

Western Montana Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Minutes

April 26, 2023

Butte Brewing Company Conference Facility – Butte, Montana

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Western Zone Staff Present: Katie Stevens (Designated Federal Official), David Abrams (RAC Liaison), Amanda James (Dillon Field Manager), Erin Carey (Missoula Field Manager, via Teams), Lindsay Babcock (Butte Field Manager), and Michael Albritton (Missoula Assistant Field Manager).

RAC Members Present: Dave Williams, John (J.M.) Peck, Sean Steinebach, Dave Kumlien, Eric Clewis, Michael Korn, Dennis Milburn, Jean Belangie-Nye, Clayton Elliott, and Michael O'Herron.

RAC Member Present Via Teams: Lois Steinbeck, Mark Peck, and Juanita Vero

RAC Members Absent: Kathryn McDonald

David Abrams opened the meeting at approximately at 0902. A copy of the agenda, RAC roster, as well as information regarding setting up travel arrangements were provided to all the members. All members were provided the opportunity to introduce themselves and give a brief autobiography.

Sean Steinebach – Sean represents Sun Mountain Lumber. Brings a timber background to the group.

Michael Korn – Michael is a retired Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) employee. Michael played a key role in establishing the FWP's Block Management Program. Michael is involved with several conservation groups.

Dave Kumlien – Dave is a commercial recreationist and has been a recreational guide on the Madison River since 1975. Dave is very interested in fish and river issues.

Jean Belangie-Nye – Jean is a retired teacher. Jean established an outdoor educational recreation program for the Lolo Elementary School that is now the oldest outdoor educational recreation program in Montana. Jean works on grants for long distance trails. Jean feels there is a lot of unfinished business from the "COVID shutdown" that didn't get handled.

Clayton Elliott – Clayton grew up in an area of Wyoming with large amounts of BLM land. RACs were a big part of his graduate research. Recreation management and the demands of recreational use on the landscape is a passion that led Clayton to apply for a position on the RAC.

J.M. Peck – J.M. is a local cattle rancher along the Big Hole River. J.M. represents the ranching community on the RAC.

Michael O'Herron – Michael is the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) Southwestern Land Office Area Manager. Michael was invited to be on the RAC.

Dennis Miburn – Dennis is a retired Forest Service (FS) Fire Manager. Dennis has worked with several collaborative groups on riparian/stream restoration and trail restoration.

Eric Clewis – Eric collaborates with the Defenders of Wildlife. Eric is interested in connectivity issues on BLM lands. Eric is interested in working with collaborative groups like the Southwest Montana RAC.

Lois Steinbeck – Lois is very involved with livestock management on public lands including riding horses and herding/tending cattle. Lois is looking forward to working on the RAC and weighing in on public land decisions. Lois wants to make sure our public lands are still around for generations to come.

Mark Peck – Mark is the Unit Manager in Libby for the MT DNRC. Mark is serving as the Lincoln County Commissioner and has been serving in this role for the past 7 years. In this capacity Mark is promoting forest restoration. On the RAC, Mark is representing the Lincoln County local government, the logging industry, and is interested in forest restoration.

Members of the Public:

1. David Lefevre
2. Brad Burbank
3. Eric Broeder
4. Cindy Perdue-Dolan and Brett Slaughter, Senator Daines's Office
5. Brandy Janzen

Tracy Stone-Manning Address to the RAC via Zoom

Getting the RACs back together to be able to establish a quorum is a national priority for the BLM. RACs are taken very seriously. Director Stone-Manning personally thanked all the members of the RAC for choosing to participate on this team when there are many other important tasks they could be doing.

There are a couple of current rulings and more to come that need the RAC's input. There is a large amount of money coming from a variety of national funding sources which provides a wonderful opportunity for restoration. BLM Headquarters (HQ) has asked all states to give their top Focal Areas to HQs. These Focal Areas are going to be made available to the public in the next month.

Questions for Tracy:

J.M. Peck – Public hearings were completed a couple of years ago regarding changes in grazing regulations. What is the status of the changes in the regulations? In addition, J.M. stated that grazing done properly can help our public lands.

Tracy's Response – Grazing done properly can help improve public lands. The grazing rule along with the changes in regulations are making their way through the regulatory system. The draft rule will be out hopefully late this summer. BLM is trying very hard to release a rule to provide producers the flexibility to complete what they need to do while at the same time the BLM can complete the work they need to do. Tracy believes flexibility is the best way to do that. Robust feedback is going to be needed with this new ruling.

Clayton Elliott – Historically there has been a division between agriculture producers and recreational/commercial users of fish and aquatic resources. Collaboration between folks that historically have not gotten along to allow for restoration work to be completed is essential.

Tracy's Response – Hopefully the country is getting tired of division whether real or perceived. Public lands are a uniter, and we have an important job of taking care of these lands. The 80/20 rule is often applied in which approximately 80% of the time we can find some common ground to get along and work together. People getting along and working together for a common goal is important for our children to see.

Dave Kumlien – Dave stated that he has worked on Madison River planning since the late 1970s. Dave would like to do everything possible to get a plan in place to get real work done on the ground adjacent to the Madison River.

Tracy's Response – Rivers are used by so many people whether fishing, recreation, irrigation and so forth. The Madison River is a highly used river. Adaptive Management needs to be implemented, specifically on the Madison River, so all users of the river can utilize and enjoy the river.

Dave Williams – The Society for Mining, Metallurgy, and Exploration (SME) is concerned about electrification.

Tracy's Response – Minerals are essential for this administration for making a clean energy economy. The BLM is understaffed and needs staff to be able to complete the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) work before NEPA reform is needed. The president's budget has in place a plan to provide BLM with the funding to hire the necessary staff to complete the work dependent upon congress's approval.

Lindsay Babcock – Butte Field Manager

Butte manages approximately 355,000 surface acres and 660,819 subsurface acres over eight counties. The most recent Resource Management Plan (RMP) was signed in 2009. The lands within the Butte Field Office (BFO) are highly scattered with landlocked parcels. This takes a lot of coordination with private landowners along with several county and DNRC offices.

Land health is the foundation of everything the BFO does. The Butte Field Office is broken up into 10 planning areas. The goal is to evaluate rangeland health within these planning areas every 10 years. The foundation for this process is to renew grazing permits, however, there are several other disciplines that are included such as forest and recreation management.

Managing for resilient and healthy forests is important to the BFO. The Good Neighbor Authority is a tool that the BFO uses to get work done across land ownership boundaries. Fuels reduction in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) is also a priority.

Recreation is huge in Butte. The BFO has eight fee sites, nine Special Recreation Management Areas, seven Wilderness Study Areas, several river access sites, as well as several other recreation management activities. In addition, the BFO is approximately 99% complete with travel management planning.

Chain of Lakes sites received approximately 900,000 visitor use days last year. This is a big workload and priority for the field office. The BFO has several other recreation sites and the visitor use days at these sites are consistently going up.

Minerals is a big part of the BFO. Graymont, Montana Tunnels, and the Golden Sunlight Mine are a few of the larger mines. In addition, there are several abandoned mine lands. The BFO has a robust Small Miner Program. The BFO has 20+ small miners.

The Lands and Acquisition program in Butte is extremely busy. With the BFO's scattered land pattern, there is constant request for rights of ways and easements. There are also several acquisitions that are in the works.

The three top challenges in the BFO: One is conifer expansion. Douglas Fire and Rocky Mountain Juniper are expanding into sagebrush steppe and grassland habitats. In recent years, the BFO has lost in litigation, not because of science, but because of regulatory processes. A second challenge is recreation capacity, specifically, staging and site maintenance. Visitor demand is outpacing the BFO's current staffing and budget. Not all developed sites are fee sites. Also, the fees are outdated at sites that do charge a user fee. Many developed recreation sites were put in more than 20 years ago and are outdated. The third challenge is Recreation Use Conflicts. There are a lot of people using our public lands and not everyone wants to see other people using our public lands. One example is horseback riding and mountain biking in the same areas.

Questions for Lindsay:

Michael Korn – Is the BLM taking on some type of comprehensive effort to evaluate recreational use on Public Lands? Is there any long term, visionary planning taking place to try and get in front of this increased recreation use?

Lindsay's Response – Yes, we are forward thinking in our Land Use Planning processes.

Katie Steven's Response – The Western Montana District is trying to figure out what people need from their recreation experience and then trying to get where everyone can do what they want to do recreationally on public lands.

Jean Belangie-Nye Comment – Everyone needs to be on the same page. The FS, DNRC, and other groups/agencies need to all have the same vision instead of operating on separate agendas.

J.M. Peck – How do you have double the subsurface acres compared to the surface acres?

Lindsay's Response – The surface acres are privately owned, but subsurface minerals are owned by the BLM.

Michael Korn – With the large amounts of encroachment that is taking place, what is your strategy to handle this issue?

Lindsay's Response – The ways the laws are written, the BLM can lose on a procedural matter, regardless of what the data or best available science states. The BLM is trying to fix these small procedural errors to be able to produce NEPA that can survive litigation. Completing quality NEPA without being adequately/fully staffed is very difficult to do. It would be helpful if the RAC could advocate for the agencies to become fully staffed to be able to complete quality NEPA.

Lois Steinbeck – Can you describe some of the technicalities that cause you to lose lawsuits?

Lindsay's Response – Cumulative analysis of issues, specifically wildlife.

J.M. Peck's Comment – There needs to be more people on the ground and there is a complex world out there in terms of litigation.

Amanda James – Dillon Field Office Manager

The DFO spans across Beaverhead and Madison Counties and includes 900,000 surface acres and 1.3 million subsurface acres. The Grazing Program is the largest program in the Field Office and has 396 grazing allotments covering 850,000 acres with 263 livestock grazing operators. A second major program within the office is Recreation Management. There are two cabin rentals, developed recreation sites along the Madison River, over 250 Special Recreation Permits for fishing along the Madison River, several Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funded projects, the Bear Trap Canyon Unit of the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area and nine Wilderness Study Areas.

A primary objective in the DFO is using fuels management to address conifer encroachment. In addition, fuels management is used to address WUI. There has been approximately 60,000 acres of land treated with prescribed fire and mechanical methods within the Dillon Field Office (DFO). The annual target for the Field Office is approximately 5,000 acres per year.

Another primary objective is the management of Special Status and Threatened and Endangered Species. This takes coordination with partners and agencies in surveying and monitoring. The DFO has a great relationship with The Nature Conservancy.

Another primary objective is invasive species management. The Field Office annually treats approximately 4,000 acres of land for invasive species in partnership with counties and an additional 5,000 acres in burn units. There are plans in place to monitor cheatgrass and other invasives also.

Other important programs in the DFO include forest management, abandoned mine lands, cultural resources and tribal relations, and lands and realty.

The DFO has a Watershed Assessment Process which has been in place for approximately 20 years. The DFO has 16 watersheds across the Field Office. Through this watershed process is how the Field Office determines restoration work that needs to be completed. One of the Field Office's top challenges is litigation. Every time the Field Office is litigated takes the staff's time to deal with the litigation. This is a significant challenge for the Field Office. Currently the Medicine Lodge and Grasshopper Watersheds Environmental Assessments are complete, however, decisions have not been issued because of Whitebark Pine Consultation. The Upper Horse Prairie and Upper Big Hole Watershed Assessment Reports are expected to be completed in 2023 or 2024.

Another planning effort that the DFO is completing is a Programmatic Vegetation Environmental Assessment. This EA will include large scale upland and riparian vegetation treatments. The State Historic Preservation Office along with the Tribes will be closely coordinated with to be able to complete the cultural resource surveys on these large treatment areas.

The DFO has the largest concentration of Whitebark Pine than any other Field Office in the nation. The Field Office is trying to put conservation efforts in place to protect the species.

One challenge the DFO faces is managing recreational use along the Madison River. The Warm Springs day use area received 61,000 day use visitors in 2021. The overflow parking lot (California Corner) for the Warm Springs day use area increased from 7,000 day use visitors in 2019 to 21,000 day use visitors in 2021.

Questions for Amanda:

Michael Korn – Watershed Assessments are the benchmark for evaluation land health in grazing allotments. These assessments are completed every 10 to 12 years? Is the Field Office able to keep up with completing the Watershed Assessments on the 10 to 12 year cycle?

Amanda's Response – Yes.

Michael O'Herron – Day use fees on the sites. Does not having a day use fee directly affect your operational budget?

Amanda's Response – Yes. Fees that are received at recreation sites go right back into the management of those sites. The money can be used to improve the recreation sites and hiring staffing.

Lois Steinbeck – Why is the Madison River Working Group Recommendation not adopted? There was a joint partnership between Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and BLM, why wasn't this plan adopted and what can the BLM do moving forward?

Amanda's Response – Amanda was not able to speak to why the plan was not adopted. Amanda added that outfitters may use a joint permit and are not required to have a permit with both the FWP and BLM. In addition, days use fees would be only for the day use recreation sites.

Katie Steven's Response – There are two major issues going on along the Madison River. On the Upper Madison there are issues dealing with commercial use with guided fishing. On the Lower Madison there are issues with more casual recreation. The increase in fees will be applied to those sites with increased amenities.

Dave Kumlien's Comment – The Madison River Working group had a reasonable plan. In the late 70s and early 80s there was around 70% commercial and 30% non-commercial use on the river. Now the commercial and non-commercial is approximately 50%/50%.

Clayton Elliot's Comment – One of the biggest challenges is the dramatic increase in the non-commercial use along the Madison River in addition to the commercial use. There was a proposal to have a legislative committee tackle this issue.

Jean Belangie-Nye's Comment – If you are accessing an FWP day site, if you are a Montana resident with Montana License Plate, you can access that site without paying a fee. How is that money divided up? How do people from other states have to pay for these sites?

Michael Korn's Comment – Are the public going to be hit with all these new fees on recreation sites? With all these increases in fees, there may be a little pushback.

Dave LaFevre – Resource Advisory Council's Role in Fee Proposals

Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) was an important Act that allows money that is collected at a site to be put back into that recreation site. This law was signed by President George W. Bush in 2004.

Input from the RAC is needed for fee proposals. The rationale behind the act is with the increased recreational use, people must “pay to play”. With these funds, the money that is spent at the site will be used to maintain and upkeep the site. Locations that have highly used sites, the day use fees can help with the cost of additional staffing, law enforcement, and the overall maintenance and upkeep of the sites.

All fees must go back to the ground to update facilities, hire staffing that includes law enforcement, people for public outreach, and maintenance workers. There is a list of criteria that

must be in place to charge a day use fee. Additional fees can be charged for use areas that have additional amenities such as electricity and water.

There is a process to establish new recreation fees for sites and areas. One step in this process is approval by the RAC. The RAC makes recommendations to the BLM and the plan must be approved by the majority of the group.

Questions for Dave:

Michel O'Herron - How fast can a donation site be setup/established versus a fee site?

Dave's Response – They can be established very quickly.

Katie's Response – People may be more willing to pay with an app versus putting money in a tube or a metal box.

Lois Steinbeck – The safety component, what does this entail?

Dave's Response – Funding Law Enforcement, campground, or site hosts to help provide support and oversight to the use area.

J.M. Peck – What is the typical way of collecting fees?

Dave's Response – Dropping fees at a designated fee area at the use area.

Katie's Response – Areas where we have hosts, compliance for paying fees increases. Also, areas that have transitioned to having day use fees paid by using recreation.gov have experienced an increase in fee compliance.

Dave Kumlien – Are the SRP Fees distributed the same way as days use recreation fees?

Katie's Response – The fees likely go to FWP.

Question Brought Up Over Lunch – Are the fees for campgrounds/use areas standardized across the state/region?

Dave's Response – No, the fees are not standardized.

Erin Carey – Missoula Field Manager

The Missoula Field Office is the smallest Field Office in the Western Montana District with 186,500 acres. The Missoula Field Office recently completed a new RMP in 2021. One hallmark of the Field Office is the collaborative efforts that take place in the office.

Most of the BLM lands in the office are east of Missoula along the I-90 corridor. Most of the lands within the MFO are forested, approximately 90%. Restoration is a big priority within the field office. Specifically, prescribed fire, forest thinning, and low-tech mesic stream restoration. Another big priority in the MFO is recreation. One of these sites is the Garnet Ghost town. Over

30,000 visitors enjoy the Garnet Ghost town each year. There is a \$3 fee for viewing/enjoying the Garnet Ghost town. Also, recreation use along the Black Foot River corridor is big priority.

The Missoula Field Office has a very active collaboration program. The Field Office has acquired tens of thousands of acres in the Lower Black Foot. Other efforts such as the Blackfoot Challenge also exist within the MFO.

With the acquisition of these new lands, the MFO has initiated an effort to conduct land health assessments at a watershed scale. Specifically, the MFO has initiated an analysis of the Lower Blackfoot Watershed. One of the defining features of this watershed process is to reach out to the community to determine what is important, what would they like to see changed, and determining things that people want the BLM to pay attention to in the watersheds. The MFO has held several open houses and public meetings. Within this landscape there is a tremendous opportunity for travel management and recreation planning.

One project the MFO has going on is the Clark Face (CF) Forest Health and Fuels Reduction Project. This project received some attention in the local media. This project is in the Garnet Mountains of the Field Office. Within this area, the BLM only owns about 10% of the planning area. The MFO had to work across landownership boundaries to get this plan in place. The MFO determined one major priority of this project is forest health. Within the planning area there have been extensive fire outbreaks. This has caused a plan to be put together that have treatments to address concerns regarding WUI and forest health. In this plan there are approximately 2,400 acres of fuels management, 300 acres of limber pine enhancement, 5,000 acres of Rx fire, 1,500 acres of thinning, and 9,812 acres of timber harvest with prescribed fire. After the plan was put together, consultation with the USFWS was initiated along with a public comment period. Implementation on this project is expected to be initiated in 2024.

Another priority for the MFO is to work across boundaries. The MFO uses the Good Neighbor Authority along with partners, such as the Nature Conservancy, to get this work done.

Questions for Erin:

Mark Peck – Question regarding the NEPA process: How long does it take to write an EA?

Erin's Response – The Clark Face EA is a complex project and is taking longer than expected. Community relations and working across multiple agencies along with a robust scoping process is taking time. The comments received have been very substantive. Incorporating the public's input into the EA is a priority for the field office.

Mark Peck – Is the EA 200, 300, 400 pages?

Erin's Response – Currently, the EA is approximately 70 pages with 140 pages of appendices. However, this is likely to change as the MFO continues to work through public comments.

Topics for Future RAC Meetings

Katie's Suggestion – The next meeting will be either in Missoula or Dillon. Potentially, host a meeting in Dillon followed by a trip through the Madison to see the recreational use that is taking place along the Madison River.

Lois Steinbeck – The RAC needs to focus on topics in which the BLM has brought forward at the upcoming meetings.

Clayton Elliot – Looking at the conifer encroachment that is happening across the landscape and projects that have been completed to address conifer encroachment. In addition, work with abandoned mine lands.

Jean Belangie-Nye's – Potentially the group could look at stream access issues along with abandoned mine lands.

Michael Korn – Discuss industrial recreation's impacts on wildlife. Can we discuss this and bring experts in to discuss the impacts of industrial recreation and urban development on wildlife.

J.M. Peck – Discuss issues in regard to grazing management.

Katie Stevens – updates on the proposed grazing regulations and updates on the BIL and IRA funding.

Clayton Elliot – update on the amount of money being invested in dollars from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding.

Katie Stevens – A couple of field trip options could include a trip to the Everson Creek Archeology Area in the DFO or looking at impacts from recreation in the North Hills of the BFO. Potentially, should the group meet in August, specifically early August?

Dave Kumlien – A trip to the Madison River in early August would be a good time to see the amount of casual and recreational use that is taking place along the river.

Sean Steinebach – Does Katie, or the BLM, “drive” the issues/topics that are discussed by the RAC or does the RAC determine what issues/topics will be discussed at the meetings?

Katie's Response – To get the group back up and going, the BLM was planning on providing a lot of input, however, the group can bring ideas and concerns to the group that need to be discussed.

Katie's Final Comments on the Next Meeting: Katie will send out a doodle poll for the last weekend of July and first two weekends in August to establish a date for the next meeting. Katie will also send out a doodle poll to establish a meeting date in October.

Commissioner Vero

Juanita Vero joined the meeting for a few minutes in the afternoon. Commissioner Vero stated that recreation, fire, and restoration are all driving factors for why she wants to be on the RAC.

The Role and Election of the Chair and Vice- Chair of the RAC

Chair – develops the agenda, works closely with Katie Stevens on planning for meetings as well as some public engagements. The role is a one-year term. **Jean Belangie-Nye volunteered to be the Chair of the RAC.** All members of the RAC approved Jean as the Chair.

Vice-Chair – **Clayton Elliott volunteered to be the Vice-Chair.** All members of the RAC approved Clayton as the Vice Chair.

Additional Items to Talk About

Michael O’Herron directed all BLM representatives on the RAC to not be afraid to bring issues to the group that need RAC discussion and input. The RAC is ready to get to work.

Michael Korn – Can all the RAC members get contact information for all the field office staff members?

Public Comment Period

There were no public comments during the meeting.

Closing Remarks

David Abrams gave some instructions on how to complete the travel forms so members can get paid for meals, lodging, and other travel costs.

Moving forward, all presentation documents will be provided to all members of the RAC at least five days prior to the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1420.

Approved by: /s/ Jean Belangie-Nye
Jean Belangie-Nye, Chair

Date: May 15, 2023