

Western Montana Resource Advisory Council Minutes

August 21, 2013

Butte Field Office

BLM Western Zone Staff Present: David Abrams, Scott Haight, Rich Torquemada, Rick Hotaling, Cornie Hudson, Keith Johnson, AFM Dillon Field Office

RAC Members Present: Mike Connors, Koy Holland, Michael Gibson, Dave Kirsch, David Krueger, Mark Sweeney, Paul Putz, Sam Samson, Whitney Tilt, Bob Walker, and Jack King via speaker phone.

RAC Members Absent: Ted Antonioli, Katherine Looney, and Alan Weltzien (one Category 3 position vacant)

David Abrams, RAC coordinator, opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m. with a review of safety items, travel reimbursement, agenda topics, and meeting ground rules.

Rick recognized the public service of Sam Samson and Michael Gibson and presented appreciation plaques for serving two 3-year terms on the RAC. He applauded the members for their commitment and efforts.

Sage Grouse Planning Strategy

Rick Hotaling updated the RAC on the sage grouse planning strategy for the Great Basin Area. Idaho and southwest Montana is a sub-regional portion of the Great Basin plan. The administrative draft document is headed to the Washington Office for review, and then will be combined with the full Great Basin EIS which should be out in draft sometime this fall. It is on the path to a final EIS and Record of Decision (ROD). The document may amend the Dillon Field Office RMP or it could be considered a maintenance action. The preferred alternative is the current RMP direction with some changes to the oil and gas stipulations. DFO did an outstanding job of addressing sage grouse with their RMP in 2006 and subsequent watershed assessments. BLM wants consistent stipulations between Montana and Idaho.

Montana Governor, Steve Bullock, has formed a working group on sage grouse that will provide recommendations that should be available in January, 2014 for incorporation into the document before it is final. Placeholders are in the draft document to allow for Montana's additions.

Mike Connors asked that when the document is sent to the WO if it needed to go through congress. Rick said no, it goes to the Department of Interior (DOI). Michael Gibson asked if the EIS will be piecemealed by sub-region or if it will be kept as one document. Cornie said there will be one EIS document, but that each BLM office will have its own decision that will be released at the same time. Scott said they are reviewing and striving for consistency.

Bob W. asked about a target date for the EIS. Rick said late fall, 2013. Sam asked about who coordinates or reconciles the differences in recommendations. Rick said the BLM State Directors resolved differences via a conference call. Rick said any inconsistencies need to be explained in the document.

Bob also asked about the role of MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Rick said that FWP Director Jeff Hagener is the lead on the Governor's committee with some State legislators, and representatives from different groups. FWP has a key role to play.

BLM has until September, 2014 to meet the requirements specified by the judge that made the ruling for the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). They will be looking at two primary factors to avoid listing – habitat fragmentation and regulatory mechanisms to protect the species. ROD needs to be completed prior to September, 2014 so the timeline is tight, but BLM recognizes the need to stay on schedule.

Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan

See Rich Torquemada's Power Point presentation attached to these minutes as Appendix A. The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) reported 2300 comments ranging from "protect the bear" to "shoot the bear". The document is available on-line and the most pertinent information for BLM is found in Appendices 11 and 16.

Conservation management strategies differ by area with the "Primary Conservation Area" having the most intensive management and less in zones 1, 2, and 3. In zone 3, if a bear shows up, he is on his own and it is up to the State of Montana and local governments to manage. Food storage standards are a requirement in all areas except for zone 3. Habitat quality, road density, and access are also issues with most of the recommendations applying to the Primary Conservation Area and zone 1.

A team of nearly 20 different agencies and entities has worked for more than two years to develop the strategy and the 90-day public review period ended on August 1 with a final document expected by the end of 2013.

Question on why the Yellowstone area was not part of the Conservation Strategy. The plan had five different recovery units with the Yellowstone area being one along with the Northern Continental Divide. They are treated separately so that the bear could be delisted in certain areas but protected in others depending on how the species recovers. The process is similar to that of the sage grouse except that instead of avoiding a listing under the ESA, the agencies are trying to delist a species. Five National Forests and three BLM units need to incorporate the strategies into their land-use plans before the FWS will approve the delisting package. According to Rich, it could take five years to amend all the needed land-use plans.

Butte Field Office considered grizzly bears and is in good shape with their plan completed in 2009. Missoula's plan is 27 years old (1986) and needs revision. Lewistown FO is just starting the revision process and most plans take at least 5 years to complete. Rich feels that in some areas the bears could be delisted now since the populations are strong and bears are moving into areas they haven't been for a long time. Rich expects some legal challenges upon completion of the final strategy or in the adoption process.

Question on how the area southwest of Butte would be affected. It is mostly in zone 2 of the recovery area where food storage, habitat management and road density are issues. In the area closer to the Bitterroot, no grizzlies have been reported and it is outside of Zone 3.

Once the bear is delisted, Montana will take over management of the grizzly and it could become a game animal. Rich said bear mortality trends need to be monitored for five years past delisting.

Bob W. said the public asks about overhead and administrative costs of federal agencies and the previous discussion points out why the administrative costs are higher – there are regulations to meet and monitoring requirements under NEPA and it's important for the public to understand why the costs are high.

Rick H. said that FWS agrees that the Yellowstone area bear population has recovered and the land use plans were amended, but after only 24 hours, a lawsuit based on white bark pine considerations was filed that postponed the delisting. Bear management is now based on a court action; policies such as food storage can vary but land-use plans are formalized and can only be changed with an extensive public involvement process. The NCD has learned from the Yellowstone ecosystem process that bear mortality trends need to be tracked.

Koy asked about the 10-J rule as it applied to wolves where they were “delisted” in a target area and wondered if that would also apply to bears. Rich T. said the 10-J rule is an option but will most likely end in a legal challenge. The State could apply for a 10-J exception with a solid management plan and the FWS would either grant or not. Agencies are trying to learn from wolf management and apply those to bear management.

Next Meeting Date

David Abrams said it is better to plan a meeting well after the new members are expected to be appointed by the Secretary of Interior. Not sure of when that will be, but mostly likely in November. Question raised on budget situation and number of meetings. Rick said that RAC meetings will still be held, but probably not two day meetings that involve extensive travel. BLM will orient the new members prior to the next meeting.

Decision: Wednesday, November 20, 2013 in Butte; Subsequent meeting January 29, 2014 with location to be determined.

USFS Fee Proposal – Mary Laws, Recreation Program Manager, Kootenai NF

The Kootenai NF would like to add two lookouts and one ranger station cabin to the cabin rental program.

1. The Fair View Cabin is a historic building that has undergone a 10-year restoration program to improve the fence, outhouse, and road. The cabin will be open year-round and is located between Libby and Kalispell. The FS expects this cabin to be very popular at a proposed \$50/night.
2. Meadow Point Lookout is another historic structure between Libby and Kalispell and the FS expects a 60-90% occupancy rate. Proposed at \$40/night.
3. Mitten Peak Lookout is near Trout Creek. It is not historic and is more modern in appearance. It is more child friendly since it close to the ground with a fenced walkway. It has lots of community support and interest. Proposed at \$40/night.

Mary explained that the cabin rental program is self-sustaining; \$40K/year is collected and returned to cabin operations and maintenance. When a larger improvement such as a roof or outhouse is needed, money outside the cabin program is sought.

Cabin rentals are listed on the www.recreation.gov website. The units do not have potable water systems because they are too expensive to maintain.

The process for adding cabins is a two year effort that included a comparison with other sites using a regional fee tool. The public was notified and involved using numerous press releases, websites, and federal register notices. They received 20 responses all wanting to know when the cabins would be available.

Question asked on proposing to raise the other cabin rentals to \$40/night. Mary said eventually that would be the case but that is a low priority right now. Sam asked about area comps and Mary explained that the comps are in the same area but are privately owned and offer many more amenities. The goal of the cabin rental program is not to make a profit but to cover basic costs.

Michael Gibson said the recreation fee subgroup did not do a site visit but did have a conference call and the members felt it would be a great addition to the cabin rental program. He put the recommendation in the form of a motion with the fees stated, seconded by Sam and it passed unanimously.

Recreation Fee Subgroup Update

The RAC Recreation Fee Subgroup (Koy, Whitney, Michael G.) reported that the Henneberry House in the Dillon FO was a “gem”. The subgroup visited the sites in July. Cornie said the cabin is located right on the Beaverhead River and has a pit toilet. Furniture is being installed and it will sleep 6-8. The notice was published in the Federal Register with the comment period ending in May and BLM is proposing a fee of \$75/night. BLM did not receive any comments regarding the cabin. Because of its location, it could be open year around. It will be available 6 months after publication in the Federal Register.

Cornie introduced Keith Johnson, AFM for non-renewable resources. Keith recently transferred to Dillon from Carson City, NV and will be supervising the recreation program as one of his duties.

Koy asked about the fence issue with Tom wondering if the fence could be moved to allow some of the tall grass to be grazed to reduce fire danger. Cornie said he had talked to her once briefly but she would be willing to consider options. Michael Gibson asked about boat parking – not a ramp, but possibly some sturdy wooden posts to anchor a boat. Cornie didn’t think that would be a problem.

The subcommittee moved that BLM add the Henneberry House to the cabin rental program for \$75/night. The motion passed unanimously.

The remaining fee proposals for the Dillon FO were discussed. The proposal is to increase the campground fees from \$8 to \$12 per night and increase the fee for the Axolotl Cabin from \$50 to \$75 per night.

The Axolotl cabin has had many improvements in the last few years including a new roof, toilet, and internal improvements. The cabin sleeps 8. The subgroup felt the fee increase proposals were reasonable with fees well under market value.

The RAC discussed ways to streamline the fee increase proposals and help the public better understand how the money is used. Whitney stated that the goal is not for the agencies to make money, but to cover maintenance costs. BLM and Forest Service appropriated money doesn’t begin to cover administrative costs. Recreation amenities are still priced well under market value.

Whitney would like the agencies to be more proactive in standardizing fees across agency boundaries. In other words, if a facility was a certain size with certain amenities, the price range would be consistent across the BLM, Forest Service and State agencies. Whitney said that would simplify the cost structuring for both the agencies and the RAC. If a site met the standards of a particular category, the fee would be approved as long as it fell within the prescribed range.

Currently there is no "clearinghouse" for recreation sites. Recreation.gov lists the fee sites regardless of agencies that are under the reservation system, but not all sites are listed (e.g. Henneberry, Axolotl). First come-first serve fee sites and free sites are generally listed only on the home unit's website.

Bob asked Mary about the Recreation Facility Analysis completed by the Forest Service five years ago. About half of the Forest Service fee campgrounds in the Northern Region are on the reservation system. The FS is working on a website portal to house all the campgrounds (fee/reservation/free) in one system to make it more user friendly.

Whitney is willing to work on agency proposals for fees to make them consistent and transparent to the public. Bob asked if the RAC can make recommendations on an issue that has not been raised by the agency to the USDA or DOI. Rick said the only restriction for the RAC is on matters of budget or personnel. Also, the RAC cannot lobby congress but letters are appropriate to the State Director and the Secretaries of Ag and Interior. RAC recommendations are submitted on BLM letterhead so letters to Congressmen pertaining to an issue such as recreation probably would not be appropriate.

Rick said the State Director will host the RAC Chairs in October to discuss issues across the state. This would be a great issue to bring up to the group. Rick used the example of the RACs raising the travel management issue that resulted in a statewide EIS.

Cornie stated that the Dillon FO proposes to raise the Lower Madison dispersed camping sites from \$5 to \$8 and wanted input from the RAC on public involvement. Cornie said BLM would use press releases, website notifications, paid ad if needed, posting at recreation sites, outreach to various groups and commissioners to reach interested individuals. BLM is willing to have public meetings if interest warrants.

Koy asked about the "Rainbow Family" and BLM sites. Rick said any large group recreating on public land requires a special recreation use permit.

Cornie officially thanked the recreation fee subgroup for taking the time and making the effort to visit Dillon's sites. Public comments will be available by the next meeting and Dillon's other proposals will be an action item at that meeting.

Since Michael Gibson is leaving the RAC, the subgroup needs a new member and chair. Koy and Whitney are still on the subgroup. David Abrams suggested waiting for new RAC members to fill out the subgroup. Bob mentioned that he and Kathleen are attending the State Director's forum on October 23. Bob would like to unofficially raise the recreation fee issue at that meeting. Whitney volunteered to draft a proposal with input from Koy and Michael with key points.

Public Comment Period

At 11:30 a.m., David Abrams announced the opening of the public comment period. No one attended that wanted to comment and David entered the following message into the record. The message had been read aloud during recreation fee discussion:

Kitty Benzar, president of the Western Slope No-Fee Coalition based out of Durango, CO requested that the following email be read at the August 21, 2013 Western Montana BLM Resource Advisory Council and entered into the record:

Hello again David,

Once again today's Federal Register contains a notice of a meeting next month in Butte of the western Montana RAC at which some recreation fee business will be done. The notice gives no specifics, nor can I find anything on the RAC's website. The most recent minutes posted are from last year; nothing from the February 2013 meeting. You never responded to my March 7 email asking how I could comment on the Dillon FO business plan, where and when the recreation fee subgroup would be meeting, how to participate in that process, and requesting a contact email address on the RAC to whom I can address my concerns since messages to you go largely ignored.

Is the August meeting going to conduct business as a Recreation RAC under the FLREA? If so then your FR notice should say so, otherwise I question whether it meets the public notice requirements in FLREA. Legalities aside, the "public participation" process on recreation fees as being conducted in western Montana is a sham.

PLEASE ENTER THIS MESSAGE AS A PUBLIC COMMENT FOR THE AUGUST 21 MEETING.

Bob asked if this group has a Montana chapter or representative. According to their website, no Montana representatives or chapters are listed.

The meeting continued with discussion on the proposal to be raised at the State Director's meeting. The key points include: 1) standardized fee schedule with ranges, 2) public outreach information on where the money goes and that it doesn't cover all the costs, and 3) a "universal" location for all recreation site information – fee and non-fee.

Michael suggested using a non-profit organization to post recreation information since it seems hard for all the agencies to coordinate on that scope of a project.

Rick stated that BLM used to post notices at fee sites telling how the money was used; found compliance to be higher at those sites. It hasn't been used recently.

Whitney said a trial mobile "app" for the Yellowstone NP area (MT, WY, ID) is in the works and he will know more in a few months. The app will have information on all the outdoor sites regardless of agency and links to chambers of commerce in the surrounding communities.

Paul asked about the Dept. of Commerce website. Whitney said websites aren't as useful when you are traveling or if you are in an area without cell coverage. Paul suggested Google Earth as a resource. Whitney said GE is important but the information on each site is not available.

David announced that the recreation fee proposal letters to the State Director and the Regional Forester are being signed. The remainder of the DFO fee proposals will be an action item at the next meeting.

Field Office Updates

Butte FO – Scott Haight

Recreation Fee increases: We have received many positive responses, and a few negative responses. Increases have not had any noticeable effect on visitor numbers, so revenues in combination with grants resulted in some sites being self-sustaining for the first time.

Recreation Reservation System: is being considered for fee sites on Holter and Hauser Lakes in the future. It would alleviate many of the law enforcement problems by promoting accountability, ensure we have full fee payment compliance, and provide opportunities for visitors from outside the area to access our sites. Some non-reservation sites would remain at each site. BLM is looking for feedback about potentially adopting such a system.

Montana Tunnels Mine: The north slope continues to slide into the pit. BLM administers about 5% of the permitted area. Clancy Creek was captured by failures August 8 & 9.

Fire Prevention Order: A fire prevention order (Stage 1 restrictions) was issued for Silverbow County on July 29. This includes the BLM East Bank recreation site on the Big Hole River for BLM. Campfires only in designated fire rings.

Copper City Fire Prevention Order: A temporary shooting restriction was issued for the Copper City area on July 23. It was implemented to prevent additional wildfires and to protect fire fighters and others associated with mop-up and rehabilitation efforts in the Copper City Fire burned area. A 400 acre fire was started by shooting activity in late July. Once conditions improve and crews are no longer working in the area, the restriction will be lifted. Work left to complete include: pipeline repairs and check dam installation. Copper City is located north of Three Forks and east of the highway.

Iron Mask Mine Reclamation: Engineering design is scheduled to begin this winter, hopefully followed by construction the summer of 2014. This is a CERCLA (Superfund) project to clean up abandoned mine wastes. Timing of work may be scheduled to coincide with other work proposed under the watershed plan EA to make most efficient use of resources. Public meetings not yet conducted.

Iron Mask Planning Area, (26,397 acres):

- Travel Planning is underway in the **Iron Mask area (watershed EA)** covering primarily acquired lands (5566 acres) not previously addressed under existing travel plans.
- In addition to travel planning IDT is working on the impacts analysis for the including vegetation treatments to enhance wildlife habitat and range improvement projects to improve grazing management on the Limestone Hills Allotment, and establish the needed infrastructure for the Indian Creek Forage Reserve Allotment.
- Draft EA out this fall(?)

Jefferson County SE Planning Area, (24,490 acres):

- Responding to comments (~80) received during the 30-day comment period and drafting proposed decisions. Final EA and decisions to be out in the coming month.
- Includes Travel Planning over entire area.
- Doherty Mountain non-motorized trail system dropped from analysis.

Marysville Planning Area:

- 45 acres will be treated along evacuation routes in the Marysville Area as part of the Tri-County Roadside Thinning project. ~1,398 tons (223 MBF) will be removed approximate value \$7K
- Land Health Assessments have been completed within the Marysville Planning Area(14,000 acres) and the assessment report will be available this winter, which is the precursor for any future EA

- Minor travel plan adjustments to be addressed in the **Marysville Planning Area** this winter. A road near the continental divide that is closed by private land on both ends may be marked closed on the existing travel plan. Both landowners are in favor.
- **Missouri River Foothills Planning Area:**
- Land Health Assessments were completed by the IDT(5,400 acres) and the assessment report will be available this winter prior to completing an EA (in addition to travel planning mentioned above).
- Travel planning to occur this winter.
- Scoping likely this fall.

Other Travel Planning:

- Travel plans in **Broadwater Co SE, Park and Gallatin Counties** scheduled for FY 2015. This will complete all travel plans for the BFO.

Pipestone Visitor Trail Map is being prepared by BLM, FS and National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council (NOHVCC). Should be ready and available by next summer. Bob gave a kudo to Brad Colin of the BFO and to BLM for designating trail difficulty in the popular Pipestone OHV riding area.

- Considering changing one access route to the **North Hills from seasonal closure to open year round**. Currently, gates are severely vandalized annually. There does not appear to be any reason for the seasonal closure (2/14-4/16).

Acquisitions:

-Pursuing **donation of inholdings in the McMaster** (Spokane Hills) area. Awaiting solicitor opinion (needed due to lack of title—donated parcels were acquired by landowner from tax sale).
 -Investigating working with FS on **Ingersoll Land Exchange**. A BLM section would be given to private party, with a conservation easement in exchange for private ground to block up federal land. It is adjacent to FS land, and within FS boundary, so would fall under FS administration. Includes a short section of the Continental Divide Trail (few hundred feet). Located near Rogers Pass.

Rogers Pass:

- Timber sale is complete as well as required road work. Total volume was 1.2 MMBF (7440 tons) for \$180K.

Wise River:

- Mastication Units were completed last week total of 284 acres. A ~15 acre prescribed fire to enhance aspen and upland willow was completed this spring.

Upper Big Hole East:

Mastication on ~535 acres has begun this week to reduce conifer encroachment into sagebrush and restore open savannah. Timber sales that we are in the process of sending out for bid include ~200 acres. The contractors will be starting the Tie Creek WUI hazardous fuels reduction next week to reduce hazardous fuel loads in the WUI on 90 acres (\$138K timber sale). Grants from RMEF have helped us complete mastication and weeds treatments within the mastication units this summer.

Miscellaneous:

- Intense, short duration, rain/thunderstorms have washed out portions of roads across the FO, including: Marysville, the Scratchgravel Hills, east side of Hauser Lake, and Whiskey Gulch.
- dump cleanup at Livingston. Found 6 dumps (3 private, 3 BLM) at Copper City to be cleaned up.

Paul P. asked about a questionnaire being distributed about travel to historic mining sites near Townsend. He wondered if it was related to BLM planning. Scott wasn't familiar with the effort could have been FS.

Personnel changes: Sarah LaMarr, BFO wildlife biologist transferred to MFO as a fisheries biologist. Tanya Thrift, AFM for renewable resources is the new field manager in Boise and will start in September. Butte will try to fill the positions.

RAC adjourned for lunch.

Missoula FO – Rich Torquemada

- MFO learned recently that they will get some funding in 2014 to “soft start” their RMP process and plan to publish the Notice of Intent (NOI) to plan in 2015. The funding in 2014 will be used for some contract work on visual resources and some habitat typing for forested and rangeland areas - background work that is needed for the planning effort.
- In early August the Markum Timber Sale was purchased by EM Logging for \$57K and about .5MMBF of material on 104 acres. It was well above the minimum bid.
- 2013 LWCF Funding (Land & Water Conservation Fund) is being used for appraisals on three areas – lower Blackfoot River corridor, 2 sections in Chamberlain Basin and a piece on the Blackfoot River downstream from Lincoln.
- Chamberlain Watershed Assessment EA should be available for 30-day public review period soon. It has been held up for additional assessment on lynx habitat. The EA includes actions for prescribed burns, timber harvest units, stand improvement, wildlife habitat and fish passage projects.
- Garnet Ghost Town had a banner year with above average attendance. In September many school groups visit the site. Garnet Preservation Association has developed living history presentations and interpretive displays that are popular, especially during Garnet History Days. Gordon and Ruth Omlund were recognized for 10 years of volunteering at Garnet. A commemorative license plate for ghost towns is being developed, but the license plate depiction is of Garnet.
- Counties in the MFO are also under Stage I fire restrictions.
- A company has proposed processing the Garnet tailing piles for gold. The NEPA assessment has been completed on five sites. Question on where the ore was being taken – into Philipsburg to the mill.
- The Discovery Basin ROW EA is being completed by a private contractor working with CJ Pitcher. The two primary issues are impact to big game and safety concerns on Rumsey Road. A draft EA should be out in September with a decision in December.

Dillon FO – Cornie Hudson

- The Upper Horse Prairie decision document should be out before the end of the year.
- Watershed assessment fieldwork for the South Highlands and the Middle Ruby were completed this summer. The EA will be developed over the winter and available for public review in the spring.
- DFO had several successful weed spraying days this summer with about 1500 acres treated. Some spraying was done in cooperation with Beaverhead and Madison Counties and some private entities.
- The Madison River Citizen’s Advisory Council completed the Madison River Plan and has been approved by the MT FWP Commission. Cornie is attending a meeting in early September to see how recommendations can be implemented.

Whitney asked if river setbacks were incorporated into the plan. Cornie said she didn't know of any. River managers are encouraging the use of voluntary boater registration to determine level of use and which areas are used most often.

- The Federal Lands Acquisition Program (FLAP) has projects in Beaverhead and Madison Counties including paving of the Ruby Creek Road. This winter the Dillon FO will complete an EA to determine the amount of paving in the Ruby Creek Campground.

David Krueger asked about paving standards and load limits for log trucks. Cornie will keep David K. in the loop.

- Beaverhead County received \$1.3 million to redo five bridges on the Medicine Lodge Road and other improvements. Question on access along Medicine Lodge Road. Cornie said the easements that were planned when the Hansen Ranch pulled out of block management are almost completed. BLM needs to install culverts on Cow Creek Road. Two other segments need to have easements purchased from Hansens. They are willing to sell and negotiations are underway. MT FWP and Rocky Mtn Elk Foundation are very interested in the easements and have taken the lead. When complete, the easements will be gifted to BLM for management. Want to have the road open by mid-October.
- Madison River cleanup this Saturday. Volunteers will meet at Warm Springs at 9 a.m. to float the river and cleanup.
- The Nature Conservancy is sponsoring a tour in the Centennials on August 22 to highlight cooperative fuels and vegetative treatment projects. Question on Nature Conservancy's interest in the Centennials. Cornie said TNC owns property in the Centennials and have been an active participant in a number of cooperative projects.
- Hagenbarth Exchange – ribbon cutting being held on September 10 and all RAC members are invited. Hagenbarth traded some privately owned riverfront property for more upland area. The process took almost six years to finalize and the Hagenbarths were wonderful to work with.
- Beaverhead and Madison Counties are not currently under fire restrictions. Only one person-caused fire so far.
- Dillon's forester is leaving in September to take a position with the FS in Oregon. Plans are to fill behind her.

David Krueger asked about Steve Flynn's (former RAC member) proposal to address beetle killed timber. He wondered if that had progressed into any projects. Cornie said Dillon offers projects each year along with the watershed assessments. David said the object is to look outside the normal planning process to harvest timber before it is lost. Scott said that BLM had asked the timber interests to suggest areas or projects they might be interested in. David said they had submitted some possibilities to Butte FO, and one small one to Dillon. MFO is offering the Chamberlain Timber Sale and starting the RMP process but would look at small salvage sales. Cornie said salvage sales are easier to offer.

RAC Feedback to BLM

Bob referred to the letter from the RAC of August 18, 2012 concerning the beetle killed trees and forestry projects. Letter was sent to the Rick Hotaling, District Manager. Rick said every watershed has some beetle killed trees and BLM offers timber sales in various areas every year. It is hard for BLM to take on other projects because of the way the agency is funded and efficiencies that need to be met. BLM is also short staffed in forestry positions, but even with sequestration and tight budgets, those positions are slated to be filled which demonstrates BLM's commitment to the forestry program.

David Krueger said the limiting factor for the lumber industry is timber availability. They can sell as much as they can process. They don't want timber offered after it's not merchantable. It's frustrating for the industry to process small acreage salvage sales when there is a sea of dead timber on the landscape.

Dave Kirsch asked how long a tree is merchantable once it dies – 4 to 5 years. Once the bark starts sloughing off, it is no longer viable. There are eight major mills currently open in Montana. Mark asked about lawsuits holding up timber sales – David said there are discussions in Washington, but nothing has been resolved. He mentioned Senator Tester's bill as a possible partial solution.

Bob said it appeared BLM was doing everything they could, considering budget and staffing constraints, but it is good to keep the issue elevated. Bob will take a copy of the letter to the meeting with the State Director in October along with the recreation fee proposal.

Sam asked if BLM can encourage joint FS/BLM timber sales. Scott said that BLM and the FS have different appeal regulations so it is hard to have joint sales but agencies still coordinate and work together on a regular basis.

Kirsch mentioned all the acres of dead lodgepole in the Elkhorns. Krueger said they are willing to work with agencies on sale lay out and meet with specialists out in the field. Sam mentioned that lodgepole is a hard species to manage due to its nature, the granitic soils and other variables.

Mark asked about white bark pine and seed gathering. Cornie said this is a poor white bark pine seed year but 2014 should be a bumper year. Some white bark pine trees were planted after the Pony Fire – it is a high priority species for grizzly bear.

Jack King interjected that from the oil and gas industry standpoint, they don't always agree with everything BLM does, but he does appreciate the excellent communication.

Bob reported that Governor Bullock has appointed a State Parks and Recreation Board with the first meeting August 28. It consists of five members with Tom Towe of Billings as chair.

Bob reminded the managers that they had agreed to update the RAC regularly on weed control. Kirsch said Jefferson Co. received a \$50K RAC grant to aerial spray in the Elkhorns. The tour showed high mortality on the knapweed and dalmation toadflax.

Rich reported that MFO had two extra weed sprayers this summer; also used biological methods (insects) and some hand pulling. There are many cooperative efforts underway with Missoula, Powell and Granite Counties. Rich also mentioned America's Great Outdoors Initiative – not much funding, but data on weed infestations was collected across all agencies and built into a "Crown of the Continent" data base. Allowed agencies to show on a large scale where the large infestations are occurring.

D. Kirsch said that Jefferson County received \$1.6 million grant for Pipestone area and slough to treat Eurasian waterfoil which is detrimental to fisheries and other species. May have to dredge the creek to get rid of the plant. It has made its way all the way to Fort Peck Reservoir.

Bob said that private groups around the state are also good cooperators in the fight against weeds. Montana has a Recreational Trail Program that offers grants for various projects including weed control. The deadline for applying is March, 2014. Beth Shoemate heads up the program.

Sam mentioned Todd Breitenfelt, a Whitehall science teacher that raises insects for knapweed control. He is a good resource.

Koy asked about weed spraying priorities – knapweed vs. thistle? Cornie said they work cooperatively with other agencies and counties, and they do priority spray. Rich said they use the NIMS (National Invasive Management System) data base to identify priority areas. Scott said when they do watershed assessments, weeds can raise the treatment priority for that watershed so that the allotment meets land health standards.

Cornie said all BLM offices work cooperatively with other agencies and counties to share resources and funding. Any extra funding is used for cooperative agreements with counties who have more flexibility for staffing and chemicals.

Action Items

Timber letter resend - David
Recreation Fee Policy Letter – Recreation Subgroup

Future Agenda Items

DFO recreation fee increase proposal
Recreation fee letter
RAC chair meeting report from 10/23
New member introductions

Mark asked about the quantity of applications for the RAC positions. David Abrams said they had the best response since 2009. The applications have been coordinated with the State and are now being vetted at the national level. Meeting adjourned.

 //SIGNED//
Bob Walker, RAC Chairperson

Date: 9/25/2013