

# MISSOURI-MADISON WILDLIFE TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (WildTAC)

## MINUTES OF ANNUAL MEETING FOR CALENDAR 2023 YEAR

In person-MT Wild, Helena, MT and Virtual meeting by Zoom

29 November 2022

AND

End of Year Budget Report

### Attendees

**Attendees:** Grant Grisak (NWE, Chair); Claire Gower (FWP); Jim Boyd (USFWS); Mary Gail Sullivan (NWE); Jordan Tollefson (NWE); Andy Welch (NWE); Jon Hanson (NWE); Marco Restani (NWE); Scott Hemmer (FWP); Anna Noson (UofM); Alli Russell (USFS); John Muhlfeld (RDG); Tara Luna (RMB); Heather Harris (FWP); Randy Scarlett (USFS); Alex Shoals (FWP); Chris Boone (BLM); Jesse Hankins (BLM).

### WildTAC Business Items

Grant reviewed language from section IV C of the Agency MOU that describes TAC Operations. By virtue of having a representative from NWE and FWP and FWS or FS or BLM, a quorum was present for making TAC decisions this day.

**Environmental Webpage.** Grant provided an overview of NWE Environmental Webpage that warehouses all of the documents normally given out at the annual meetings in TAC booklets. The webpage has information relating the current 5-year plan, Agency MOU, 10- year agreement between NWE and FWP, project reports, meeting minutes, proposals, annual meeting information, etc. The only item typically not included on the website is the budget sheet, mainly due to the constant changing status of the budget. If anybody wants updated budget information, please contact Grant.

**5-Year Wildlife Plan.** Grant reported the current 5-year wildlife plan for 2018-2022 will expire at the end of 2022. A draft of the 2023-2027 plan was updated by NWE to reflect minor updates and changes and was sent out to the TAC members in May for review. Grant integrated updates and addressed comments from TAC members. The final draft was sent out for final review and signatures in October. We are waiting on a few reports from the previous 5 year period and NWE plans to submit the next 5 year plan, signature page and reports to FERC within a few weeks.

**Madison River Flow Management and Hebgen Lake Elevation.** Andy provided an update on the river flow and lake elevation issues encountered in early 2022. Low lake elevation and low river flows required NWE to submit to FERC a revised Article 403 operations plan based on severe drought conditions in early 2022. A stakeholder group was formed to help NWE educate users on issues with balancing low flows and meeting license requirements. On Memorial Day weekend a rain on snow event in Yellowstone National Park caused severe flooding in the Yellowstone drainage and greatly increased inflows and storage at Hebgen and base flows in the Madison River. NWE continues to work with resource agencies and the stakeholder group to balance changing water abundance issues in the Madison Valley.

**NWE and Eagle Protection Offset Program (EPOP).** Although not associated with the Hydro Licensing requirements, NWE is participating in the EPOP program to help reduce transmission pole impacts to raptors. Marco Restani reported in NWE's service area there remain thousands of historic transmission poles/designs reaching as far back as the 1940's. Those designs place live wires across a horizontal support beam within wing span distance of numerous raptors. This placement and spacing of wires can facilitate grounding and electrocution of raptors. The new design spaces wires vertically so bird wings can't touch live wires. Other power generation and transmission projects, like wind generation, can mitigate incidental take of raptors by funding replacement of old pole designs with new designs to reduce transmission raptor impacts. Mitigation can be conducted within an Eagle Management Unit, not confined by state or other boundaries. For example,

generation projects as far away as Texas can participate in transmission line updates in Montana, South Dakota and Nebraska. NWE identified 8,000 poles that could be updated. Plan to replace 500-600 poles in 2023-2024 to new EPOP standards.

**Status of Project Completion Reports.** Grant briefly covered the list of outstanding project completion reports. A number of reports were submitted the day before the meeting. The applicants were reminded to submit reports as quickly as possible for inclusion in the next 5-year report. Those not included in this submission would be submitted with the next 5-year Wildlife Plan.

## Review of 2022 Projects

**2022-0. Cultural Resources Management.** Grant reported three projects required CRM this year and Heritage Park was the only project that required TAC spending. The inventory was completed and came in under budget.

**2022-2. Trumpeter Swan Release.** Claire reported in spring 2022 MFWP presented a proposal to the Montana FWP commission seeking approval for another five years of releases (2022-2026). The project will continue to request funding from Northwestern Energy, through the Madison/Missouri Wildlife Protection, Mitigation and Enhancement Program, and will proceed to request and release birds from WWS. The goal is to release 5-10 birds annually, for the next five years or until the objective of five nesting pairs has been met. On September 6th, 2022, four 100-day old cygnets, obtained from the WWS, were released at Fever point on the Longhorn Ranch. This location was selected to avoid releasing at the O'Dell Creek wetland, as two white birds were present on the O'Dell wetlands, and they could potentially disrupt pair bonding activity. Two other cygnets were smaller, so were held back and will be released as yearlings' summer 2023. Claire submitted a report of swan restoration activities from 2012-2022.

**2022-3. Heritage Park Tree Planting, Fence, Irrigation.** Grant reported the fence was installed in May. Trees and irrigation were installed in June. A total of 515 trees and shrubs were planted; 97 skunkbrush sumac, 9 chokecherry, 49 buffaloberry, and 360 cottonwood. Saskatoons were not available at the time of planting. Overall plant survival after 60 days was 96.9 percent (Table 2). Chokecherry had the highest survival rate, but was also the lowest number planted and the most mature size at time of planting. Plants on the southern ¼ of the plot had the highest mortality rate which suggests there was an issue with watering in this zone. At one point during the 60 day period, FWP noticed diminished water delivery to this zone which was later attributed to a partial blockage of this zone from PVC debris inside the line was corrected. One minor issue that occurred during this project was the contractor planted the cottonwood trees in rows rather than staggering them. As such, the cottonwood trees have an orchard appearance. This can be easily corrected by future thinning or planting a few trees in the rows.

**2022-4. Evans Bend Fence.** Grant reported the project was started in June and completed in July over a 14 day period. Grant reported the comparative appearance of vegetation inside and outside of the fence enclosure indicated an obvious benefit to protecting trees and shrubs from deer and livestock grazing. An issue with sloughing corner braces was discovered on two corner braces that were not 90 degree braces. The BLM came back and installed brace post anchors. The fence is under warranty for 1 year. We will evaluate in the spring. If the braces are in poor shape we will consult with the contractor to correct. Given the fence is considered short term (several years), it will likely withstand to that point.

**2022-5. Upper Moore Creek Habitat Restoration Design (Goggins).** RDG reported the project was started in 2022. The project was suspended mid summer after an on-site meeting with FWP and the Conservation District raised concerns about including an on-site wetland system to deal with water quality (temp, turbidity). There was a personnel change with the CD that caused the project to temporarily stall. Future discussions are planned to help move the project forward.

**2022-6. O'Dell Creek Rare Plant analysis and Publication.** Tara reported the analysis showed increased seedling establishment on Phase 5 (active) and Phase 6 (passive) restored stream sections. Seeds are able to retain viability for at least 70 years and possibly for even longer periods in-situ. Seeds redistributed from borrowed sod and originating from greater depths maybe >100 yrs. Redistribution of borrowed seed banks and reactivation of in-situ seed banks may partly

explain variation among plants for 3 rare species. All rare species possess a combination of seed characteristics that may promote increased seed longevity in cold wetland soils: (reticulated seed coats, undifferentiated or tiny embryos, trace to minimal amounts of endosperm and MPD seed dormancy type. The manuscript was submitted to Native Plant Journal and was accepted for publication pending a few revisions.

**2022-7. Systemwide Bird Monitoring.** Anna Noson reported on the continued monitoring of bird populations at O’Dell Creek, at several habitat restoration sites along the Missouri Madison corridor and efforts to remotely identify cuckoo’s. After 17 years of work on O’Dell Creek the area has transformed, offering complex wetland habitats that support a large number of Montana’s breeding birds. To date, we have documented 123 species using the project area during the breeding season, including 19 mt species of concern., up from 29 species prior to the project. Two new species observed in 2022. We observed 7 BNST including this pair using the shallower ponds. They are a MT species of concern due to habitat loss and contamination by selenium in agricultural areas that breeds on the edges of shallow marshes. Usually found in Montana in larger wetland complexes so this is an exciting new development. We’ve documented 15 new waterfowl species since project started. In 2022, we counted fewer waterfowl than the previous two survey years. The biggest difference is that we didn’t see any large flocks of American White Pelicans (shown in white at the top of the graphs). We also counted fewer mallards and cinnamon teal. Changes in some bird populations include 7.3 times more Common Yellowthroats, and a whopping 23.3 times more Marsh Wrens in restored areas than prior to restoration in 2006. 51 ARU were deployed along the Missouri River and playback surveys at 17 sites identified 1 Black-billed Cuckoo detected during playback survey in CMR. Another 44 recordings were sent for analysis. There have been 7 long-term monitoring surveys since 2004 yielding 2,184 point counts and 34,791 birds. There have been significant population changes for many species. This budget was increased by about \$9,000, with TAC approval, to make up for some budgeting issues with partners.

**2022-8. O’Dell Creek Revegetation Phase 3.** RDG reported 6 planting units were selected where 2,600 willow cuttings and 300 containerized plants installed. All 6 sites were fenced to exclude browsing by wildlife.

**2022-9. Moore Creek Restoration Master Plan.** RDG reported the project was nearly complete and they anticipate 3 phases of restoration will be proposed in the future. The site is typical of other drainage issues that were “managed” by tiling and channelizing throughout history, attempts to restore the system had occurred within the past ~25 years but were largely unsuccessful. Future restoration efforts would require changes in land use practices and fencing.

**2022-10. Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement.** Grant reported the project did not develop over 2022 due to some planning issues with funding sources and the FWP Commission. FWP reported the Commission is expected to make a decision on moving this project forward in late 2022. This project will move into the 2023 Reserve Account.

**2022-11. Hebgen Basin Great Owl Survey.** ARU surveys began in late March and extended into early May while night-time call-back surveys began in April and extended into early May. All call-back surveys were initiated so that the second visit occurred prior to the end of the survey period (May 10). ARUs were deployed no later than May 10. A total of 17 grid cells were surveyed during this period. Ten cells were surveyed using ARUs and 7 were surveyed using night-time call-back surveys. All of the surveys met protocol requirements for timing, distance, and other parameters except for one – night-time call-backs in the West Fork Denny grid cell were aborted during the second visit due to bear activity on the transect. All of the surveys except one occurred in the Hebgen Basin – one cell was surveyed using ARUs in the Taylor Fork between West Yellowstone and Big Sky. Please refer to Figure 2 for locations of grid cells that were surveyed. A total of 7 grid cells were surveyed using nighttime callback surveys. As these grids were visited twice, this resulted in a total of 73 callback survey points. Four owl species were identified by vocalizations during the call-back surveys – great gray owl, boreal owl, great-horned owl, and northern saw whet owl. The boreal owl was the most widespread species identified; it was present in 5 of the 7 grid cells that were surveyed. Owls in general used all the selected grid cells, with one cell being occupied by all 4 species that responded to call-back surveys

**2022-12. Bald Eagle Monitoring - Hebgen & Quake Lakes.** Randy reported highlights of the 2022 field season include the discovery of 1 new nest/territory in the vicinity of the Madison Arm of Hebgen Lake and 1 partially constructed nest in the vicinity of Red Canyon. The new nest being constructed in the Horse Butte area (“Bennett”) continued to have late season activity but is not yet complete. Approximately nine nests were active (had a nesting attempt) during the 2022 season. Two territories (Trapper and Horse Butte) fledged a total of two chicks this year.

**2022-13. Missouri River Open Lands Easement.** This project was not implemented in 2022. Discussions continue between Montana DNRC and Cascade County to determine the aspects of the proposed easement. This project will move into the 2023 Reserve Account.

**2022-14. Lone Tree Conservation Easement Infrastructure.** The Lone Tree Conservation Easement (CE) Infrastructure Project (2022-14) was started in June of 2022 and completed in July of 2022. The project consisted of installation of 8144 feet of 2”HDPE pipeline buried >5ft underground and the installation of 4 stock tanks with fittings and hydrants. The cultural and archaeological survey was conducted on April 8th and SHPO approval granted on May 25th, 2022. Silvan Excavation was awarded the bid for the project and completed the work. Pipeline work was completed on 7/13/2022. Completion of work was verified by the landowner and FWP staff by 8/5/2022.

**2022-15. Missouri River Cottonwood Restoration.** Limited report. Grant stated the project at Hole-in-the-Wall was completed that involved planting tree sprigs and adding an exclusion fence around existing wild trees. Jesse Hankins confirmed the work was done at that site. Staffing changes with this applicant has been common and they are in a staffing transition now.

### **Review of 2022 Expenses & Reserve Account**

The budget for 2022 was \$403,565 and the amount approved by the TAC was \$403,555. Of the approved amount, \$293,203 was spent. Project 2022-5 was not completed/billed by the end of 2022. Projects 2022-10 and 2022-13 were not conducted. All three of these projects will be moved to the 2023 Reserve Account and total revenue for these will be \$110,444. The WildTAC Reserve Account balance at the beginning of 2022 was \$168,192 which included \$157,687 for Beaver Creek phase 2 construction and \$10,400 in uncommitted funds. The increase of the Beaver Creek phase 2 budget from \$130,000 to \$157,687 was the result of increased diesel fuel costs between the time the project was bid (Oct 2020) and implementation in September 2022. The TAC approved this request by email on September 12, 2022. Estimated Reserve Account balance at the end of 2022 was \$10,400. In order to reserve plants for May 2023 for the anticipated Carter Ferry project (2023-3) they had to be ordered by October 1, 2022. About \$3,887 was used from the 2022 budget to purchase plants for project 2023-3. If that project is funded by the TAC in 2023, that amount will be reimbursed to the Reserve Account using 2023 funds.

The 2022 end-of-year budget status is outlined as follows;

Wildlife TAC Projects & Budget for CY2022				Numbers in PIN
	As of Dec 31, 2022			
Project #	Project description	Proposed budget for 2022	Approved budget for 2022	Spent
2022-0	Cultural Resources Management	\$239	\$239	\$0.00
2022-1	Contingency	\$10,000	\$0	\$0.00
2022-2	Trumpeter Swan Restoration	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$8,000.00
2022-3	Heritage Tree Planting, Fence, Irrigation	\$72,043	\$72,300	\$72,629.00
2022-4	Evans Bend Tree Exclusion Fences	\$45,700	\$45,700	\$45,700.00
2022-5	Moore Ck Habitat Restoration Design (22-00)	\$24,724	\$24,724	\$14,280.28
2022-6	O'Dell Rare Plant Analysis and Publication	\$3,100	\$3,100	\$3,100.00
2022-7	Bird Monitoring & Data Analysis	\$30,448	\$40,148	\$40,148.00
2022-8	O'Dell Revegetation phase 3	\$41,747	\$41,747	\$41,749.00
2022-9	Moore Creek Valley Garden Master Plan (2022)	\$22,500	\$15,000	\$15,000.00
2022-10	Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0.00
2022-11	Hebgen Basin Great Owl Survey	\$8,225	\$8,225	\$8,225.00
2022-12	Hebgen Bald Eagle Monitoring	\$3,250	\$3,250	\$3,250.00
2022-13	Missouri River Open Lands Easement	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$0.00
2022-14	Lone Tree Conservation Easement Infrastructure	\$21,122	\$21,122	\$21,122.00
2022-15	Missouri River Cottonwood Restoration	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$20,000.00
NA	plants for 2023-3 est \$3,887			
	<b>Total Request 2022</b>	<b>\$411,098</b>	<b>\$403,555</b>	<b>\$293,203</b>
	Budget for CY 2022	\$403,565	\$403,565	
	Total Approved for CY 2022			
	Difference	-\$7,533	\$10	
<b>***RESERVE ACCOUNT***</b>		Order 10007921-003		
<b>Projects Approved in Prior Year(s) But Not Fully Completed Yet:</b>				
	<b>Project</b>	<b>Project Cost</b>	<b>Amt Spent</b>	<b>Remaining Commitment</b>
2021-2	Beaver Ck Restoration phase 2	\$157,792	\$157,687	\$105
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$157,792</b>	<b>\$157,687</b>	<b>\$105</b>
	<b>Reserve Account balance start of 2022-NWE Accounting</b>		<b>\$168,192</b>	
	<b>Subtract Remaining Reserve Account Commitments</b>		<b>\$157,687</b>	
	<b>Estimated Uncommitted Reserve Account funds end of 2022</b>		<b>\$10,505</b>	

## **Review and Comments on Selected 2023 Proposals**

There were 9 projects proposed for 2023, totaling \$277,715. By the time of the meeting, budgets for one project was adjusted making the total request \$284,195. The budget for 2023 is \$411,636 which means the budget is under allocated by \$127,441. In most cases, there was little discussion following the brief presentations by project sponsors. There were questions or comments on a few of the proposals as follows:

**2023-0. Cultural Resources Management.** Grant stated a desire to conduct a comprehensive CRM inventory and report on Moore Creek rather than individual/annual surveys as is being done at O'Dell Creek. If the Valley Garden landowner is planning to fund entire reaches on their own, it would be desirable to know that so NWE funds were not used to perform CRM survey on reaches where no future NWE funds would be used. RDG indicated they would investigate that and discuss with the Valley Garden Ranch personnel.

**2023-3. Carter Ferry Trees, Irrigation and Fence.** Grant reported an updated budget request that reflected additional costs to install power based on new information found since the application was submitted that revealed a property boundary consideration that would require the power to be run an additional ~500 feet further than the anticipated location. The additional cost would be about \$6,450. Grant also reported NWE is submitting an application to the National Wild Turkey Federation Waterways for Wildlife fund to help purchase materials for this project. That funding decision is in February 2023. If successful, an additional \$2,500 would be available for this project.

### **Review of 2023 Proposals, Funding Decisions & Reserve Account**

After review, comments and questions for the 9 proposals, and the budget strategy noted above, the WildTAC voted unanimously to approve the 9 projects proposed for 2023. In addition, if NWTF funds \$2,500 for project 2023-3 the TAC budget would either be reduced by that amount, or that balance could be maintained in the Reserve for future maintenance of that project.

The estimated Reserve Account balance at the beginning of 2023 is \$120,867 which includes Audubon donation of \$1,000 for Heritage Park and Carter Ferry tree planting materials, \$3,887 for project 2022-3 (Heritage Park maint), 2022-5 for \$10,444, 2022-10 for \$50,000, 2022-13 for \$50,000 and \$5,536 in uncommitted funds. The projected 2023 budget status is attached below:

Wildlife TAC Projects & Budget for CY2023				Numbers in <b>PI</b>
Project #	Project description	Proposed budget for 2023	Approved budget for 2023	Spent
2023-0	Cultural Resources Management	\$24,450	\$24,450	
2023-1	Contingency	\$10,000	\$10,000	
2023-2	Trumpeter Swan Restoration	\$8,000	\$8,000	
2023-3	Carter Ferry Trees, Fence, Irrigation	\$86,517	\$92,997	
2023-4	Hebgen Bald Eagle Monitoring	\$3,200	\$3,200	
2023-5	Moore Ck Phase 1 Design & Permitting	\$63,805	\$63,805	
2023-6	Systemwide Bird Monitoring	\$39,501	\$39,501	
2023-7	O'Dell Ck Phase 19 Design	\$17,500	\$17,500	
2023-8	O'Dell Revegetation Phase 4	\$24,742	\$24,742	
<b>Total Request 2023</b>		<b>\$277,715</b>	\$284,195	
Budget for CY 2023		\$411,636	\$411,636	
Difference		\$133,921	\$127,441	
Estimated Available WildTAC RESERVE beginning 2023		<b>\$124,379</b>		
<b>***RESERVE ACCOUNT***</b>				Order 10007921-003
<b>Projects Approved in Prior Year(s) But Not Fully Completed Yet:</b>				
	<b>Project</b>	<b>Project Cost</b>	<b>Amt Spent</b>	<b>Remaining Commitment</b>
2022-3, 2023-3	Audubon donation to Carter Ferry/Heritage		\$0	\$1,000
2022-3	Heritage Park Trees, Fence, Irrigation maint		\$0	\$3,887
2022-5	Moore Ck Habitat Restoration Design (22-003)	\$24,724	\$14,280	\$10,444
2022-10	Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement	\$50,000	\$0	\$50,000
2022-13	Missouri River Open Lands Easement	\$50,000	\$0	\$50,000
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$124,724</b>	<b>\$14,280</b>	<b>\$115,331</b>
<b>Reserve Account balance start of 2022-NWE Accounting</b>			<b>\$120,867</b>	
<b>Subtract Remaining Reserve Account Commitments</b>			<b>\$115,331</b>	
<b>Estimated Uncommitted Reserve Account funds available in 2022</b>			<b>\$5,536</b>	