

RANGELAND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES

Tuesday September 7, 2021

4:00pm

Great Northern Hotel

Malta, MT

PRESENT

Members:

Chair Diane Ahlgren

Member Ron Devlin

Member Jim Anderson

Member Leah Lewis

Staff:

Stacey Barta, State Rangeland Resources Program Coordinator, Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation

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

Guests:

Kelvin Johnson, Habitat Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Raylee Honeycutt, Executive Staff, Montana Stockgrowers Association, Montana Association of State Grazing Districts, Montana Public Lands Council

Floyd Thompson, Rangeland Management Lead, Bureau of Land Management Montana-Dakotas

Kevin Derzapf, Rangeland State Coordinator, Natural Resources Conservation Service-USDA

Public:

Nakaya Rife, District Conservationist, NRCS Roundup and Harlow

Gillian Rowe, Montana Conservation Corps Fellow and DNRC Intern, Gallatin Conversation District and Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation

Elizabeth Emeline, Natural Resources Specialist, Gallatin Conservation District

Call to Order

Chairwoman Diane Ahlgren called the meeting to order at 4:00pm.

Minutes

Jim Anderson moved, and Ron Devlin seconded the motion to approve the minutes of the May 24, 2021, meeting. Motion carried by unanimous consent.

Welcome and Introductions

This was the first meeting in person with the new appointees. Members, guests, and public present introduced themselves.

Coordinator Updates

Working Lands Internship Program

August wrapped up the 2021 Working Lands Internship Program with a Forest Health Day up in the Mountains. Four interns completed the 12-week program, visiting 20 ranches, spending two weeks at each ranch. Internship program was a huge success with one intern being hired by NRCS and great media coverage. This year's program was successful for the interns and the ranches, and the program continues to achieve more every year. The program was started in 2018 and have resulted in interns being hired by NRCS, Fish & Game, and other agencies across the country. Always looking for more operations to participate in the program; program allows for flexible hosting weeks.

Tour of Invasive Annuals

Field days were rained out but still had great conversations with ranchers across the state about a potential for a foundation of rangeland in the future.

Governor Job Advisory Committee

Stacey sits in on the committee and will send any important updates

Ranching for Rivers

Ran through MACD. Stacey reviews applications and completes some technical work for program. Ranching for Rivers ended their contract with DEQ but will be looking to start up program across the state. Program allows improvement of riparian areas and corridors.

RSA (Rancher Stewardship Award) Monthly Meetings

Ranches Resources Network meeting in Lewistown, had conservation representative from across the state, very informative and ready to see what's next.

Planning 2021 Range Tour with Phillips CD

Have been working hard with the Phillips Conservation District to put on a successful Range Tour. Have also been working with the Sand County Foundation and videographers to create a wonderful Aldo Leopold Conservation Award presentation.

Advisory Members Updates

Raylee Honeycutt,

- Grazing Districts annual meeting will start soon. Next Joint Public Lands Council and Grazing District board meeting will be November 15th at the Northern Hotel in Billings, MT, Stockgrowers convention will be the 15th-17th in conjunction with the above PLC and GD meeting.
- National Public Lands Council virtual conference, Sept. 28th.
- BLM released EA recently.
- Looking into the possibility to grant some covid money to agriculture
 - Covid money is in the economic and stabilization trench, Dept. of Ag will submit proposal in Oct.

- Agriculture is going up against work force development and affordable housing, two very hot topics; agriculture may see little to no money.
- Dept. of Ag. Original proposal was \$15 million, will be reworked, maybe \$10 million or less. Very little direction given.

Floyd Thompson, BLM

- BLM still in the process of hiring director.
- BLM Montana and Dakotas looking to hire one more Range Management Specialist in Malta.
- Drought has been top concern. Great cooperation through drought season with permittees and leasees; will continue the cooperative effort to monitor drought conditions.
- APHIS has treated grasshoppers at the field offices: Choteau, Phillips, Petroleum, Fergus, Carter, Prairie, Custer, and Powder River Counties. Still waiting on final figures for acres treated.
- Draft Environmental Assessment for American Prairie Reserve (APR) is open for public comment through September 28th.
 - Comments will be reviewed, and EA will be revised, as needed.
 - Final EA will be posted. Will have 15-day protest period.
- Grazing regulation's re-write is still on hold.
- Permit renewals and land health assessments are highest priority. Typically see 43,050 grazing leases and permits administered, 5,300 allotments.
 - Goal is to administer 525 permits this year, will likely meet goal.
- Threatened and endangered species consultations have increased due to Grizzly bear expansion.
- Litigation on Range Program have received a few protests tied to perceived grizzly bear conflicts with livestock grazing.
 - Billings and Dillion Field Office. Decisions hopefully issued by October.
- Miles City, Pumpkin Creek allotment: decision redone by BLM, received appeals and continuing litigation process.
- Butte, Virginia Creek allotment: final with no appeals, yet.
- Indian Creek allotment: litigation lost in federal court, is being reworked.
- IBLA base property dispute, still waiting for decision.
- Lewistown office will release draft EA for outcome based grazing authorization pilot within the coming weeks. Public comment period will follow.
- A handful of fires this year on BLM land, overall impact has been minor, with the exceptions of Billings, Robertson Draw fire, and Richard Springs fire in Miles City.
- BLM summer vacancy announcements will be released in October or November.
- Haven't felt the need to create any blanket grazing reductions. Will be case-by-case basis.

Kalvin Johnson, FWP

- Governor announced Emergency Drought Declaration. FWP released Emergency Drought Grazing and Haying leases on Wildlife Management Areas in August.
 - WMA's opened for emergency leases do not have wintering ranges.
 - Received many constructive comments and the public showed lot of interest
 - Application period closed Sept. 1st and leases were awarded by random drawing.
 - Varied response of applicants. There are still unawarded leases due to no applicants.
 - May re-open application period.

- These leases show 'good neighbor' relations. They enhance landowner relations with the ease and speed of process.
- Conservation Easement Stewardship Manager hired, Sara Sylte. Sara is based out of Helena.
- Migratory Bird and Grasslands Coordinator hired, Heather Harris. Heather is based out of Glasgow.

Kevin Derzapf, NRCS

- NRCS has over 50 new employees across the state.
- Hoping to hire 3 more
- Grasslands CRP programs requiring a lot of time and resources.
- Virtual fencing has potential and NRCS in the future may support and provide financial assistance to the conservation practice.

Nakaya Rife, NRCS

- Current USDA Conservation Reserve Program continuous enrollment.
- Very short staffed across the state.

Old Business

RRC Member Focused Areas

- MSGOT- Diane
 - State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC)-?
Provides recommendations and input to NRCS.
 - BLM- Leah, John, Ron
 - USFS- Leah, John
 - Endangered Species Act- Whole committee, as they arrive
 - Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)-?
 - Grazing Districts/Grass Commission-?
 - Montana Stock Growers Association (MSGA)- Jim, Ron
 - Farm Bureau- Jim, Ron
 - MT Grazing Lands Coalition- Ron
 - APR- Jim
- *Ron Devlin is willing to be placed wherever seems fit.

New Business

Strategic Plan Review

- Will need to set a date to review and revise the strategic plan for future years; it is currently more of a framework.
- Next meeting will be held mid/end-November in Lewistown with the focus of reviewing Strategic Plan.

2022

Projects and Events

- Range tour- Cascade County CD will hold 2022 tour, ~2-week time frame around Labor Day.
- Leopold Conservation Award Winner Tour- 3rd week of June.
- High probability of another Grazing Academy with MSU, 2021 had an excellent response.
- Range Camp:
 - To restimulate interest, may need to change name.
 - Maybe put range land camp content in existing camps or science museums?
 - Will have conversation with Cascade and Judith Basin CD to get the word out.
 - Need to revisit how to gain more interest in November meeting.

Correspondence and Dissemination of Information

No new updates. Will continue to email important content.

RRC Monthly Zoom

Will hold a one hour zoom meeting every other month, alternating in person meetings.
Prefer Friday mornings?

2021-2022 Budget

Nothing yet to report.

Rangeland Improvement Loan Program

- Current interest rates are 1.5%.
- The amount of the fund is decreasing, Ron will check into legislature viewpoint of it. Stacey will schedule meeting with Ron, John, and DNRC Financial Services Bureau.

Public Comment

Raylee Honeycutt

- 30x30 initiative movement, oversight Committee formed, will have report by the end of the year.
- NRCS has pledged \$30,000 in matching funds to do Soil Health Initiative Study. Group will begin outreach to landowners in the area; the outreach should include rangeland in conversation.

ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at 6:07 p.m.