

Notes from 10/15/2015 PRCAC meeting to PRCA Board of Directors:

Held at Pigeon River Country HQ in the forest

(**Note:** These notes are not intended to be draft minutes, nor do they cover every item presented at the advisory council meeting. I have excerpted only those issues/items I felt to be of interest to the PRCA board or members.)

PRC Wildlife Habitat tour

There are approximately 2,000,000 acres of land in the northern Lower Peninsula. Of those, 100,000 are acres of open land or forest clearings, and oil and gas well pads are “a challenging subset” of those 100,000. Open areas can be prime wildlife habitat and are therefore “high value” land. There is a constant natural tendency for those areas to fill in and close up, and constant maintenance is required to keep them open.

Abandoned oil well pads, although already open, have been degraded by hydrocarbon development, even though the oil companies have voluntarily complied with, and in many instances gone beyond, restoration requirements. The challenge is not to keep them open, but to improve the openings as forest and wildlife habitat.

Long-lasting effects of soil compaction, pH readings higher than in surrounding undisturbed soils, and lack of quality topsoil render abandoned oil well sites very poor quality wildlife habitat openings, and they are especially susceptible to the establishment of invasive species. No single restorative “prescription” will fit every site, and different stages of restoration, which is often a multi-year process, exist at different sites. Standards for site restoration have changed since the 1980s; the goal now is to plant native species, especially deep-rooted native grasses like big bluestem grass, whose deep roots loosen and prepare the soil, eventually, for trees to re-establish.

Within the next 25 years, it is estimated that approximately 10,000 Antrim gas wells will go off-line. DNR foresters are urgently aware that they must develop best management practices ("BMPs") for restoring these abandoned oil sites to high quality wildlife and forest openings as more and more acreage becomes vulnerable. There are currently approximately 1,800 abandoned well sites in Otsego County alone, totalling about 1,800 acres. Communicating BMPs to other agencies and to private landholders will be crucial in coming years as the number of abandoned well sites increases, and the DNR admits that it will need assistance "spreading the word".

The Pigeon River Country Open Wildlife Habitat project is funded by the Michigan DNR's Wildlife Habitat Grant Program (funds derived from hunting and fishing license fees) and by the EPA's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant.

PRCAC members were invited by Huron Pines to participate in a PRC wildlife habitat tour (helping to fulfill the public education requirement of the Wildlife Habitat grant) prior to the October advisory council meeting. Huron Pines is working with the DNR Wildlife Division to learn about and implement reforestation efforts and to document their findings in a "practitioners' manual".

We visited two oil well restoration sites, one on Tin Shanty Road and one on Bobcat Trail. The Tin Shanty Road site has been partially reforested, first by planting small deciduous saplings, which was not very successful, and then by transplanting pines from the forest surrounding the pad with more of the trees' native soil included in the transplanting. This second effort has been more successful, and the pad is now partially forested, but more open than the surrounding forest.

The pad on Bobcat Trail is a multi-year restoration site. It has been sprayed for invasive species, and was planted this summer with a cover crop of annual rye. The rye will be tilled

into the soil next spring before planting with native grasses, some of which take up to three years to establish themselves. Deer and elk have already found the annual rye, as evidenced by the hoofprints we saw at the site, and similar predation will no doubt slow the establishment of the grasses.

We also visited a habitat restoration area (that is not an abandoned oil well pad) at Inspiration Point, where invasive species and shrubs that were encroaching on high-quality grassland have been removed. It costs over \$1,000/acre to do *each* of the following: 1) to remove trees, 2) to do prescribed burns, and 3) to remove invasive species. The area is much more open than it was at the beginning of the summer.

The PRCFSF is a place where the DNR can “focus money” on wildlife habitat restoration because of the Concept of Management and because of managing for the elk herd. Even so, the Department’s original prescription for the forest was to have 50% forest and 50% open land. The amount of prescribed open land is now only 6% to 7% because of the lack of resources to maintain open spaces.

Chair’s Opening Remarks:

2016 Advisory Council dates (tentative at this time)

New start time: 6 p.m.

Friday, January 15, 2016 at	Corwith Township Hall
Friday, April 15	Charlton Township Hall, Johannesburg, MI
Thursday, July 21	HQ
Thursday, October 20	HQ

Dave Smethurst was absent from the 10/15 meeting because he experienced chest pains a few days prior (while fishing) and

subsequently had a cardiac stent implanted. He is home, feeling better, and the chair invited everyone to send Dave their good wishes.

Old Business:

PRC Equestrian Workplan update: Scott Whitcomb reported there were a total of 11 equestrian trails that the Equestrian Committee ("EC") and the Advisory Council/DNR staff could not agree on. Those 11 will be the subject of a mediation session on October 27. Attending will be 5 representatives from the EC, 5 representatives from the PRCAC, and DNR staff. The facilitator will run the mediation session. At that meeting, all parties will look at the proposals, explain their reasoning for or against the trails, and offer alternatives. Any agreements on trails arising out of the mediation will not come back to either the EC or to the PRCAC but will be handled administratively by DNR staff.

The 11 trails approved at the July PRCAC meeting will be presented by DNR staff to the Director for a Land Use Order ("LUO"). Scott hopes that any trails that are approved at the 10/27 mediation could be reviewed and presented to the Director at the same time so that more than one LUO would not be necessary.

The EC's request for equine access to Blue Lakes, Green Timbers and Inspiration Point have not yet been addressed. They are tabled pending the further development of the Recreation Management Plan. Right now, they are contraindicated by the Concept of Management.

Song of the Morning Dam Removal update: Lisha Ramsdell reported that the bids for removing the dam and installing the timber bridge had come in higher than the amount of money that

had been raised, but that the necessary additional funds had been raised.

All the electrical and phone lines have been removed from the dam structure and are now re-routed under the river. All the necessary permits are in place, and the sand trap downstream from the dam, designed to catch sediment loosened by removing the dam, was dug over several days around September 22. Demolition of the dam will begin on October 28. The 72' timber bridge that will replace it is already constructed and should be permanently in place by Thanksgiving, 2015.

Especially good news is that a recent fish population survey shows that trout populations have rebounded and are now similar to what they were prior to the dam's most recent failure. Temperatures above and below the dam have equalized.

PRC Discovery Center Update: Sandy Franz reported that a local architect has submitted drawings for the proposed historical and educational space at the Center outlining exhibit spaces, occupancy limits, and storage and utility spaces and detailing the necessary upgrades to the heating, electrical and plumbing systems. These drawings have been reviewed and approved by the State Historic Preservation Office® ("SHPO").

Bids are being sought for electrical and plumbing upgrades, and for installing a new heating system. These basic upgrades are expected to be completed in late fall, 2015.

In addition, the PRC Discovery Center has been chosen by Americorps as a "signature service project" for 2016. On May 20, 2016 70-80 volunteers will spend the day landscaping, painting and washing walls, and power-washing the exterior of the building. Donations of materials, food and funds will be solicited for that work day.

The many ideas from people who passionately love the Pigeon River Country about history, geography, geology, wildlife, biology, forestry and forest uses will be distilled into educational exhibits for the center. The Steering Committee will be meeting in the next several months with professional exhibit designers and fabricators, some of whom are retired from the DNR, to further define the Center's message and how it will be presented.

The Pigeon River Country Association has hired a Wayne State PhD candidate as an intern to research archives at the DNR, as well as at academic historical libraries, for photos and historical documentation of the forest's early days.

Oral history also plays an important role. Oral histories from some people who lived in the residence are being recorded, and other transcribed interviews with men who worked in forest during the logging era of the early 1900s are available.

Donations of artifacts have already begun. Among them are some of the original office furniture that will be part of a recreation of the Unit Manager's office from the 1940's.

In the next several months, publicity about the Center will be more widely distributed to the general public, donors, and media. Fundraising for operational expenses and further development of exhibits is ongoing and will be a priority in coming months. Periodic updates on the Center's development will be provided.

New Business:

Annakathryn Parker, the Wayne State PhD candidate/student intern who has been doing historical research for the Discovery Center, was invited to give the AC an overview of her work. She was unable to attend, but compiled a 20-minute slide presentation, with voice over, in which she detailed her findings

regarding P. S. Lovejoy, his connections with Aldo Leopold, and the beginnings of the Pigeon's elk herd.

She also provided amazing archival photographs of some of the elk, shipped to northern Michigan by train from Yellowstone National Park in (I think it was) 1913, and traced their initial migration through northern Michigan. She revealed that the PRCSF elk herd is likely descended from 7 elk who were originally located in Cheboygan. She has dubbed this foundation herd "the Cheboygan Seven"! 😊

Ex-Officio Reports:

Law Enforcement: (CO Nick Torksy)

- Elk season uneventful
- Fall has been busy, but less busy than 10 years ago re: hunters and fishermen; there are more bikers, hikers, photographers "who want to take pictures of elk, not poach them"

Forest Resources: (Unit Manager Scott Whitcomb)

- Timber sales completed; 1,100 acres set up for sales, both thinning and clear-cuts
- Compartment review completed
- some land exchanges, easements completed
- "2nd annual invasive blitz: finding and treating invasive plants; rapid response to keep PRCSF a high quality area
- busy fall with many tours and workdays: Michigan Hemingway Society tour, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Ruffed Grouse Society tree planting

Wildlife Division: (Wildlife Supervisor Brian Mastenbrook)

- Elk season: 38,000 hunters applied for permits; 100 granted. 50 permits issued for early hunt with 43 elk killed; 50 permits issued for late hunt (December 5-13). Good distribution of kills throughout animals' range.
- elk survey will take place in January, from which will come any recommendations for changes in hunt boundaries or rules. Any changes that are implemented remain in place for two years.
- effort underway to graft resistant beeches to rootstock, so may have trees in the future that are resistant to beech bark disease.
- moose herd in Upper Peninsula has low reproductive rates; herd is stagnant at about 400 animals and is not increasing.
- in 2014 scat and tracks found in northern Lower Peninsula confirmed to be from wolves, but no recent activity.

Recreation Report (Kelly Kinser, Otsego State Park):

- erosion control measures at the river at Elk Hill Trail Camp mostly done; ADA mounting block there is under construction; attendance at Elk Hill about the same as in previous years.
- no update yet available on status of Recreation Management Plan.