

**Arizona State Habitat Partnership Committee Meeting
Minutes of Saturday, February 21, 2009**

Attendees:

Chasa O'Brien, AZ Game and Fish Dept (AGFD)
Jeff Gagnon, AGFD
Barry Spang, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Joe Currie, AGFD
Steve Najar, AGFD
Rob Lever, USFS, Clifton Ranger District
Rex Brown, Springerville-Alpine HPC
Doug Witt, Enviro-Land Management
R.L. Brim, Enviro-Land Management
Bob Jacobs, The Mule Deer Foundation
Dave McCasland, AZ Desert Bighorn Sheep Soc.
(ADBSS)
Jim Unmacht, ADBSS
Ruth Gregory, AGFD
Craig McMullen, AGFD
Bob Birkeland, AGFD

Wade Zarlingo, AGFD
Raul Vega, AGFD
Tice Supplee, AZ Antelope Foundation
Ron Thompson, AGFD
Bob Hernbrode, AZ Game and Fish
Commission
Bill McLean, AZ Game and Fish
Commission
Mike Senn, AGFD
Benny Aja, Rancher
John Koleszar, AZ Deer Association
Larry Phoenix, AGFD
Steve Clark, AZ Elk Society
Pete Cimellaro, AZ Deer Association
Tom Schorr AZ Elk Society
Sal Palazzolo, AGFD
Wade Albrecht, AGFD/NRCS

Roll Call of Local HPCs:

Springerville-Alpine – Rex Brown
Show Low – Bob Birkeland
Winslow – Bob Birkeland
Forage Resource Study Group – Larry
Phoenix
Williams-Flagstaff – Tom Mackin
Fredonia -

Kingman -
Prescott -
Southwest -
Tucson – Raul Vega
Southeast – Raul Vega
Payson Nat. Resources Committee – Craig
McMullen

Approval of Minutes of August 2, 2008

A motion to approve the minutes was made and seconded. The motion carried.

Agenda Review

A request was made for clarification of the criteria that the Department and funding partners consider in funding decisions, specifically for research projects.

NGO and Local HPC reports:

Rex Brown for the Springerville-Alpine HPC – Rex was not aware of what projects in his area had been approved for funding. The spreadsheet of projects approved for funding in 2008 was provided to him and all the other meeting attendees.

Wade Zarlingo for the Winslow and Show Low HPCs - In Region 1, funding was used for the purchase of equipment, specifically a water trailer and fence roller. In the Rodeo Chediski

burn area, renovation of 50 tanks was completed for approximately \$32,000 and the success was documented in an article in the recent RMEF magazine; the Ohaco landscape project is 60% complete with over 30K acres treated, as well as several catchments; the Unit 4B tank project should be done by June. The two area Wildlife Managers Paul Greer and Evan Lautzenheiser coordinated a couple of projects using local RMEF volunteers. They also identified about 24 USFS guzzlers that need maintenance. Look for a future project proposal requesting funding to accomplish this.

As for landowner issues on Unit 4B, the over-the-counter tags were successful in achieving the objectives for which they were intended and the Unit 4BN landowners are pleased with reduced elk numbers. Access is not an issue in the unit. There has been a lot of work done in Unit 4A in the last 5 years and forage monitoring indicates that for the first time use was within specifications in 80-90% of monitoring sites. The mule deer populations are rebounding, as well as higher elk calf crops and the local butchers report fat elk. In Unit 3C, higher mule deer fawn crops in the burn area have resulted in a decision to recommend and increase in deer permits.

Larry Phoenix for the Forage Resource Study Group (FRSG) – Their territory covers much of Units 5A and 5B. The FRSG is still cohesive group. Recent accomplishments include treatment of 1,200 acres of juniper, including 876 acres shredded, at the Hopi Three Canyons Ranch, the completion of the East Clear Creek meadow enhancement and some fence work using Arizona Antelope Foundation volunteers.

Tom Mackin for Williams-Flagstaff – Completed projects include fence modification and juniper clearing near Highway 180 in the Slate Lakes area. This project is to be completed in stages and will be continued this year. For the last 10 years the Coconino Sportsmen have been conducting maintenance on the Pat Springs Pipeline which supplies 35 wildlife drinkers encompassing an area of 200 square miles. Non HPC funds were used to build tanks in Units 7E and 7W and work continues on the Hwy 180 antelope fence. The group is also working with ADOT and Babbitt Ranches. Tom also discussed the work on Anderson Mesa Wetlands projects coordinated by the Arizona Wildlife Federation.

Benny Aja – The Double A Browse release project was funded last year and Benny thanked the groups for their funding. Last year's work was completed and the next phase will take place as soon as conditions allow. MK and Martin Dams are fixed and currently full. The project also included the treatment of 1,800-2,000 acres. There is an antelope component in the ranch and they are working with the National Forest to allow the public to collect the firewood for free to reduce carcasses. Applied for a grant and will know if it was received in July. Funds from this grant, if awarded, will be used to construct a pipeline system. The Williams Ranger District has a new range conservationist and they would like to present accomplishments on the Kaibab National Forest (KNF). Benny mentioned that the KNF's Forest Plan Revision NEPA process is open for comment and asked the group to provide input in support of habitat treatments for the restoration of grassland.

Raul Vega for Duane Aubuchon – Report for the Southeast HPC – Scott Heap is no longer the chairman of the Southeast HPC. The new person's name is Chuck Brooks and he will take the helm at their next meeting on March 24 at 6:30 PM at the Safford BLM Office conference room. Commissioner Hernbrode made note of the date and will try to attend. Seven of the group's projects were funded in 2008. The NO Bar-4 Bar prescribed burning and tree cutting

pasture project is almost complete. Special Tag funds were used as match for this project. The Galiuro Mountains #2 tank project will take place next week. The Dyl Canyon project will start two weeks later. The Safford group saw 4 of their 7 projects funded and the area Wildlife Managers in the sector are developing project proposals for the next cycle.

Commissioner McLean asked about disposal of tree carcasses after cutting projects. The Forest Service is allowing them to be gathered as firewood.

Raul Vega for the Tucson HPC – Region 5 had 14 out of 22 projects approved. Mostly water. Mostly catchments funded by deer tag dollars.

Craig McMullen for the Payson Natural Resources Committee (PNRC) – The group has been involved in a sizeable guzzler maintenance project. After the Dude fire, the Tonto National Forest placed 100 drinkers, but they require extensive maintenance. Park Tank Juniper clearing has taken place. On the Buzzard Roost allotment the permittee bought a tractor and shear, only wants reimbursement for fuel. Boundary Tank is completed. The Cherry Creek prescribed burn is about to take place. On the Houston Mesa grassland project – the first 600 acres have been cut, using a grinder; the total project is 3,200 acres. For the next phase – cost adjustments will be made due to a miscalculation of trees per acre. The Payson Ranger District completed EAs for burns in their district, mostly in Unit 22N and parts of Unit 23N. Christopher Creek Ranch, will be cleaning 5 stock tanks and after a minimum tool analysis for wilderness area and were approved to use dozer. Craig suggested a support letter from either the State or local HPC to support the project (which is not funded yet). Deer surveys indicate fawn survival in the mid-40's, which is well within parameters. After listening to the reports from other HPCs, Craig offered congratulations to all the local HPCs for all the work in support of wildlife habitat.

Commissioner Hernbrode asked: Should these presentations be more formal or less formal? It was mentioned that each project proponent is supposed to provide a written completion report. John Koleszar mentioned that before and after photos would also be great as a way to promote the good work of the conservation groups in their respective publications.

Tice Supplee for the Arizona Antelope Foundation (AAF) – AAF has a projects review committee and Tice stressed the importance of prefunding coordination, especially with field trips or site visits. This is one of the criteria AAF uses for recommending funding a project with antelope tag dollars. Two of their 2008 projects were the East Sunset fence improvement project and fence repair on Anderson Mesa. The AAF partners often with Diablo Trust on Anderson Mesa projects. AAF was contacted by Region 5 to look at the Elgin herd and will be working with the Babocomari and Bill Brake at Rose Tree Ranch. Their projects include LIP and special tag funds as match. AAF's Adopt a Ranch project was again at Horseshoe Ranch. AAF met with Tomas Teskey, owner of a ranch north of the Horseshoe and recommended AAF support for funding a well conversion to a solar project for a more secure water source. This project is an HPC proposal. AAF would also like to help modify all the drinkers on the ranch to make them more wildlife friendly. This would be a great volunteer project for the non-hunting conservation organizations. AAF had decided to commit up to \$135,000 to the Horseshoe Ranch acquisition. The Department is working to make it so.

Commissioner McLean asked Tice about how the separate evaluations of projects are done by the AAF's project committee. The process includes written report for the board, using a form,

basically a trip report. The AAF's priorities are fence modifications, grassland restoration, work that addresses concerns about specific herds. A few years ago, AAF supported the habitat treatments in the Clifton Ranger District and would have liked to do more. This year's priority is the acquisition of the Horseshoe Ranch. Tice urged proponents and HPCs to contact AAF to arrange field trip, and also to build up partnerships with land management agencies and landowners.

Mike Senn noted that the Department is excited about possibly acquiring the property, especially because of its proximity to metro Phoenix and the opportunities it affords for juniors camps and other hunting opportunities. It is a terrific property that already has infrastructure, giving it the potential to be another Sipe. The Department is seeking partners in the purchase – asking price is \$6 million.

Tice also mentioned that antelope appreciation day will be next Saturday, February 28.

John Koleszar for Arizona Deer Association (ADA) – The quality of project proposals submitted continues to improve. John reiterated the importance of contacting the organization for a site visit as part of the planning process. He also asked that project proponents please use the HPC project proposal form, as it asks for the information the groups are looking for, and that match should be clearly explained. Arizona Elk Society, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and the Mule Deer Foundation have been working as cooperative partners with ADA, for which John expressed appreciation.

Commissioner Hernbrode asked if there should be a formalized process for prefunding coordination. It was mentioned that when criteria change, proponents would like to have info on conservation group priorities. John Koleszar also noted that the funding partners also rely on the Department's scoring to make their funding decisions.

Steve Clark reminded the group that there is a cycle timeline which does not always get followed. Priorities are tweaked, but are generally the same. What changes are the people who do not always follow the format, like using the proper forms, and providing maps. Commissioner Hernbrode will work to get the process adhered to. The deadlines were reiterated – July 1 for proposal coordination and September 1 for project proposal submissions. The group agreed that there still needs to be a measure of flexibility to allow for out of cycle funding needs. It was noted that when the HPC charter was revised, the recommendation called for conservation group representation at the local HPC level and that up until now, the proposal process and conservation groups' site visits and field trips had been optional. Jim Unmacht noted that the conservation groups need more board members to be able to be represented at the local HPCs.

Jim Unmacht for the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society (ADBSS) – The group completed a project in the Trigos, Aubrey Tank as well as Paria. Jim gave kudos to Sofia Fong for her work at generating projects in her district for the society's volunteers to work on. The ADBSS would like to see more proposals for 2010 and beyond and would like to see more from Regions 6, 3, 4, and 1. They had to turn down a few projects in Region 2 for lack of volunteers. They will not be able to use volunteers for Tipperary Tank because it's in wilderness and the hike to the project is long.

Steve Clark for the Arizona Elk Society (AES) – The Buck Springs allotment documents are ready to sign which will retire 73,000 acres from livestock grazing. Forty acres of the allotment will be Arizona Game and Fish Commission-owned.

Bob Jacobs for The Mule Deer Foundation (MDF) – MDF’s mission statement is to restore, improve and protect mule deer and their habitats. MDF is always looking for partnerships and any type of project that benefits mule deer. The special tag in the recent auction raised \$137,000. They evaluate projects on a case by case basis, but site visits are key, as is consistency in writing and scoring proposals. It was mentioned that a lot of the info for the project proposals can be found in the regional habitat plans.

Tom Mackin for Coconino Sportsmen – The group was involved in a project on Anderson Mesa that identified 17 wetland areas. Work was funded by a Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant. The work included 4 fencing projects in 2006, 5 in 2007, 4 in 2008 and the last 4 for 2009.

Review of Special Big Game Tag Fund Awards – Ron Thompson

Ron Thompson talked about his first year through the HPC process cycle and reaffirmed the value of the program. Regarding hard deadlines as part of the process, he acknowledged that proposals continued to roll in after the deadline, but he feels the program needs to continue to remain flexible, within reason, especially to take advantage of match opportunities he believes it’s the Department’s obligation to leverage the funds. It is a huge component of what this process is all about.

There is a bit of a disconnect between the local HPCs and the conservation funding partners. There is a need to get to the base roots of the program and that is a local project proponent working in coordination with his or her local HPC and the NGOs. The HPC cycle is a dynamic process that’s going on year round. Pre-proposals are a necessary part of the planning process.

NGO sideboards are totally appropriate. Several non-priority projects among the NGOs have been stated, such as exclosures, clearing projects that don’t include removing carcasses, pinyon-juniper clearing in areas that, according to soil type, might not be true grassland, areas managed for limited populations, are a few of the “no” type projects expressed by NGOs. These priorities need to be clear to proponents. This year the groups favor the long term commitment of land acquisitions. But it should be noted that money set aside for escrow of an acquisition that is not ready to happen (escrow account not opened) does not fully encumber funds, which is something to be particularly cognizant of in the current fiscal climate.

Dave McCasland asked about a rule change to allow the NGOs to hold money. That is a possibility, however, the fund is still state money. Attorney general opinion in the recent past is that these funds must be kept in a state controlled account. Fund balances need to be kept low. A rule change cannot facilitate this outcome.

Steve Clark mentioned that the AES banquet is funding the 73,000 acres of the Buck Springs allotment. The Department has discretion on Wildlife Conservation Fund money, which means it can also be used for acquisitions. Other states can and have used voter initiatives set aside funds for the acquisition of land for wildlife. Heritage dollars have been used to acquire

property, but only if the land has a sensitive species component. Another thing the group should be thinking about is leveraging special tag dollars as match for other grants from AZDA, USDA, Farm Bill, etc. The rigidity of the HPC process doesn't lend itself to this, mainly because of the different granting cycles. Commissioner Hernbrode asked about prefunding with the NGOs in order to establish priorities and then give these to Department staff to analyze for grant matches and within the required cycles. Doing this will also give firm commitments to federal grants, some of which, like EQIP, have to have firm match secured before the federal funds are granted. If a proponent applies for an EQIP grant, expecting special tag (state) match, which is then denied, the proponent is still on the hook for the match if the federal grant is awarded.

There was a brief discussion of mechanisms to make this work. The bottom line for the NGOs is getting the most bang for the buck and projects that leverage money are highly favored. Sal Palazzolo mentioned that the USDA will pay for NEPA work on private or state lands.

It comes down to communication. Steve Clark commended Benny Aja for being the only rancher that coordinates with the conservation groups and noted that the HPC charter does not give any responsibility to the NGOs. Perhaps there is a need to have a coordinated 2-day meeting to establish priorities that everyone can agree on. Then priorities need to be communicated to all parties. There needs to be a little structure.

It was mentioned that perhaps each region could coordinate a regional level planning meeting. This would allow proponents to identify which conservation groups they could be coordinating with. AAF has excellent relationships with ranchers who contact them and work very closely with Region 2 on Diablo Trust projects. Once projects are funded, at some point AGFD needs to take over to work on leveraging the funds.

Ron Thompson asked the NGOs – What is it that the NGOs prefer to see in terms of projects?

John Koleszar mentioned that in the past, ADA and MDF did not fund research projects. There is no restriction in the tag fund statute and rule that prevents funding research. Chasa O'Brien cited the HPC charter and its emphasis on "landscape scale" projects, and noted that most research projects have a considerable ecosystem component. Jeff Gagnon cited research to define areas that connect fragmented populations. Also, when proposing the need for highway projects to ADOT, they need to have the data to justify the request.

Bob Hernbrode suggested that research projects, as well as habitat projects, need to be coordinated with the NGOs.

Dave McCasland stated that the ADBSS prefers on the ground habitat projects. The NEPA process can sometimes delay the time frame for project implementation to several years, Danny Nasca tank is an example – it took several years to complete. The ADBSS would like to see proposals for which NEPA is complete and would like to see projects identified a year or more in advance of submitting a proposal to allow NEPA to be done as far in advance as possible.

Ron Thompson would like to see the members of the local HPCs involved in this project planning process.

Sal Palazzolo explained that in the Landowner Relations program, they are involved in many different types of programs, (grassland, fencing, etc.) and their proposals are programmatic to granting source. Mike Senn stated that the intention should be to definitely leverage funding to the best of our ability and asked Sal to develop a process for the State HPC to review at the next State HPC meeting in July 2009. Sal – ACTION ITEM.

Ron Thompson asked the NGO reps to consider funding NEPA, as it is just as an important step in completing a process as any other. It would also be helpful if proponents would discuss this in their pre-planning with the NGOs, and the NGOs would let the proponent know up front if this might be a possibility for his or her project. John Koleszar requested that the proposals include what NEPA work constitutes, specifically a breakdown of costs.

Landscape Project Proposals:

Some points raised during the discussion:

- Proponents want to know why their projects don't get funded. For example, the Park Day and Sunset grassland projects had been ongoing, but lack of funding brought them to a halt. The conservation funding partners will follow up with this, as lack of tag funds for match will result in the loss of \$165,000 from the Arizona Department of Agriculture.
- Commissioner Martin's committee was looking into how non-hunting groups can contribute funding in habitat projects.
- Regarding the Ida Grassland project, which was not funded: The project proponent had requested funding for three years, but would settle for partial funding. The AES was concerned about low match, the disposition of tree carcasses and that moved the project lower on the priority list.
- Bob Birkeland expressed thanks to the NGOs for raising the funds and noted the history of improved relationships with landowners and other land management agencies as a result of the HPC program. He cautioned that in the "landscape view" in developing projects to not underestimate the value of the small \$5,000 type projects that help to build these relationships. We need to spread the wealth among the regions. Region 3 only received funding for the Highway 93 research project. Research projects weren't on the table in the past – do we need to think about this for the next meetings?
- Pete Cimellaro remarked that the NGOs have been working with Department on the special big game tag program since 1984. The first priority has always been wildlife and wildlife habitat. Dept. asked NGOs to raise funds for this. The reality is that there isn't enough money currently to fund every project. The process still needs to be refined and could use more funding partners.
- Tice reminded the group that although special big game tag funds have been the main funding source for HPC projects, it was never the intention of the program that it be the only source of funding. And with the focus on landscape scale projects, priorities should be determined with everyone at the table. John Koleszar mentioned that it would also be

nice to see wildlife advocacy groups contribute. Tice gave kudos to the Landowner Relations program for their work in leveraging dollars with matched funds.

USFS Presentation by Rob Lever: Rob gave a presentation on projects in the Clifton Ranger District. The district's primary focus is wildlife habitat in their burn projects, as they have no urban interface. When looking at the maps, he highlighted the connectivity of the landscape of treated areas. This work is used as match for grants the USFS receives for their water projects. The Sunset project is about \$32,000 short in funding at this point. The allotments are currently resting, now would be a good time to implement. This is another project that will be funding decision is tabled. The groups declined funding prior to this meeting thinking that the District would fund it with SB 1441 money. Should the decision be to fund the project, Rob will submit a proposal to fund tree thinning in Phase 2 of the project.

Wade Albrecht Presentation: Project Proposals in Region 3. Wade presented the following:

Cane Springs Ranch: Great mule deer habitat and project includes several partnerships among the landowner, the BLM, and the NRCS.

Crosier Ranch project: A good project – the Department has an access agreement.

Yavapai Ranch – Juniper Mountain: Another ranch that the Department has an access agreement with.

Smith Mesa project: Great biodiversity here. The Prescott National Forest will do NEPA on this project in summer 2009 if it gets approved for funding.

Orme Ranch: This would be important to the relationship with local ranchers and the water developments would help spread out the wildlife populations.

10. Wrap Up; Date and time of next meeting:

Ron Thompson – thanked everyone for their help.

Commissioner Hernbrode made note of the following as results of the meeting:

- Uniform presentation of proposals
- Department needs objectives from NGOs
- Department will develop process for matching funds
- A checklist for the HPC project proposal application – emphasize applicant coordination with NGOs

John Koleszar requested that the two tabled projects (Sunset and Park Day Grassland) be presented at the ADA board meeting. Wade needs a letter stating that funding will be available. Craig McMullen – would like a letter to the forest service

Craig McMullen requested a letter of support from the HPC in support of tank projects in the Hell's Gate Wilderness Area. Benny Aja made the motion, Craig seconded, the motion passed. Craig will draft a letter and get it over to Ron Thompson for Bob Hernbrode's signature.

Commissioner Hernbrode reiterated that proponents should know the NGOs objectives and coordinate with them during the planning process and submit proposals in a timely fashion.

When money is awarded for projects it should not languish waiting for NEPA, etc. Projects should be "shovel ready."

Next meeting: AGFD Region 1 Office, Pinetop – Saturday, July 25th. 9:00 – 1:00.

The meeting adjourned at 1:00 PM.