

Western Montana Resource Advisory Council

Oct 3rd, 2023, University of Montana Western

Dillon, MT

BLM Western District Staff Present: Katie Stevens, David Abrams, Amanda James, Erin Carey, Lindsey Babcock, Lacey Decker, Brandy Janzen, Dustin Crowe, Corey Meier, Mike Harper (technician); via Teams: State Director Sonya Germann (for first half of meeting), Margaret Ward

RAC Members Present: Jean Belangie-Nye (Chair), Clayton Elliott (Vice-Chair), John Peck, Sean Steinebach, Dennis Milburn, Juanita Vero, Lois Steinbeck, Mike O'Herron; via Teams: Dave Kumlien, Mike Korn

RAC Members Absent: Dave Williams, Mark Peck, Kathryn McDonald

9:00 Housekeeping, Travel, and Daily Agenda.

David Abrams – Travel Vouchers can be turned in during the meeting. We're experiencing technical difficulties with internet and presentation, stand by.

Sonya Germann – Thanks to all who contributed to making this happen.

9:15 Dillon Field Office. Madison River Discussion.

Lacy Decker – There's a high population of users very close to the Madison River Recreation Areas, primarily Madison and Gallatin Counties. There's a large push to connect with surrounding communities. Both counties have had large increases in population. Recreation Sites have become overcrowded, and safety is a concern. 2023 user data should be available next Dec/Jan. Dillon Field Office only has one law enforcement officer, and his time is spent on the Madison. There are 244 outfitters/guides with Special Recreation Permits (SRPs).

RAC Member Comment - Are they all angler outfitters? Lacy - Yes.

RAC Member Comment - What is the total estimated cost for managing the Madison Rec area?

Lacy - \$300k, not including labor.

Corey – There are fluctuations to yearly costs due to manpower each year.

Member Comment – What about resource damage, protection, and user conflicts? I would like to see emphasis on resource protection.

Corey - FWP manages the river, BLM works with FWP's decisions and management plan.

Katie – our next steps, after fee discussions, we will focus more on resource use, damage and capacity. Katie- BLM is going to be active with our Staff and FWP to keep the ball moving forward on identifying and managing all forms of recreation (not just anglers and guiding) expanding on the rivers.

10:00 Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

Maggie Ward – BIL (bipartisan infrastructure law) and IRA (inflation reduction act) investments in our communities. Request has been put into BIL for \$1.5m for Recreation in the Western Montana District (WMD). BLM has awarded WMD \$26.9m IRA funds. RAC members would like copies of this PowerPoint.

Erin Carey - Blackfoot Clark Fork Restoration Landscape, comprised of 1.5 million acres. Boundaries were selected based on watershed areas. This area contains multiple Landowners/ management groups. These areas have been hardworking landscapes: railroad, timber, etc. The Nature Conservancy and other partners have acquired private timber lands and transferred them back to public ownership.

Member Comment – Where did most of the acquisitions come from?

Erin – TNC and land exchanges primarily. The area has tremendous density of roads constructed for industrial uses. There have been historical clearcuts and forest fires, but also a lot of dense regeneration and potential. There are perfect opportunities to invest in this land. This area is a culturally rich area to Native Americans. Many forms of funding are playing into this project. \$2m was obligated in 2023 on forest health projects.

Member Comment: What is LBC and LIDAR?

Erin - Lower Blackfoot Corridor and a Light infrared laser data collection tool. This allows us to see through vegetation or materials in different way to collect current conditions on the landscape.

Public comment (David Olson) ?– Where are you weed spraying, and where are the burn preps happening?

Erin – we are focused on planning in the Lower Blackfoot and Clark Force Face. The decision is expected to be out on E-Planning by end of the month. Implantation would be expected to start next spring.

Member Comment – What do the other agencies bring to the table?

Erin – we are still working on what partner matches will be, one example is Blackfoot Trout Unlimited. We are working upstream on Abandoned Mine Lands restoration while they are working on private lands downstream, by leveraging our collective work to effect change on the entire system. Travel Management and road work will be another focus. We have a request in for FY24 funding for Cultural Resource Projects with Tribes and reconnecting them with the lands.

Member comment (Michael ?) – Will travel management and planning go through public process?

Erin - Yes, we are currently pre- NEPA, but route inventory has been completed. We are currently looking at every piece of roadways that exist and will have that data to present to the public. There will be multiple opportunities for public engagement starting this spring. Anticipated decision is 2025.

Amanda James – Missouri Headwaters Restoration Landscape (High Divide)—it's a stronghold for wildlife pushed out of historic landscapes and home to multigenerational families and ranches. It's comprised of 6.48 million acres; 937,000 of those acres are managed by the BLM. \$10m in IRA funds will be received

shortly for this restoration landscape, and we are expecting \$400k in BIL funding. Restoration through Collaboration: partnerships are key to accomplishing this work, including county, state, federal, tribal, nonprofits, private, and many more. Sagebrush steppe habitat is also a priority in this area, as are weed management and a reduction in juniper and conifer encroachment. A travel management inventory and road system planning will be needed. There are issues with big-game migration corridors. We are working with private landowners and opening routes with new fencing options or modifications, forest and woodland with White Bark Pine habitat enhancement and Aspen habitat restoration.

Member Comment - What's the reason for the aspen decline?

Lindsey – conifer encroachment, suppression of natural fire, and other climate impacts.

Corey - We are looking at working with youth programs to engage youth and demonstrate conservation and the importance of conservation work in this landscape. This investment has value to everyone in SW Montana. \$6m is estimated to go into contracts and agreements. The Nature Conservancy implements on-the-ground work, we provide the funding. There are agreements with counties on weed treatments and invasive species. Agreements with National Park Service and American Forests on whitebark pine inventory and consultation. Through the Fish and Wildlife Service, we are funding position on consultation projects on 5 needle pines.

Erin Carey - Garnet Ghost Town Presentation on Recreation Needs. Garnet is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The management plan revolves around the "Garnet Experience." The mission is to protect the town's historical and cultural heritage. Visitation to Garnet is growing exponentially, doubling in the last decade. We invest a lot in building preservation but also in education and interpretation. Dispersing visitors has been one method of maintaining the "experience," but more is needed. Being in such a remote location has created a challenge with communication and emergency response. The surrounding area also has winter recreation trails. In 1994, Garnet became a fee site for the first time, at \$2 per person. Today it's \$3 per person. The Cabin Rental Program needs to be modernized to provide better service to the public. Fire concern around Garnet is always a big issue. Fuels treatments have been a huge success in protection of the buildings. Parking improvements are in the work. We would like to move modern visitor services out of Garnet Proper to continue the "Garnet Experience." Winter recreation is increasing, with winter trail system and cabin rentals, \$30 & \$40 per night. Yearly average fees collected \$40K. Total annual cost is approximately \$226K. GPA (Garnet Preservation Association) assist us with some of this cost. We rely heavily on other departments to chip in and help maintain.

Jean- Do you charge school groups?

Erin -- No, we do not.

Jean – Is the I-90 access still open?

Erin -- Yes technically, but the routes are in very poor condition. \$500k has been allocated for road improvements.

Lois – have you thought about changing the way we collect fees?

Erin-- Yes, we would love to modernize and provide a better product for the public.

Lois – how do you enforce fees compliance?

Erin – more staffing would help with this compliance.

1:00 Butte Field Office Recreation Program Business Plan

Lindsey and Brandy – Butte Field Office Fee Proposal. Recreation in the field office is divided into 2 areas: Chain of lakes, and Other (to include parts of the Big Hole River corridor). The Butte Field Office covers 8 counties. The most recent fee increase was 2013. 4 rec fees approved by RAC in the past but were not implemented.

Lois - Why did they not implement them?

Katie – We were leery of the staffing needed to collect fees at these sites. Fees must be used at sites where they were generated. We’re looking to add commercial use SRPs on the Big Hole and Missouri rivers.

Michael – Are guides and commercial permits going to be charged for things like parking?

Lindsey – No, it’s just for using public lands. 3% goes back to the BLM or the “people.”

Michael – How do we plan to permit licenses?

Lindsey – We don’t do fishing licenses or permits like that. We just are taking care of the site or resource.

Lindsey – The Butte Field Office has seen a 30% increase in recreation since 2020. Population growth in the area is ever-expanding. Shoulder seasons are getting longer. Fee sites are seeing public desire to extended amenities longer during the year. Fee compliance is as low as 25%. Staff presence increases fee compliance. Recovering this lost fee revenue would be a major revenue source. New technology like digital fee kiosks would improve compliance.

Lois – How much does fee compliance go up with staff presence?

Lindsey – We don’t know how much we’re losing, so we are not sure how much more we would be gaining. Understaffed sites create a domino effect that camp hosts do not want to work there. More fee compliance, more staff, more camp hosts, more fee compliance. Rinse and repeat.

Lindsey - Maintenance backlog is also huge. It’s difficult to hire seasonal staff; volunteer staff have been saving the day. We have conducted a 6-month labor analysis of the Chain of Lakes. The outcome was that a substantial increase in staffing is required to move forward.

Member Comment- are parking areas considered new facilities?

Lindsey – Technically yes, because they usually include a Vault Toilet which brings on more cost.

Katie – We are not allowed to charge for parking if that’s the only amenity provided. Explained the three categories of fees sites in FLREA.

Lois – why don’t you want trash collection at Jerry Creek?

Lindsey – because I’ve seen what people do with remote trash receptacles. They use it for dumping and it creates more costs.

Lois- what constitutes security services?

Lindsey – having staff with abilities to contact law enforcement. Not just having a law enforcement officer on site.

Lindsey-

- 1st proposal. We want to try to incrementally increase fees over 5 years determined on fair market analysis.
- 2nd proposal. We would like to add 6 new rec sites. 4 that were previously authorized, and 2 new sites.
- 3rd proposal. We would like to extend fee season by 1 month in spring and 2 months in fall.

Day use fee areas would have ability to buy a season pass.

Member Comment – fees are per vehicle?

Lindsey -- Yes, per vehicle not per person.

Mike – how does this compare to Forest service fees?

Lindsey – we are providing higher quality amenities and our fees are still very competitive. Our neighbors are also considering raising rates, so we might end up still behind the curve on fee rate increases.

Mike – The public perception is that Forest Service and BLM shouldn't have different rates for public lands.

Lindsey – page 29 of the business plan shows a detailed comparison of all campsites in the area. All rec sites are different and should be looked at as such. We don't want to expand sites, just cover costs to keep them an asset to the public.

Jean – while visiting Utah I was very surprised at how much more expensive they were than here in Montana.

Lois – How do you determine Chain of Lakes day rate vs season pass, and are season pass holders incurring more cost to the gov?

Brandy – having a reasonably-priced season pass is important to large families in the area.

Clayton – Regarding the Big Hole season pass, what are the logistics and changes to season pass holders?

Lindsey – they would have to display their season pass in the vehicle.

Clayton – to launch a boat at Divide, would you need to have a day pass if you have already paid a camp fee nearby? Yes, you would need to pay both fees. We need to work on description and clarifications of what fees and rules.

Member Comment – do you have data to show increased fees would cover costs? And what do the public think when the Big Hole is managed by 2 separate field offices?

Brandy – education and coordination between both field offices is very important.

Katie – Day use on the Big Hole includes picnicking and other uses besides access to the river.

Mike – the comparison on page 29 goes above and beyond and looks like your pricing targets are right on track.

Lois – how much do the digital kiosks cost?

Brandy – we are looking into buy them at a statewide level to reduce cost. They run approximately \$7-10K for each kiosk.

Member Comment - How would we purchase those?

Katie – we have funds available to purchase them and would be cutting our current fee counting costs.

Member Comment – What if people don't want to use electronic fees?

Brandy – we will continue to have iron rangers (steel collection tubes for fees) to allow people time to adapt. Some people like to write checks.

Lindsey – enforcement is hard, but increased staffing helps, education helps, and working with judges to determine if they are willing to take those cases on. Current yearly deficit is \$263k. This has been increasing each year. These fee increases would bring our revenue from \$443k to \$1.054m each year. This allows us to bring on more staff and run these sites in the black and properly maintain them.

Member Comment – What kind of compliance do you assume on the new fee proposal?

Lindsey – 60% compliance with digital abilities.

Lois – there is a difference in the business plan from the revenue analysis.

Brandy – using FY24 data makes it difficult to forecast FY29. Instead of provided numbers without full confidence, we used FY24 data. There are so many unknowns with site maintenance that we need to plan for.

Katie – we don't believe these fee increases will cover all costs; we are just trying to catch up to all our needs. We are not trying to generate excess revenue.

Lois – I'm surprised you wouldn't estimate a higher compliance with kiosks and increased staffing.

Brandy – We do not want to provide false expectations. Even kiosks and staff can't get 100% compliance.

Member Comment- FWP changed rates on camping in the Blackfoot, put more pressure on dispersed camping and other sites. Are you working with other agencies on where the extra pressure is going to go?

Lindsey – we have free dispersed camping, and they will get more pressure, but we cannot take on any more development in the Big Hole. This is just a first step in managing what we already have. We will continue to collaborate with other neighboring agencies.

Erin – having time to monitor and gather data on dispersed camping pressure will help make decisions in the future.

Lindsey – We'll do public outreach on social media, E-planning with NEPA, as well as posting hard-copy notifications at all recreation sites. County commissioner notices have been sent. So far, we have

received ONE public comment and it was in favor of increasing fees. We offer lots of free recreation areas including 57 toilets. We understand the need for balance of free vs fee recreation opportunities.

2:30 Endangered Species Topic

Emily Guiberson – Whitebark pine and issues. David is going to get YouTube video and presentation slides sent to all parties. The biggest challenge is having overlapping multi-use project areas. Education to non-foresters is a current priority. Identification of Whitebark pine is critical. If 5-needle pines are present in a project, consultation is mandatory before project moves forward.

Katie – working with FWP for assistance with consultation. Grizzly and Western Bumblebee consultation work is also currently being developed.

Lois – Does whitebark pine do better after a fire?

Emily – they do good after a fire, but it is difficult to get prescribed burns on these landscapes. There are still so many unknowns.

Amanda James – there are 400 ongoing actions that Dillon needs to do consultation with Fish and Wildlife Service. Limitations in manpower and expertise is creating a huge roadblock on projects like grazing permit renewals. We are at risk of litigation until we can get these consultations completed.

Jean – Are there any other endangered species coming down the pike?

Katie – we are just starting to understand, and starting with the Bumblebee is our starting point.

Emily – in the last year we have had 3 different people working on this topic. It's been difficult because most are leaning into the research side, and less on the ongoing operations and activities on the ground. BLM plays a smaller role than FS.

Mike – Is the state engaged in this? I would expect DNRC would be interested.

Katie – yes, it is being discussed at management level currently.

Planning for next RAC meeting – David Abrams

Lois- What is the process for fee proposal?

Katie - if you don't want to vote today, we would like it next meeting.

Lois – Oct 21st is public comment period, can we vote after that?

Member – Can we vote electronically?

Katie – we would like to have one more meeting before this RAC changes January 15, 2024.

Lois – Could your proposal change once you review the public comments?

Katie – yes

Lois -- Is there a threat of government shutdown that would get in the way of this RAC?

Katie – yes, we are going to try and meet before that in Missoula. Let’s try to choose a date in January. Is there is any other documentations or topics, you would like to see before a vote?

Jean – We are new as a group; we might need time.

3:15 Katie – Does the RAC need time or would they like to take a vote today?

Jean – The RAC would like to view public comment prior to a vote. I would like to disseminate the information to the public before we place a vote. We would like to add to the agenda recommendations on streamlining meetings and evaluating personnel for the team.

Clayton – I would like to add to the agenda, Legal challenges to projects in the Western Montana District.

Katie – We will investigate the ability of a digital vote from the RAC.

Jean – I’m not comfortable with an email vote. I would prefer to have more opportunities for dialog with the staff. How much time do we need after vote to publish in the federal register?

Katie -- 60 days for the Federal Register Notice

Clayton – I would like to have more information on the Special Recreation Permit proposal on the Big Hole. There are a lot of issues and conspiracy theories on the Big Hole.

Katie – That situation is different. We are willing to provide as much information as we can.

Member Comment – What is the plan by the next meeting?

Katie – Butte Rec Plan Fee proposal reviewed and prepared for vote.

Public Comment Period 3:05

David Olson (Member of the Public, joining via Teams) – I don’t understand why I’m not able to ask questions during the briefings? Why would I be told to be quiet?

Katie – we ask the public to hold questions to the comment period because sometimes we have a large public presence. Overall, the goal is to get information to the RAC so they can make recommendations to the BLM.

David Olson – What if my comment might help members of the RAC with their own questions?

Jean – public comment is always included in the agenda, so your concerns or questions can be considered after the discussion items have been presented. If 100 people show up, we all benefit by having scheduled a public comment session.

David Olson - I do appreciate I can at least comment at the end. Are there members of the RAC that are members of the public?

Jean – yes there are different requirements for creating a RAC team. One of them is a member of the public-at-large in Category 3.

David Olson – Can I be a member of the RAC?

Jean - Yes, but it's a 2–3-year process.

David Olson – Collaboration and partnerships need further definition?

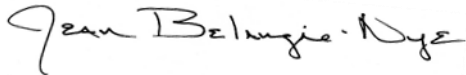
Katie - Send your questions to David Abrams and he can respond with answers. The people on the RAC are designed to represent the public and should represent some of your opinions and questions.

David Olson – Specific question about Garnet.

Katie – please send comments to David Abrams. If you have recommendations for the RAC, please present those now.

David Olson - How do you work with identifying roads and mid-20th century roads, before you designate them as needed to be removed? and could you please talk to local landowners before acting. Researching historical documents also will assist you in making road closure decisions.

Meeting Adjourned 4 p.m.



Approved by: _____

Date: October 6, 2023

Jean Belangie-Nye, Chair