

**RANGELAND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Tuesday March 8, 2022**

**1:00pm**

**Big Timber Carnegie Library**

**Big Timber, MT**

**PRESENT**

**Members:**

*Vice Chair John Hollenback*

*Member Jim Anderson*

*Member Ron Devlin*

*Member Leah Lewis*

**Staff:**

*Stacey Barta, State Rangeland Resources Program Coordinator, Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC)*

*Mark Bostrom, Conservation and Resource Development Division Administrator, Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation*

*Emily Moran, Administrative Attachment Coordinator, Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation*

**Guests:**

*Katie Decker, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Montana-Dakotas*

*Kevin Derzapf, Rangeland State Coordinator, Natural Resources Conservation Service-USDA (NRCS)*

*Connie Iverson, Advisory Member of the Rangeland Resources Committee, Richland Country Rancher*

*Molly Masters, Council Coordinator, Missouri River Conservation Districts Council (MRCDC)*

*Rick Northrup, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)*

**Public:**

*None.*

**Call to Order**

Vice Chair John Hollenback called the meeting to order at 1:05 p.m.

**Welcome and Introductions**

Members, guests, and public present introduced themselves.

**Minutes**

Jim Anderson moved, and Ron Devlin seconded the motion to approve the minutes of the September 7, 2021, meeting. Motion carried by unanimous consent.

## **Coordinator Updates**

### **GLCI Field Day**

Stacey has been working in coordination with Montana Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) to plan a Field Day at Terry Haughian's Ranch near Miles City. Tour of the Haughian Ranch will be from 8:00 a.m.-5:30 p.m. on June 1st with lunch and dinner provided.

Presentations from industry speakers include Terry Haughian, Whit Hibbard, a research update from Fort Keogh, Miles City Veterinary Service, and the fall price outlook from Kevin Good with Cattle Fax. Registration is \$25.

### **Future Rangeland Resources Committee Meeting**

The next Rangeland Resources Committee (RRC) meeting will be held at the Miles City Community College, room 106 on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022. An action item of this meeting is to set a new interest rate for the Rangeland Improvement Loan Program; the current interest rate is 1.5%. This meeting will take place the day before the GLCI Field Day.

### **Upcoming Events**

- The Stockgrowers Midyear Meeting in Sidney, MT, June 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>.
- The Montana Farm Bureau Summer Conference will be held June 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> at the Fairmont Hot Springs.
- Montana Association of Conservation Districts Spring Board Meeting is June 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> in Helena at the State Capitol.
- The 2022 Montana Range Days will be June 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> at the Marias Fairgrounds in Shelby, MT.

### **Working Lands Internship Program**

Four interns hired for summer 2022: Joe, Jodee, Autumn, and Bridger. Stacey is in the process of meeting the interns in person. This year, the internship program will run 10 weeks instead of 12 weeks. Five of the previous hosts have taken a break and chosen not to host this year. New RRC member, Leah Lewis, has volunteered to host in May; she is one of three new hosts for the program. [Agristudios](#) production company will create a video for the Working Lands Internship Program, the video is predicted to be complete by July.

### **Forest Service**

Wyoming Department of Agriculture is using the Good Neighbor Authority through the Forest Service to host monitoring Forest Service allotment interns and renew Forest Service permits. Stacey is working with Shawn Heinert (U.S. Forest Service) to enact the Good Neighbor Authority in Montana.

### **Resource Advisory Committee (RAC), BLM**

The BLM has two open RAC positions, [Western Montana](#) and [Missouri Basin](#). Stacey applied to both.

### **Range Tour- Cascade Conservation District (CD)**

The 2022 Range Tour will take place in Cascade County, August 30-31<sup>st</sup>; Save the Date cards will be sent out soon. The planning committee was able to hire Alejandro Carrillo as a speaker for the 2022 Range Tour. Alejandro is a rancher in Mexico who has successfully created a productive ranch in a drought zone. He will be in Cascade County for 4 days and his rate is about \$2,200/day; Stacey submitted a proposal to GLCI for his funding. Other speakers include

John Lang- marketing in a volatile market, and Jerry Townend will present about genetics and fitting an animal to your environment. The planning committee has run into transportation logistical issues; commercial busses will no longer drive on gravel roads and there are no extra school bus drivers outside of school hours. Cascade and Judith Basin CD will look into renting busses from different Universities and/or renting large vans.

#### **406 Grazing Academy with Montana State University**

The 406 Grazing Academy will take place June 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> in Lewistown, the academy is in partnership with MSU and sponsorship by GLCI.

#### **Leopold Conservation Award (LCA)**

The 2022 Leopold Conservation Award applications are due March 15<sup>th</sup> currently Stacey has received four applications and is expected to receive at least four more. John Hollenback represents the RRC on the LCA selection panel, he is one out of ten members.

The 2021 award tour and dinner will take place at the Hidden Hollow Cattle & Guest Ranch near Townsend, June 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Society for Range Management (SRM)**

Stacey was appointed to the board of directors of the International Mountain Section (IMS). The SRM IMS will be hosting a Summer Tour- "Drought, Fire & Grazing Resilience in Central Montana". This summer tour will feature various ranches in the Stanford area and will take place Saturday, July 9<sup>th</sup>.

#### **General Update**

Stacey's office space lease in Bozeman was not renewed. Stacey is currently working on securing a telework agreement with the DNRC and the Department of Administration.

### **Advisory Members Updates**

#### **Mark Bostrom, DNRC**

- Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program
  - On February 11<sup>th</sup>, The Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team authorized the initiation of a 6-month grant cycle with the use of the \$5.2 million in the Sage Grouse Stewardship Account. Contact [Therese Hartman](#) or [Stacey Barta](#) for more information.
    - There is an emphasis on term or conservation leases, as well as focusing on restoration projects, and mitigation in the Central Service Area.
- American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)
  - ARPA grants are going out to cities and counties.
    - Minimum amounts established for water and sewer projects.
- Renewable Resource Grant Program
  - Renewable Resource Project Grants applications due May 16<sup>th</sup> by 5:00 p.m.
  - \$125,000 available for irrigation and range projects. More information can be found on the [Conservation Development website](#). Or by contacting the Program Manager, [Lindsay Volpe](#)
    - Irrigation Districts can apply for this grant program through their Conservation Districts.

### **Rick Northrup, FWP**

- FWP is on its fifth year working on the Working Grassland Initiative purchasing 30-year leases with ranches and the grant program is wrapping up. Currently the program pays a one-time payment of \$30/acre. Looking to establish a new grant opportunity with Pittman-Robertson funding, with new price, maybe \$40/acres.
  - Program pays ranches to commit to not plow up or spray native vegetation on their land. Agreements require minimal public access requirements.
  - FWP is looking to put \$5-10 million into the new grant
  - Collaborating with the Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program to potentially help their program as well.
- Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP), Kelly Flynn (winner of the 2021 LCA) sponsored this program when he was in the legislature.
  - Program focused on noxious weed management on priority wildlife habitats.
  - Historically, the program has been very successful with many applications each year, but last year only saw one application for a five-year agreement.
    - The application this year includes 434,000 acres and is expected to treat 35,000 acres in the Bitterroot.
  - WHIP has not seen many projects in the Eastern Plains part of Montana and would like to see more project applications in that area.
  - Fishing Access Sites can potentially be leased sites through long-term lease agreements.
- FWP administers the Habitat Montana Program
  - Historically has been accommodating purchasing land in fee title for the purpose of establishing Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) or purchasing perpetual conservation easements.
    - The Program has received direction to no longer seek perpetual easements and to expand into term easement options; nothing more than 40 years in length.
    - Rick is looking for help and recommendations from anyone on the council. Please contact [Stacey Barta](#) for more information.
- Liz Bradley will replace Mike Thompson's position.

### **Katie Decker, BLM**

- Drought conditions are persisting. Precipitation conditions from last Fall from into this Winter are improved conditions.
  - Field offices did impose 25-30% AUM reductions and working with permittees and leases to document the reductions.
- [Grazing Rule revision](#)
  - Federal Grazing Regulations update effort has been renewed with newly assembled team. Scope of revision remains the same, it is to clarify procedures, address court decision, improve business and land use practices, and increase flexibility for land use managers.
    - BLM is hoping to release a proposed rule this Fall with a 60-day comment period.
    - Final rule will be released in the Fall of 2023.

- More information can be found on [BLM ePlanning](#) website.
- American Prairie Reserve EA
  - BLM released a preliminary environmental assessment of the American Prairie Reserve in September 2021. Within the 90-day comment period, BLM received about 3,000 comments.
    - Comments are addressed in edits or appendixes within the final EA.
    - BLM anticipated signed release will be the end of March or April.
  - More information can be found on [BLM ePlanning](#) website.
- Outcome Based Grazing Decisions
  - BLM released preliminary EA in September with a 30-day comment period. Only received one comment. Grazing decision authorized issuing two 10-year term grazing permits with changes to season of use to provide flexibility to the two permittees. It also authorized construction of new range improvement projects and modifications of existing range improvement projects.
    - Final EA and Fonzie signed and released February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021.
    - Proposed grazing decision signed and released February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Proposed grazing decision was sent out to interested public and permittees.
      - Grazing Decision still within the protest phase. If no protests are received, the decision will become final and will have a 30-day repeal period. If no repeals are received, the decision is implemented.
- Grasshopper suppression treatments with APHIS
  - In January 2022, BLM signed an updated Memorandum of Understanding with APHIS in the cooperation of grasshopper and cricket suppression efforts on BLM lands.
    - Last year APHIS treated 142,500 acres on BLM land in Eastern and Northcentral Montana Districts.
    - Gary Adams (USDA-APHIS) completed follow up surveys to test effectiveness but hope to see effectiveness through this year's numbers.
  - APHIS completed their annual EAs for suppression areas. BLM districts have until April to review and comment. Once EAs are finalized, BLM will accept their NEPA analysis and publish their own decision by May.
- [Sage Grouse Focal Area \(SFA\) Environmental Impact Statement \(EIS\)](#)
  - BLM headquarters reviewing large scientific evidence and literature with respect of assumptions made in original EIS on mineral withdraw.
  - United State Geological Survey is working on a Critical Mineral Report for the BLM. Report is expected to be complete in April. Once BLM receives the Critical Mineral Report, the agency can create a reasonable development scenario for critical minerals for SFA and potentially develop alternatives.
- Review of Sage Grouse Habitat Management Plans
  - Public comment yields a large response.
  - BLM anticipating final scoping by end of March.
    - Comments have supported leaving plans as is.
    - Many MT agencies and government agencies asking to keep the 2015 plan in place.

- Post 2021 wildfire season
  - Approximately 230 BLM Dakota-Montana grazing allotments affected by wildfires in 2021.
    - That is about 4% of all Dakota-Montana grazing allotments.
  - Field offices are looking into proper post-fire grazing management practices.
- Key planning efforts throughout the state
  - Dillion field office issued decision on East Pioneers Watershed Plan
    - Native Ecosystems Council challenged decision- court ruled in BLM favor. Native Ecosystems Council continues to challenge water development within the watershed planning effort.
  - Billings field office issued project for Bighorn Basin Broke Creek Permit Renewal
    - Western Watersheds protested proposed grazing decision.
    - Billings field office is working to address comments and publish final decision.
  - Miles City field office issued a Decision for Pumpkin Creek Grazing Allotment.
    - JCM enterprises submitted a notice of appeal of the Pumpkin Creek Decision and included a Stay Request. Office of Hearings and Appeals denied the request. BLM has submitted a motion for summary judgment.
  - Lewistown field office issued a decision in 2014 tied to property disputes and has been working to resolve issues.
    - Administrative Law Judge affirmed BLM's 2014 decision. That decision was appealed to the IBLA.
- Staffing Updates- Katie is the Acting State Range Lead for the BLM Montana-Dakotas.
  - Her assignment may end either the end of April or first of May, though there is talk of extending her assignment.
  - John Mehlhoff vacancy has been advertised, but not filled
  - State Director position is working to be filled. Hopes to be filled within the next two months.

#### **Molly Masters, MRCDC**

- [30x30 Atlas comment letter](#) submitted yesterday.
- [Fort Peck Test Flows US army corps of engineers](#) comment letter submitted.
  - Record of Decision was signed for alternative 1 but no test flows will happen this year due to drought.
    - Contact Molly for more information.
- CMR Community Working Group schedule for March 24<sup>th</sup> in Glasgow.
  - Topic is Sage Grouse; RSVPs will be Thursday March 10<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Kevin Derzapf, NRCS**

- [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP) has now implemented through targeted implementation plans (TIPs) that are submitted by partners or local NRCS for targeted practices.
  - State team will review application March 21<sup>st</sup>. Applications are accepted year-round, but the state only reviews applications once or twice a year.
- [Range related specifications](#)
  - NRCS standards are being updated.

- Fence specification has changed, a lot of the revisions were done before Kevin was hired and is more wildlife friendly.
    - Allowances for bolt together angle braces
      - Keyhole brace system is favorable.
  - Prescribed grazing specifications
    - Will be discussed further tomorrow during GLCI meeting. Any words of advice are welcome.
- MSU Ventenata research
  - GLCI is working with MSU on research.
    - Is herbicide effective and the best method?
- [State Conservation Innovation Grants](#)
  - Applications are due May 2<sup>nd</sup>.
    - \$75,000 is the state cap.
  - Targeted providing funding for innovated programs that NRCS currently does not support
    - Temporary water solutions, electric fences, or projects that were denied at the national level.

**Connie Iverson, Advisory Member of the RRC**

- Area is dealing with drought and lack of hay.
- Lots of cattle going to market and wondering how to get through the summer.

**Shawn Heinert, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)**

- In his absence, Shawn shared his [updates via email](#).

**Old Business**

None.

**New Business**

**2022 Strategic Plan Draft**

- RRC member need to look over the current draft and send any edits to [Emily Moran](#) or [Stacey Barta](#).
- Draft will be voted on at the May 31<sup>st</sup> meeting.

**June Range Month Update**

- RRC member need to look over the current draft and send any edits to [Emily Moran](#) or [Stacey Barta](#).
- Draft will be voted on at the May 31<sup>st</sup> meeting.

**Range Month Proclamation**

- Jim Anderson has sent a draft proclamation statement to the Governor's Office to create June 2022 as Range Month. Jim spoke with the Governor's Chief of Staff and Lieutenant Governor.

### **RRC and GLCI Roles Discussion**

- Handout- RRC and GLCI comparison
- There is a lot of opportunities to partner so, collectively, we can be a stronger voice for Montana's rangelands.
  - It is possible to work together while maintaining each program's identity.
- GLCI is national based, but also plays a role in Montana. Discussion will be tomorrow at the GLCI meeting from 10-11 a.m. The discussion will be focusing on individual roles and potential partnerships.
- Montana has one of the first and only statutorily approved committee (RRC) to work with all other rangeland groups.
  - Kevin Derzapf, NRCS State Coordinator, comes from Texas, where GLCI does both RRC's and GLCI's responsibilities.
  - RRC has statutorily mandated Rangeland Resources Committee duties, loan responsibilities, and Rangeland State Coordinator staff.
- GLCI is a 501 C3 Nonprofit, funded by NRCS
  - GLCI is less restricted on projects they fund.
  - MT GLCI originally partnered with MSU.
  - National GLCI board that made up of state coalition and advisory members.
  - National GLCI meets every 3 years, Stacey looks forward to going in the future, or sending a RRC member.
  - Montana Budgets for projects
    - \$60,000 per year, guaranteed for five years.
      - RRC should promote that GLCI has money for projects, maybe partner with the Rangelands newsletter?
      - Stacey asked GLCI to promote RRC projects like LCA, Field Days, Range Tour, etc.
  - GLCI may have the funds and ability to travel to DC to be a proponent of national rangeland items.

### **Rangeland Improvement Loan**

- DNRC has received two loan applications so far this year.
  - Currently \$75,000 is the maximum loan amount.
- It has suggested to change the statute language.
  - The statute should be changed to the Special Revenue fund so RRC would receive the interest. Currently, the General Fund receives any interest earned.
  - If the statute was changed to include the Special Revenue Fund, RRC could ask the legislature to refill the \$1 million balance. Currently there is no statutory cap.
  - The statute language on the loan application process should be changed. Stacey is hoping to remove the need for Conservation Districts to approve loans, to increase approval time.

## **2022**

### **Projects and Events**

- GLCI Field Day- June 1<sup>st</sup>, Haughian Ranch.
- 406 Grazing Academy- June 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>, Lewistown.
- Range Tour- August 30<sup>th</sup>- 31<sup>st</sup> Cascade County CD
- SRM Tour: Drought, Fire & Grazing Resiliency in Central Montana- July 19<sup>th</sup>, Stanford.

- Leopold Conservation Award Winner Tour- June 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup>, Hidden Hollow Cattle & Guest Ranch.
- The Stockgrowers Midyear Meeting in Sidney, MT, June 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>.
- The Montana Farm Bureau Summer Conference will be held June 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> at the Fairmont Hot Springs.
- Montana Association of Conservation Districts Spring Board Meeting is June 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> in Helena at the State Capitol.
- The 2022 Montana Range Days will be June 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> at the Marias Fairgrounds in Shelby, MT.
- Stacey and Emily are updating the 1987 State of the Range Program book. The book is currently on onion paper and will need to first be converted into a text document before sent to State Mail & Print.

**Other**

The next two RRC meetings will be:

May 31<sup>st</sup> at the Miles City Community College.

August 29<sup>th</sup> in Great Falls before the Cascade County Range Tour.

**Public Comment**

None.

**ADJOURN**

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00 p.m.