

Regional wildlife team keeps tabs on land issues

Posted: Wednesday, February 12, 2014 3:00 pm

By Nancy Thornton Choteau Acantha

As the Upper Sun Wildlife Team, formerly known as the Sun River Working Group, transitions to a new leader, the opportunity for an enhanced dialog with personnel of the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks department that administer public land west of Choteau and Augusta continues to be an important element of the group's meetings.

Besides discussing harvest data and hunting season proposals at the team's Jan. 8 meeting held at the FWP Region 4 headquarters in Great Falls, area sportsmen heard updates on the Benchmark Fuels Reduction Plan, the BLM's intention to update a regional Resource Management Plan, and a tentative response to a hunter who criticized the Forest Service's 14-day camping limit.

Forest Service Fire Management Officer Corey Buhl also presented a slide program on this past summer's Red Shale Fire in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Lastly, the group acknowledged longtime group leader Stan Meyer's contribution during the past eight years and prepared a list of qualities the members would like to see in a new leader.

According to Forest Service fuels specialist Russell Owen, the Benchmark fuels reduction implementation will begin this summer with work near the "Ford Creek burn unit." Slashing of certain tracts near cabins will occur during the spring and summer and a prescribed burn is tentatively set for this fall. About 170 acres will also see a commercial harvest.

Lewis and Clark National Forest Supervisor William Avey said that the Benchmark work would be bolstered by a "brand new tool," a statewide stewardship agreement with the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

BLM assistant field manager Adam Carr, based in the Lewistown field office, said BLM would be publishing a notice of intent in the Federal Register in the coming weeks announcing that it would start the scoping process to do a revision for the 1984 resource management plan that includes the federal land in the Deep Creek, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf outstanding natural areas. Carr said a public meeting would be scheduled in Choteau sometime in mid-February or March.

The new plan would incorporate conservation strategy for the grizzly bear, anticipating the future delisting of the grizzly bear from the Endangered Species Act. The plan would keep livestock grazing but will not allow a conversion to sheep grazing that could get bears into trouble.

The agency is also expanding its efforts to control weeds by providing chemicals to lease owners.

Great Falls resident Norman Schertenleib criticized the forest-wide 14-day camping limit, especially in the North Fork Sun River area where he hunts. He said moving in and out five air miles to hunt with all his gear allows him only five days to hunt.

"It's totally wrong. It locks out private sportsmen. It's not true that there are not enough campsites. I can show you a dozen campsites not used in 20 years. I think the Forest Service should eliminate the 14-day limit. It has nothing to do with being fair," he said, after also finding fault with the difference in how outfitters and private hunters are treated.

Avey, put on the spot because the item was not on the agenda, defended the limit. "It is fair. This is not about where you hunt; it's where you camp. Outfitters are permitted. They are much more constrained from our prospective. The idea is to ensure fairness. We are concerned with impact," Avey said, adding that the staff is "getting ready to reanalyze that in the Bob Marshall."

The subject will be discussed at the group's next meeting on March 19 in Fairfield.

Buhl's slide show on the Red Shale Fire that occurred from July 18 to Nov. 19, 2013, is available at www.fs.usda.gov/lcnf. He explained the cost of "herding the fire" as a wildland resource benefit. It cost \$60.54 per acre to manage compared to the 2007 Ahorn Fire that was fought from the start at \$377.54 per acre.

The Acantha previously reported that the Teton County Commissioners wanted the fire to be suppressed. Buhl said, "Mother Nature has the upper hand. We need to be willing to experience short-term effects. We are starting to see enough fire on this landscape for the wildfires to be self-limiting."

Buhl said the district has started scoping a new fuels reduction project, named "Elk Smith," lands southwest of Augusta that were burned in the 1988 Canyon Creek Fire but that are now covered in thick lodgepole pine and snags. He said the proposal hopes to replicate the template of action created for the Red Shale Fire.

Lastly, Jim McCollom, with the Russell Country Sportsmen's Association that hosted the Jan. 8 meeting in Great Falls, and FWP wildlife biologist Brent Lonner presented Meyer with gift certificates to Meyer's favorite restaurant and with a framed painting of several elk.

"I was glad to hold the team together," Meyer said. A former FWP commissioner and retired businessman, Meyer thanked everyone and urged the group to continue to provide input to the various agencies.

Bill Long, who served as the interim moderator, asked for suggestions as to the qualities of a new leader. "A group like this makes a difference, ultimately to the resource," Long said.

Lonner agreed to be on a committee to seek candidates, having identified key qualities: computer savvy, ability to run the the meetings, an understanding of the value of working groups, someone who can keep the conversation going while being neutrality, and someone who follows the group's mission statement and has an interest in the wildlife and habitat in the Upper Sun River watershed that is mostly bounded by hunting districts 424, 442 and 425. For more information contact Lonner at blonner@mt.gov.