

Notes from 7/16/2015 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.)

Song of the Morning Ranch dam tour

PRCAC members were invited by Lisha Ramsdell of Huron Pines to meet, just prior to the PRCAC meeting, at the Song of the Morning Ranch dam to receive a status report on the progress of dam removal and installation of a timber bridge. It was a beautiful summer evening, and the vista of the river, the meadow through which it runs, and the pine trees on the horizon was reminiscent of Yellowstone and some of the other great western river meadows.

There are two sets of rapids visible, and stretches of clear gravel bottom. The water is much clearer than it was previously, although silty areas remain in the riverbed. The river has cut down through the layers of organic materials deposited in the former lakebed, and those "strata" are clearly evident in the riverbanks.

The river runs through a meadow of blue vervain and other wildflowers and grasses. Golden Lotus has no definite plans yet for the wild area; Huron Pines will be working with them to develop a vegetative management plan, and there will be a major initiative to train volunteers to identify and remove invasive species.

It was expected, based on old photographs and documentation, that the Pigeon would re-form on the east side of the former impoundment, the side where the boathouse is, where the river's former bed was before the lake was created. Instead, it has formed on the opposite side and no one knows if it will seek its "old" bed in the future or not. Ramsdell said it is "amazing to watch this river form right before your eyes." She pointed to a smaller channel that does run closer to the boathouse and said it's unclear if it will deepen or disappear.

Later, at the PRCAC meeting, Ramsdell updated members: for over 100 years, there's been a dam of some sort at that place. "In a matter of months, we expect the dam to be gone." The dam should be removed in September, with the timber bridge being installed sometime thereafter. The

ranch's utilities, which previously were routed through the dam, are currently being rerouted, including installation of transformers and the placement of a conduit for wiring 14' *below* the bottom of the river. A large sand trap will be created below the dam in part to catch sediment cut loose by its removal.

Ramsdell thanked Joe Jarecki for his careful monitoring of river conditions during the drawdown, the information from which has helped to inform the planning on how to remove the dam and install the timber bridge. She said the project demonstrates the power of parties moving from litigation to cooperation to get the work done. There has been "overwhelmingly positive feedback" from Golden Lotus members.

Chair's Opening Remarks:

During this part of the agenda, the AC discussed a handout: "The Role of a PRC Advisory Council Member [re:] Access Issues" prepared by Brad Garmon. It excerpted passages from Dale Franz's book, Pigeon River Country, from the Concept of Management, and from Land Use Order 4.34, the vehicle access plan itself.

One member asked why the PRCSF did not simply adhere to the Michigan regulations regarding vehicle access in other state forests. Scott Whitcomb responded that the PRCSF is the only Michigan state forest with a vehicle access plan, and that the rest of the state is looking to and emulating our vehicle access plan, since it gives local authority for closures and gives local forest management the ability to close unused roads or roads that are created informally and are unsafe. Other forests without such a plan may require a director's LUO (land use order) which may take at least six months. The member responded that decisions regarding access "can be made too quickly and with too little input."

This difference of opinion was not resolved at the meeting.

Old Business:

Recreation Planning update: Rich Hill from Parks and Recreation Division reported that PRD is moving forward with "scoping out" a recreation management plan for the PRCSF. They are gathering background materials, including the Concept of Management and legal mandates such as statutes and director's LUOs, and have brainstormed with other divisions of the DNR and other stewardship agencies outside the department to get additional information to the intern who is preparing the supporting analysis. They will then draft an outline of a proposed plan and get public input. Hill reported

that the usual procedure is to “frame it internally and then pull in stakeholders;” the draft plan is “fine-tuned” by the stakeholders before it goes to the public.

Pigeon River Country Discovery Center (PRDC) update: Rudi Edel gave a chronological summary of developments, including the PRDC steering committee’s meeting with a Wayne State PhD candidate who will be working for the PRCA as an intern doing preliminary research for the center. He detailed the steering committee’s focus on the center as a forum to tell the story of the people whose actions have influenced the forest, and asked the question: how do we use the PRDC as an inspiration for people to learn more about the forest and protect its basic values?

The steering committee is composed of representatives from the PRCA, the advisory council, the Herman Lunden family, and the Otsego County Historical Society. [The PRCA signed a 25-year lease for the former unit manager’s residence on July 17, 2015.]

Wildlife Habitat Grant update: Brian Mastenbrook detailed efforts funded by this one-year grant, which

“aims to create and maintain sustainable wildlife openings by removing shrubs encroaching in grassland areas; planting native prairies; and restoring abandoned oil and gas pads sites to a more natural ecosystem—overall, this project will enhance over 75 acres of openland [sic] within the PRC.”

Huron Pines, forest DNR staff and contractors are working together to complete the grant projects. Among other projects, 8 well pads have been planted with “long-term” species this summer. The public education requirement of the grant will be fulfilled by tours of the well pads and other forest areas to highlight habitat management projects. Advisory council members may be invited to participate in such a tour before the October meeting.

PRC Equestrian Committee update: Kerry Mase reported that equestrians held a work bee in the forest earlier in the summer. 21 people worked together to clear trails and implement erosion control measures.

Committee reports:

Roads, Trails and Forest Access (RTFA): Randy Keen presented the committee’s recommendation from its 3½ hour June 25th meeting at which equestrians and committee members “really went into detail about individual” equestrian trails in the forest. The committee recommended

approval of, and the advisory council approved, 11 trails, totaling 5 miles. During a short recess of the advisory council meeting, the RTFA committee and the equestrians reached consensus on three more trails about which there had been some disagreement and presented them to the council for approval. The advisory council approved these three trails; as a result, one other proposed trail became unnecessary and will not be pursued.

Brad Garmon and other members raised the continuing question of whether or not there were any funds for maintenance of a larger trail system. PRD (Parks and Recreation Division) staff confirmed that there would be "no new money" for trail maintenance and that the department would have to rely on volunteers or new funding sources.

Paul Rose presented a motion, which council members approved and recommended be applied to all user groups, not just equestrians:

"The PRCAC recommends that the trail planning process, including expansion of the current system, include the identification of sustainable trail maintenance resources."

Anna Sylvester, a PRD staffer and member of the equestrian committee, reported in response that PRD had had a meeting regarding trails that same day at which they spoke about withdrawing or redacting the director's LUOs for trails that are no longer used or maintained. She felt that the motion above was "in sync" with this larger statewide initiative.

New business:

2017 forest treatment recommendations (compartment review):

["DNR staff looks at 10% of the forest every year. It divides the land into compartments and studies. . .them, all about two miles long and a mile wide, scattered throughout the forest. . . .An open house is held for public comment two years before the proposed treatment is actually done on site."

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Brian Mastenbrook reported that broad goals of the work recommended in the 2017 compartment review, which will focus on 5 compartments, will be:

- to cut as much aspen under 50 years old as possible;
- to do regeneration cuts in large pine landscapes:

- these regeneration cuts may result in some bigger open spaces than usual, but some pine stands are mature enough that it is time to harvest them and regenerate new growth.

The 2015 compartment review open house was held on July 23 from 3-6 p.m. Unit manager Scott Whitcomb reported that DNR staff is trying to expand its outreach to the public to attend and participate in compartment reviews, and the council discussed various possible ways of accomplishing expanded public input.

Ex-officio reports:

Law enforcement (Nick Torsky):

- 3 new sinkhole lakes open to fishing
- ORV activity is down
- Otsego and Cheboygan counties have been reorganized into one law enforcement area, allowing for more continuity in patrols and enforcement.

PRC unit report (Scott Whitcomb):

- number of visitors to the forest is down, but there are lots of out-of-state visitors
- many volunteers and activities from various user groups: mountain bikers, equestrians, football teams (who volunteer to work and get in shape physically prior to football season), Trout Unlimited
- trees have been marked and timber sales are underway
- in conjunction with local law enforcement, junk illegally dumped on forest land has been cleaned up
- Green Timbers cabins will come down "before the snow flies"
- Pete Datema, Americorps volunteer, reported that bird monitoring project is finished and he is now working on habitat grant, removing invasive species such as barberry and autumn olive
- RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) has been staffing the HQ/visitor center on Saturdays and reports that they have been busy

with a lot of visitors; there is some interest in staffing the visitor center in the winter

- many tours coming to the forest:
 - o Leadership Otsego County
 - o Finance and Operation Division of the DNR
 - o Assistant chief, DNR
 - o State Historic Preservation Officer re: Pigeon River Country Discovery Center

Wildlife Division report (Brian Mastenbrook):

- 5 “nuisance bears” have been trapped in other parts of the state and released into the PRC: 3 cubs were from the Cadillac, MI area and one from Charlevoix. Another bear traveled all the way from Muskegon, Michigan to Indiana!
- when the bears are trapped and released into the Big Wild, they tend not to return to populated areas because PRCSF is a large enough area to support them in the habitat they need.
- testing and culling of deer suffering from chronic wasting disease is ongoing: density of deer per square mile allows for rapid spread of this “highly pathogenic” disease
- lots of wildlife habitat work, concentrating more staff in elk areas
- controlled burns to improve wildlife habitat have occurred in over 3,000 acres in this region, 5,000 acres statewide.

Recreation report (Kelly Kinser, PRD):

- camping numbers up slightly; river access sites well used.
- summer emphasis on maintenance work: mowing, staining furniture, sign repair
- Elk Hill Trail Camp river access erosion project to begin on Monday, July 20; mounting block project will begin soon
- Park ranger Scott Thompson leaving PRCSF seasonal job for new full-time state employment on Saturday, 7/18