

**Wyoming Public Lands Initiative (WPLI) Fortification Creek
Advisory Committee Meeting
March 13, 2017**

Present: **Commissioner Rusty Bell** , Campbell County; **Commissioner Bill Novotny**, Johnson County; **Commissioner Micky Shober**, Campbell County; **Commissioner Matt Avery**, Campbell County; **Dave Clarendon**, Conservation; **James Hansen**, Energy; **Barry Hayden**, AG/Ranching; **Debra Hepp**, Conservation; **Wallace Leastman**, General Public; **Carrie Little**, AG/Ranching; **Jeremy Murphy**, Sportsman; **John Tinnell**, Energy; **Bryna Long**, General Public; **Levi Jensen**, Recreation; **Karlon Knudson**, AG/Ranching

Public: David A. Bacca, Jill Morrison, Jay Quintanilla

Minutes

Dave Clarendon moved and Barry Hayden seconded to approve the February 6, 2017 meeting minutes. Motion Carried.

Advisory Committee Replacement

Carried Little moved and Barry Hayden seconded to appoint John Tinnell to fulfill the term of L.D. Gilbertz, representing Energy, on the Advisory Committee. Motion Carried

Updates on the Charter

Updates and changes to the Charter were discussed.

Bryna Long moved and Barry Hayden seconded to table the final approval of the committee charter until the April meeting. Motion carried.

State Wildlife Trust/State Lands Presentation

Mr. Bob Budd was invited to present this evening but a confirmation from him was not received. Mr. Clarendon stated that it was his understanding that the money from the Wildlife Trust/State for the project did not get approved. Commissioner Novotny stated that it did not. It was removed in the Appropriations Committee. The full bill passed but that project was removed. Their projects come forward each year. All their big dollar projects have to have Legislative approval. The Advisory Committee would still like a representative from the State Wildlife Trust/State Lands to come and give a presentation.

Mr. Dave Bacca, State Chair for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, stated that he saw that the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation was on the Advisory Committee's agenda. He contacted representatives in Missoula, Montana and they stated that they were not contacted to present this evening. Commissioner Bell stated that he would confirm this with his office.

Chairperson Carrie Little said that it would benefit the committee to have presentations from the State Wildlife Trust/State Lands and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation at the same meeting. This will be placed on the April 2017 Agenda.

Topics for Presentation at WPLI Meeting in Lander WY

Ms. Bryna Long will present at the March 23rd meeting for Fortification Creek in Lander WY.

1. What is unique about your Advisory Committee's participation in WPLI?

This Advisory Committee is the only WPLI that is site specific to a geographic area being worked on by two counties. There is private and state land within the WSA so this prevents travel in the area.

2. Today what is the Advisory Committee greatest impediment to advancing a recommendation? The committee does not have enough information.
3. What one piece of advice would you like to share with other Advisory Committees? We have just had our third meeting and we haven't finalized our charter.

A member of the Advisory Committee suggested that Ms. Long find out how often the other committees are meeting. What are the other groups using for information that would be beneficial to our group? Ms. Long requested that the members email her with other thoughts and questions.

Wyoming Game and Fish Department

Erika Peckham, a Wildlife Biologist with the Wyoming Game and Fish in Gillette talked about the game and fish as it pertained to the area. This area provides habitat for different species of wildlife. For big game it will be mule deer and elk and this evening the presentation is on elk in the area. Elk were reintroduced in this area in 1952/1953 and another transplant occurred in 1974. They came from the Jackson area and there were 19 yearling bulls. In the early 1990's the Wyoming Game and Fish were curious as to what areas were important to the elk. So they did a study with the BLM and adjacent land owners. They wanted to see where the elk were seasonally, what areas were important to them, and gather some information on the population dynamics. In the early 1990's there were 17 elk that were collared with VHF collars which are very high frequency collars. This provided a lot of good information. The distribution maps that Wyoming Game and Fish use came from that data. In 2005, CBM peak times, there were 26 elk outfitted with the same collars. They were able to compare the movements from the 1990's with those from 2005. The last several years GPS collars have been used and information is gathered every 6 to 8 hours. A graduate student out of the University of Wyoming did a dissertation using all of the data and it is available on the website.

The collars have a device in them that blows the collars off the elk on a certain date. There were 3 elk from which the collars did not release. Their batteries continue to work. Wyoming Game and Fish are able to gather information from them. Chairperson Carrie Little asked what the focus of the graduate student's dissertation was. Ms. Peckham said that the focus was to see if the elk would avoid activity pertaining to oil and gas development. A company was contracted to put the collars on the elk and do some blood testing to see if they were pregnant or not. The current range came from the early 1990's data. With the collars there were a lot more data points that reinforced the accuracy of those original VHF collars. The document showed that the elk avoided road activity and avoided them in high intensity times of development. They would come back at night when there was not activity.

Ms. Peckham showed a map from the BLM document with the wilderness study area and the elk crucial range. The committee discussed the map. A map was shown of important wintering areas, calving areas, and yearlong areas.

The wilderness study area is a refuge for the elk. During the hunting season they go into this area and they will not encounter a lot of people. Ms. Peckham spoke with the BLM and they would be glad to come and discuss this area with the committee. An advisory committee member asked if there was any information on brucellosis in the elk. Ms. Peckham said that every 3 years they sample in the area. In 2016 they collected blood and sent in several samples and everything was negative. There are blood kits provided for the hunters but it is hard to get them to utilize the kits and turn them into the

Wyoming Game and Fish. Ms. Peckham said that she would be glad to go out and collect them from the hunters.

The population is increasing each year. The elk are expanding out of the area south of the interstate on the west side of the Powder River. The current objective, which is the number that they manage for, is 150 elk and they are reviewing that. They have to review the objectives periodically. Unfortunately the method that they have to estimate the herd works poorly because of the small herd size. The current best estimate is over 700 head. Ms. Peckham thinks that is a little high. They try to keep in touch with the land owners and have an annual meeting and invite the public. The trend count is done after the hunting season in November.

The public access is very limited. The public can walk a long ways to get into the WSA. Access is granted by a couple of the landowners. This is a very short season. It is a very desirable area for hunters; a lot of nonresidents want to put in to hunt in this area. Every year they meet with the landowners, because they are the ones providing the access, the goal is to keep the elk population down, so the last few years there has been a pretty heavy cow harvest. Around 70% of the hunters are successful in their hunts.

Barry Hayden: In the early 1950's when elk were introduced it was done in conjunction with private land owners. The landowners are now being overrun with the herds. The objective was 150 head and now it is close to 800 in the area. That is more than the area can support biologically. The boundaries were set because of geological landmark. The elk didn't cross those areas until there were a lot of them. The challenge is that this isn't a very big area. The committee talked about the hunting in Area 2 and what impact it has on the landowners bordering that area.

Jeremy Murphy: Could the state of Wyoming do something like other states do and have numerous hunting seasons? You can split the hunting seasons up, that way there would be less people overall. This would bring that herd number down. Mr. Murphy stated that since he moved here in 2010 he has seen a decline in the mule deer numbers. To avoid someone going into Area 2 hunting elk and bringing a mule deer out, where it is a general area, can we make that a draw area too?

Barry Hayden: As a landowner you are granting permission. With permission a hunter goes into Area 2 and kills whatever he wants, the landowner cannot stop him because he has given him permission to be on his property.

Jeremy Murphy: We want to take care of our mule deer in that area.

Barry Hayden: The landowners do not want to see the seasons overlap.

Jeremy Murphy: If Wyoming Game and Fish would make that area a draw only area for mule deer, you are going to help the mule deer out. Because that is a general area and some hunters hike to get in there to get pretty nice mule deer.

Ms. Peckham: The mule deer count in Campbell County is down. And as far as making that a limited quota, we have gone to a limited quota in Area 10. We can do it with public meetings. What really draws mule deer numbers is fawn production. So limiting quotas helps temporarily, but that is not what drives the deer out there.

There was a discussion on changing the hunting season for mule deer to after the rut instead during. Chairperson Carrie Little said that the public is always invited to the season setting meeting with the Wyoming Game and Fish and encouraged the committee to go and voice their opinions.

Commissioner Novotny stated that to fund a large project with Wyoming Wildlife Trust Funds the threshold is \$200,000. Anything under that can be approved by the members of that committee who are appointed by the Governor, anything over that has to go through the Legislature for approval.

Commissioner Novotny asked if Ms. Peckham can put together a presentation on Mule Deer similar to the Elk presentation. Ms. Peckham said the information would not be as extensive because the area is a part of larger hunt area so the information will apply to the whole and not just Fortification Creek. The Committee wanted to know if she could do presentations on other species.

Every year in January Wyoming Game and Fish has a meeting with the landowners. With the access situation they work with what they can support. So with archery suggestions and different seasons, Wyoming Game and Fish are open to anything. Everyone that has a tag can access the area. With the amount of land that is there it can only accommodate a certain number of people before they are on top of each other.

Area Map Review by County Commissioners

Commissioner Bell wanted to know what type of maps the Committee wanted to see. Do they want to see overlay maps with the elk area? Do they want mineral rights ownerships? Do they want zoomed in maps on the potential area on the west side to the river and the access? A committee member said that he would like to see the zoomed in area from the west to the river and see what type of access is there. Mr. Knudson would like to know where the established oil and gas was compared to the WPLI boundary. A question was raised: What are the private interests in the public land out there and how do they apply? It is important to know what agreements are on the properties because the designations that the Committee will be considering may have impact on that. The Advisory Committee would need to go to the BLM office in Buffalo to view the maps. The Committee talked about the options on their recommendations for the area for instance wilderness or full release. One member felt that it would narrow it down on what they heard from speakers. Commissioner Novotny stated that the Committee should still have as many diverse speakers to provide input. The Committee agreed that they would hold their April meeting at the BLM office in Buffalo to view the maps.

Next meeting is scheduled for Monday, April 10 at 6:00 p.m. at the BLM Office in Buffalo.

Deb Hepp will present the Natural Resource Land Use Plan at the May meeting.

The Agenda for the April meeting will be the Final Approval of Committee Charter, Speakers from Wildlife Trust and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and BLM GIS Mapping Review.

Public Comments:

Jill Morrison, Powder River Basin Resource Council, said that the BLM has very informative documents on the area. The wilderness study area is 12,500 acres. It is all BLM land except for the state section. The BLM planning area is over 100,000 acres. The other document that preceded this environmental assessment is about 2 inches thick and has a lot of additional detail and maps. These documents set out the type of oil and gas development that could take place within the planning area, not in the wilderness

study area, because it is off limits. The documents are available on the Buffalo BLM website. Commissioner Novotny said that the Commissioners will provide each member a copy of the document prior to the meeting in April.

Levi Jenson moved and James Hanson seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:00 p.m. Motion carried.

A recording of the meeting is available.