

Gravelly Landscape Collaborative & Ruby Valley Watershed Council
Meeting Notes
December 13, 2017 5:30-8:00pm

Dave McAdoo - RVWC, Sean Claffay -BLM, Kevin Suzuki - MVRG, Linda Owens - MVRG, Rick Sandru, Dan Durham - GLC, Dean Waltee - FWP, Bob Flynn, Geoff Hamill Madisonian, Hannah Jaicks – Future West, Frank Colwell, Darcie Warden - GYC, Gary Giem - RVCD, Dale Olson - USFS, Jennifer Konopacki, David Stout - RVWC, Matt Jaeger FWP, Rocko Reynolds, Jake and Donna McDonald. Jennifer Boyer – GLC Facilitator.

Greenhorn Scoping Comments: The team continues to review comments and respond to concerns. The project analysis has begun and the target is to have a first draft in February 2018 to be completed September 2018. Our strike team has stayed on the project. We have welcomed a new wildlife biologist. Initial review indicates good support for the proposal including support from the B-D working group.

West Fork trail and fence work update: FS is already working on re-contouring and fixing it now and next year. The work should not impact future weed control efforts. The finished work will return it to a hiking / horse trail. Communication with the permittees to get back in rotation after a rest.

Dean Waltee MT FW&P Wildlife Update:

The hunting season was productive and went smoothly, we had a lot of early activity in the rifle season and then it gradually tapered off. Based on the check station in Alder, harvest was near average, 7% higher this year. Reports of more elk observed probably due to snow cover and higher population numbers. Mule deer harvest was down from last year. Hunters reported observing about the same number and trend numbers were up about 60%. Hunters were in a good mood and were able to get out and about easily. The snow was not enough to make animals move to winter range (need 12-20 inches).

Any grizzly encounters? Yes, in September (archery) one was in Southern Gravelly Range – a bear was on the elk carcass and the hunters tried to run it off. Another attack in Tom Miner basin – range rider came in on a bear on a carcass at dark. A couple other encounters during rifle season across the state. Bears can still be up and out if there is enough to eat and temperatures are warm enough. Bears expanding through Greenhorns and move through to the Tobacco Roots and Ruby Mountains. BE BEAR AWARE EVERYWHERE. Bear spray is more effective than a gun (based on science research) we need to be aware and ready.

Wolf observations were down from last year, about 3% of hunters saw wolves. Statewide there was a reduction last year and this year a corresponding reduction in sightings and wolf harvest. A pack in the Centennial was removed in November and another in Horse Prairie. The number of packs is remaining relatively stable but the total number is down a little. Tensions eased with the opportunity for harvest, in the Ruby we saw more younger wolves this year.

Mule Deer Foundation grant applications were reviewed last week. In this area we submitted 4 grant requests which were all approved including; \$2,000 for conifer removal, \$3,000 conifer removal in upper Ruby floodplain to release willows for moose, \$3,000 for treating knapweed on Warm Springs Creek, \$5,000 for continued enhancement of aspen in West Fork Madison.

Mule Deer Foundation is growing and supported \$106,000 grants this year. Typical projects include; weeds, aspen enhancement, conifer removal, riparian, sage brush and grass land improvements. This would be good for match for GLC projects. Projects are implemented by FWP & FS staff (fire crews), volunteers and contractors a mix.

Chronic Wasting Disease research is funded by Mule Deer Foundation, but the majority of the funding comes from FWP licenses.

Big Horn Sheep: FWP monitoring in the last 3 years has met the level for a harvest opportunity to issue 1 ram hunting license. The criteria for harvest is at least 75 sheep or 30 rams per 100 ewes or 30% lambs per 100 ewes. The herd has exceeded the ratio criteria last 3 years, with a minimum of 45-50 sheep in the population. The goal is still to manage for a greater number of sheep post season and this would not change. Collaborative efforts can show how reintroduction can be successful and providing harvest can increase awareness of the herd for conservation.

Limiting factors for the population is expansion of conifer forest that impacts water and upland wildlife habitat. Springs dry up due to conifer encroachment which impacts all wildlife species and ungulates, particularly fawn rearing habitat becomes less productive. Projects that focus on aspen and willow communities, riparian, sage grasslands and mahogany would benefit mule deer, moose and big horn sheep.

Moose are doing well in mountains and river bottoms. Trends look healthy and moose in Centennial are at an all time high count.

Matt Jaeger MT FW&P Fisheries Update:

The Ruby watershed has focused on fluvial Arctic grayling and Westslope Cutthroat Trout (WCT).

WCT has a limited distribution, down 90% from historic range. Current populations in Greenhorn, Jack Creek, and Ramshorn drainages. The threats to WCT include; land use, nonnatives (brook trout, hybridize with rainbow). FWP has been doing

regular surveys and we have a good handle on remaining pure streams. We are required by law to manage pure populations so they do not become listed on ESA.

Goals for WCT populations 1) secure pure populations 2) replicate pure populations 3) expand the populations

Secure populations often means using barriers to stop nonnative species from invading pure populations. Some of the barriers can be stair stepped for different flow events, which means that the pure populations could be at risk during high runoff events that allow nonnatives to move into the tributaries and infiltrate WCT populations.

Ramshorn Creek is part of the watershed restoration plan and we are looking for opportunities to make improvements and secure the populations and even expand the distribution. The project combines irrigation improvement and takes a holistic approach for the basin.

Greenhorn project worked to replicate the population and then expand the population. These are long-term processes and can take the better part of a decade. The limitation to WCT conservation is the time it takes for these complex projects and the funding needed to do it, needs multiple grants and funders. This successful project is in the final stocking year (2018).

Our goal for grayling is to maintain healthy self-sustaining populations to keep them off the ESA list. Restoration efforts are focused from the reservoir to the headwaters. During 2003-2008 Remote Stream Incubators (developed to incubate eggs in the habitat that they will be re-established) began. Artificial introduction was completed in 2008 and natural reproduction has been recorded every year. 2017 has had the highest abundance to date but they are widely distributed and at a low density. Some limiting factors may be other fish species (brown trout), habitat (too steep) and temperature may be limited in the upper river.

How can the GLC help? Biggest assistance is helping with the WCT restoration projects and help with larger stretches of habitat and they can be very controversial as well as expensive, political support really helps. Management becomes more difficult under an ESA listing on public lands. We encourage doing as much as possible cooperatively to get populations established in as many places as we can. The west side of divide is doing better than the east side for WCT management.

When developing projects the criteria we consider includes 1) Resilience to climate change 2) Miles of habitat 3) Purity of population (genetic) 4) Geology to make a barrier structure. These criteria help determine the cost-benefit analysis.