anticipated by August 2025, aimed at integrating tribal values into land management practices.
- The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Plum Creek have been involved in implementing treaty rights.

### NEPA

- A contractor is currently handling the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process related to travel management.
- A proposed action and NEPA analysis are underway, with a draft expected in November.
- Public meetings are scheduled for December, with a 10-day comment period following the meetings.
- The timeline is on track for a decision by Summer 2025.

### Clark Fork Timber Sales

- Discussions included timber sales and logging operations that have faced appeals from two agencies, which were dismissed due to lack of standing.
- Implementation of logging activities has begun with project partners.
- A timber sale contract was awarded, with plans for a second timber sale later in the fiscal year.
- Most litigation threats have been resolved, allowing for continued progress on prescribed fires and thinning efforts.

### Land Acquisitions

- An Environmental Assessment (EA) is complete for land acquisitions, with an anticipated closing on the first transaction involving 500 acres from NC.

- The acquisition process is expected to enhance connections to the land for tribal elders and communities.

#### Grazing

- A new grazing allotment has been acquired, with leasing arrangements from Plum Creek Timber. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked collaboratively with ranchers on this allotment, which includes small riparian areas and trout habitat.
- There is a focus on reducing cattle pressure on trout streams.
- An innovative approach is being implemented using virtual fencing with cows fitted with shock collars. This method is intended to condition the cattle by creating noise or buzz when they approach the fence, with the first test planned for Summer 2024, anticipated to be 98% successful.
- Rangeland health assessments will no longer push cattle into riparian areas, promoting better ecological practices.
- Two proposed grazing allotments have been issued for the Med. Lodge and Grasshopper areas. There have been two protests regarding these proposals, with the possibility of receiving more. The goal is to resolve these protests within the next two months, with decisions expected by late November.
- Discussed the cost comparison between traditional fencing and virtual fencing. While traditional fencing is expensive, virtual fencing has proven to be less costly, averaging under 12% of traditional fencing costs.
- Virtual fencing requires cell service to communicate with collars, which can be rented at \$50 per cow per year, but this depends on the operational context.
- Pilot funding is being explored for BLM/private lands, and there are considerations for collar usage, which are not suitable for calves or bulls.
- Despite upfront costs, the longevity and durability of the collars are being assessed, along with waterproofing and subscription requirements for their use.

#### Watershed Assessments

- The Highlands Watershed Assessment is set to begin, with efforts currently focused on finalizing the vegetation Environmental Assessment (EA). A draft of this EA is anticipated in November. The pre-scoping process has addressed many of the issues raised in the previous EA.
- Monitoring efforts include data collection across 170 miles of streams, with 70 miles dedicated to collecting riparian data to track ecological trends.

#### Recreation

- The discussion included significant proposals related to campground refresh efforts. Reby from GADA provided updates on developing and growing initiatives, particularly around Maiden Rock.
- A recent refresh and delineation of campgrounds was completed, including the Kobiashi Dock area along the Ennis Lake River.

### Safety

- There are ongoing concerns about unexploded ordnance in a 3,000-acre area, with an investigation underway for other ammunition found during mowing and detection efforts. This has been a focus for the past five years.
- Inquiries regarding UXO, specifically mentioning areas like Bannack Ghost Town and Reservoir Lake, where 120 mm shells and illumination rounds have been found.
- There are ongoing training exercises by the Air National Guard that involve using older military ammunition, necessitating a critical survey of rugged terrains with limited public use.

### Funding Sources

- Emphasized the importance of funding through the BIL (Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) and IRA (Inflation Reduction Act). There is a focus on utilizing these funds for various projects.
- Partners have received \$1 million from the IRA, which has funded positions at BLM offices, including a conservation corps coordinator based in Dillon.

### Staffing

- By Summer 2025, there are plans to have a crew and interns onboard to assist with local projects.
- There are ongoing vacancies, including positions within the Fish Bio team, and two new park ranger career seasonal positions have been established in Madison.

### Public Comment

- A public comment period was open from 3:30- 4 p.m., though it concluded with no comments from virtual or in-person attendees.

### Action Items/Future Business

- The meeting wrapped up with action items, including an annual update for the business plan and updates on legal cases.
- The next meeting is tentatively planned for January 14, potentially in Helena.
- There were no nominations for RAC (Resource Advisory Committee) members during the nomination period.
- For travel authorizations, participants are advised to contact Chelsea Lair for assistance, referencing past procedures.

*Jean Ellen Belaggio-Nye*