

Montana Wetlands Council Meeting Summary
May 18, 2005

Welcome and Introductions

Lynda Saul, Wetland Program Manager, Montana Department of Environmental Quality. Opened the Wetland Council meeting and invited introductions from everyone present (see attached sign-in sheet).

Laszlo Family, Granger Ranches: A Family Commitment to Stewardship.

Rob Hazlewood, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Nominated Laszlo Family, Granger Ranches. Presented a slide show of the phase one restoration work being done on the ranch and described the efforts of numerous entities and organizations involved in this large-scale restoration project. Pointed out that the family is also working with others on long-term conservation easements and that additional future restoration is being discussed.

Jeff Laszlo, Granger Ranches, Private Wetland Stewardship Award Winner.

Thanked those involved for working with his family and to realize their restoration vision for the ranches. Provided family history of the Ranches and expressed love of the land. Discussed that his perspective of working with government employees has been positive and that the persistence needed to see a project through of this scale is worth the effort. Expressed optimism that additional restoration in the Valley will be accomplished based on the experience gained on the Granger Ranches and looks forward to the complete restoration project and return of historic numbers of wildlife.

The Montana Wetlands Legacy: A Partnership Success.

Lynda Saul, DEQ, Nominated Tom Hinz, Montana Wetland Legacy Coordinator.

Expressed appreciation for Tom's experience and leadership in developing the Montana Wetland Legacy partnership. Described the history creating the Legacy. Reviewed Tom's 33-years career of public service with the State on fish and wildlife issues. Pointed out Tom's ability to capitalize on the public relations opportunity for wetland habitat protection such as the Blackfoot Swans. Described Tom's key role in creating the In-Lieu-Fee Aquatic Mitigation Program, congratulated him on award.

Tom Hinz, Montana Wetlands Legacy Coordinator, Public Wetland Stewardship Award Winner.

Thanked all of the organizations that were involved in getting the Legacy started and are participating in the Legacy partnership. Provided a slide show detailing the Blackfoot Valley Trumpeter Swan 2004 nesting and reintroduction project. Described the numerous people and entities involved in the Swan project as an example of the value of partnerships in reaching wetland protection and habitat goals. Described his vision of no wetland left behind. Provided examples of Legacy projects and numerous partners involved. Congratulated Legacy partners and Montana landowners on reaching Legacy goal; 250,000 acres of wetlands, riparian areas and associated upland protected or restored in first 5 years of Legacy. Expressed his interest and that of Legacy partners in wanting to work with individuals and organizations on wetland restoration and protection and encouraged people to contact him thinz@montana.edu

Council Meeting reconvened after the Award Celebration Luncheon in the Rotunda.

Birds and Wetlands: Integrated Conservation Delivery.

Daniel Casey, American Bird Conservancy, Northern Rockies Bird Conservancy Region Coordinator, Kalispell.

Linked bird conservation planning to wetland habitat protection needs and identified opportunities to reach mutual goals. Discussed Bird Conservation Regions (BCR) and the role of a BCR coordinator. Explained that recent development of state, regional and national bird conservation plans has created an unprecedented opportunity to develop integrated approaches to habitat conservation. Four groups of birds all have national and regional conservation plans: shorebirds, water birds, land birds and waterfowl. The Montana Steering Committee of the Intermountain Wetland Joint Venture developed a Coordinate Implementation Plan for Bird Conservation in Western Montana <http://www.iwjv.org/plans.htm>. Goal is to keep common birds common. Setting numerical base to detect declines and targets for recovery goals. The Prairie Pothole Joint Venture emphasis is on wetlands and grasslands. The newest Joint Venture in Montana is the Northern Great Plains Joint Venture. Riparian and wetland habitats have been identified as Joint Venture priority habitats for bird conservation. Hence the direct link between bird and wetland conservation and protection efforts.

Identified and described bird plan implementation resources such as NAWCA, Joint Venture Cost-share, Land and Water Conservation Fund, Farm Bill programs, Neotropical Migratory Bird Act, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, State Wildlife Grants and Conservation Programs and Private Foundation Sources. NAWCA small grants are under utilized in Montana and have a wetland habitat focus. Small grants are due December 2 this year. Dan described NAWCA funding criteria and point system, information is on NAWCA website. Other discussion included using collaborative projects as a good way to build capacity and bring together the wetland and bird community. For example Dan stated that bird habitat goals include protection, restoration and enhancement of 154,000 acres of priority bird habitat in Montana, this compliments Montana Wetland Legacy goals. Joint Ventures could involve building capacity and needed for wetland mapping and tracking net gains of wetland acres. Lynda commented that training for NAWCA small grant applications could be an agenda item at the fall Wetland Council meeting.

Farm Bill Conservation Programs: The Key to Landscape-scale Wetlands, Wildlife, and Fisheries Conservation on Private Lands.

Dave Smith, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Area Biologist, Missoula.

Described the evolution of the Farm Bill Conservation Titles and the NRCS role in delivering these programs. Farm Bill conservation programs are currently funded at levels that can affect wetlands, wildlife, and fisheries at the landscape scale. The new paradigm in wildlife and fisheries management is planning versus opportunistic habitat delivery. Private lands emerged as a priority, hence the emphasis on voluntary conservation with private landowners in Farm Bill programs. Farm Bill conservation program budgets dwarf private lands budgets of other agencies and NGO. For instance, Dave reported that the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) provides more funding to Montana than NAWCA contributes to all 50 States (\$31.8 million allocated to MT NRCS in FY 2005). Wetland Reserve Program (WPR) budget is \$3.3 million to Montana. Under the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), stream restoration is the number one priority. The iterative cycle includes science-based planning, implementation and evaluation. A coordinated monitoring and evaluation effort of the success of the Farm Bill incentive programs is key. Partnerships with other resource agencies, organizations, and watershed groups present a very promising avenue for helping landowners protect and restore critical habitats on their lands - and achieve the voluntary, incentive-based, conservation objectives of the Montana Wetlands Council. Commented that the first tier in protection is conservation easements and that NRCS is firmly entrenched in the business of conservation easements. Voluntary easements with private landowners are critical for landscape level integrity; agencies and ranchers can adjust grazing systems over time, but development is forever.

Dave described the Bull Trout/Westslope Cutthroat Trout Special EQIP Initiative currently being delivered in the Blackfoot Watershed. This can be used as a case study for future collaborative approaches to wetlands and stream restoration involving Farm Bill conservation programs. Pointed out that riparian and wetland habitats are critical to native fisheries conservation. This type of focused outreach is needed to participate in a partnership capacity. The Blackfoot Special EQIP partnership has a science foundation, clear objectives and partnership with cooperating Blackfoot Valley ranchers. Status is that the original funding request of \$500k, had 23 applications for sign-up in a 3 week period, project outcomes: 9 miles of stream restoration, 12-15 miles of riparian habitat improvement and fish screen and fish passage projects. Initiated because landowners wanted to restore the creek. Discussed lessons learned such as: start early in the fiscal year. FFY 2006 Special Initiatives should be identified in July 2005 to allow sufficient time for planning. Partners should take lead role in identifying landowner interest, program opportunities and wildlife and wetland, and fisheries needs. NRCS develops programmatic approach and provides training to partners on NRCS program and conservation planning requirements to maximize non-NRCS technical assistance efficiency. Council discussion included questions about possible rejuvenation of interagency WRP review committee to provide input on developing ranking criteria, review applications, activities, prioritize species, who is eligible to help develop WRP and other proposals. Ideas were raised about potential new Special Initiatives for 2006 and the need to support and facilitate this program. Concern was voiced over easements and grazing and the need to develop an acceptable balance with grazing and riparian issues. Agreed that we all want to work together to achieve common goals and the Farm Bill programs provide tremendous opportunity for landscape scale natural resource protection.

The Critical Lands Project: A Collaborative Effort to Identify, Protect and Restore Lands Critical to Maintaining and Improving Water Quality in the Flathead Watershed

Constanza von der Pahlen, Flathead Lakers Critical Lands Project Leader.

Explained that the Critical Lands Project is a collaborative effort initiated by the Flathead Lakers in 1999 to identify, protect and restore lands and waters critical to the quality of Flathead Lake and its tributaries; promote collaboration; and inform the public about the importance of conserving and restoring critical lands. Science-based and collaboratively driven. Challenges include primary productivity in the lake has increase 30% in the past 35 years and several river above the lake are listed as impaired on the Montana 303(d) list. Several new conservation plans have set the stage for the Critical Lands Project to plan for long-term conservation. Critical lands project goals include identify, protect and restore lands and water critical to the quality of Flathead Lake and its tributaries, build cooperation and inform the public. Explained criteria for identifying critical lands and described the focus area as the Flathead Valley above Flathead Lake and wetland and riparian areas. Critical Lands protection projects completed include Weaver Slough, McWenneger Slough and Foy's Bend and include over 500 acres of wetlands. Rely on a detailed funding matrix for conservation and numerous project partners for land conservation. Donated and purchased conservation easements create potential for conservation corridor. Provide extensive outreach to partners, landowners, board members and Governor's office, local governments, NAWCA coordinators, others. Story telling and recognition celebrations are critical. Other projects include the VoAg School Stillwater River restoration project and working on land use planning and policies with local governments. Critical Lands long-range planning benefits and project implementation include improved water quality, significant fish and wildlife habitat and increased recreational opportunities. Will continue to coordinate with other land conservation efforts and identified collaborative opportunities, such as TMDL, and river restoration, Farm Bill program, in-lieu fee aquatic resource mitigation program. Council discussion included comment that this has been an effective approach for Flathead area and could be model for other areas.

Updates and announcements:

Debbie Zarnt, Montana Watercourse. Organizing the first Western Wetland Conference to discuss wetland protection needs and share information across state boundaries (includes the area encompassing the 17 states west of the Mississippi.) Major themes include: lack of regulations, water shortages and lack of information. <http://www.mtwatercourse.org/wwc/index.htm>. Distributed copies of the newest education/outreach material, "A Guidebook for Montana Ponds". Contact MT Watercourse at 406-994-6671 for a copy.

Russell Smith, Aquatic Design and Construction. Discussed using floating island wetlands for nutrient uptake. russell@aquaticdesignandconstruction.com

Erin Ferris, Dept Environmental Quality intern. Discussed wetland rapid assessment form revision and encouraged others to assist with rapid assessments.

Bonnie Steg, MT Dept of Transportation. Discussed wetland mitigation and MDT working with DNRC to identify mitigation sites. Also working to revise policy to be able to locate mitigation sites on USFWS lands.

Kris Knutson, US Environmental Protection Agency. Continuing with enforcement issues. Talked about various mitigation sites. Don't know status of wetland grant proposals, Denver and Washington DC are reviewing.

Jon Jourdonnais, PPL Montana. Described PPL Montana's role in the Granger Ranches wetland restoration project and thanked the agencies for their leadership.

Jim Stutzman, US Fish and Wildlife Service. Agency is kicking off huge conservation easement program in the rocky mountain front, 175,000 areas of protection, with private landowners.

Pete Husby, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service. Swamp buster procedures have been revised and will be introduced in June, will simplify the process, NRCS will still work closely with the Corp of Engineers. Trying to expand the wetland reserve program. Looking to add private landowners and to add to the program and explore partnerships. Reactivate committee on wetlands and riparian issues and ranking criteria. Pete will lead native plant walk in Livingston area on June 11 including wetland sites; all are invited.

Greg Kudray, MT Natural Heritage Program. Introduced Linda Vance, new ecologist with the Heritage Program working on wetland projects such as vegetation modifiers, watershed assessments, Bio-diversity index and BLM project on Powder River.

Susan Key, Bitter Root Water Forum. DEQ/EPA contract for Ravalli county wetland mapping project will focus on northern end of county.

Montana Wetlands Council Participants
May 18, 2005

<u>Name</u>	<u>Representing</u>	<u>E-Mail</u>
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