

Notes from 1/15/2016 PRCAC meeting to PRCA Board of Directors:

Held at Corwith Township Hall, Vanderbilt, MI

(**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.)

The PRCA was, as usual, well represented at this AC meeting. Joe and Judi Jarecki, Stewart Smith, and Gene Horan were present. I welcome their corrections, modifications, additions, questions, etc.

Volunteer of the Year Award: RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) received this year's Witness Tree Award for their service staffing the HQ on weekends. RSVP is keeping HQ open for visitors on Saturdays during the winter this year as well.

Chair's Opening Remarks:

Public Comment: Joe Jarecki informed the advisory council of the availability of the new PRCSF/High Country Pathway map and of the "holiday special" package of the new map and Dale's book being available for \$30. He had copies of both available for sale.

Re-assignments within the DNR/DEQ: Chairman Walters reported that Gov. Rick Snyder appointed Keith Creagh, director of the Department of Natural Resources, to replace the head of Department of Environmental Quality, Dan Wyant, who resigned Dec. 29 amid a Flint drinking water crisis.

William Moritz, a DNR wildlife division veteran and specialist in deer research, has moved up from deputy to head of the DNR. William O'Neill moved up from chief of the forest resources division to replace Moritz as deputy DNR director.

Chairman Walters said he hoped the interim appointments will be made permanent because of the quality of the appointees. "We have a great relationship with all three," he said. With people leaving state posts, those remaining have had to try picking up the slack, Scott Whitcomb told the advisory council. Debbie Begalle has moved up to become interim chief of forest resources, he said, leaving unfilled positions and creating greater workloads lower in the DNR hierarchy. Both Scott and Chairman Walters estimated that the effects of the re-organization will continue to be felt by staff at all levels for at least 6 to 9 months.

Housekeeping:

Six new members were appointed to the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council in January as six appointees left, including Arch Reeves who declined to serve again. Arch had a long career as a PRC forest technician and is widely respected for his intimate knowledge of the Pigeon. All the appointments were made by the then-DNR director, Keith Creagh.

Kerry Mase, an equestrian, and Eugene Horan, PRC Association vice president, were willing to serve again as at-large members, but the director made a change. Chuck Fanslow, a member of many equestrian organizations, was appointed, as was Drew Youngedyke of Michigan United Conservation Clubs and formerly active with PRCA. The Otsego Road Commission member was replaced by his boss, Tom Deans, who has a declared interest.

The changes: Brent Shank replaced Mark Ennes (both from the Cheboygan County Road Commission). Brian McPhail replaced Jim Supina (both National Wild Turkey Federation). Eric Ellis of the Ruffed Grouse Society was also appointed, along with Fanslow, Deans, and Youngedyke, while Jason Melancon of the Otsego County Road Commission, Reeves, Horan, and Mase left the council. Mase's departure reduced female membership by one-third, leaving two females of the 18 citizens on the council, Lisha Ramsdell and Sandy Franz.

Review of the Concept of Management: Pete Gustafson presented a review of the Concept of Management regarding recreation in the forest and distributed copies of the Concept with relevant portions highlighted. This edited compilation will be particularly useful to us as the Parks and Recreation Division produces its new recreation management plan for the forest.

Ex-Officio Reports:

Oil & Gas (Andy Stempky): A 3 bbl spill (primarily brine, but some oil) at Charlton 7, which resulted from an overflow pipe being plugged and another pipe bursting as a result, was cleaned up immediately and more clean-up is scheduled for spring. The spill is in Section 7, not Section 12 as previously reported, and is outside the PRCSF, but borders it.

There is a clean-up system in place for the Charlton 4 spill, a slightly larger spill that occurred some time ago. Clean-up is going well and has been

going on for years; two “hot spots” on the pad are harder to get to because they are under equipment on the site, but are being cleaned up from the side and are continuing to diminish.

Law Enforcement (Nick Torsky):

Nick and one other CO are assigned to Otsego County, and Nick usually works in the Pigeon while the other CO covers the other parts of Otsego County. There are two COs in Cheboygan County, and similarly, one of them handles the Pigeon primarily. There is a third CO position for Cheboygan County that is to be filled soon.

Nick reported that the PRCSF “is a different place and attracts a different kind of person” who does seem to recognize that it’s different. Nick believes most violations stem from “ignorance of the rules”. He noted that “[t]hings are pretty simple if people are just courteous to each other.”

That said, Nick reported “blatant and widespread” illegal horse activity in the forest last fall. Riders went into areas clearly marked as off limits to horses with a “try to catch me” attitude.

Nick’s supervisor was present at the meeting. He expressed a need from law enforcement’s perspective to have regulations available to citizens so they know what’s legal and what isn’t.

PRC Unit Report (Scott Whitcomb):

“Salvage sales” for tree stands at risk from emerald ash borer and beech bark disease, both already present in the PRCSF, have been done.

Forest managers have been directed to look at eligible stands of balsam fir and white spruce with the goal of harvesting them *before* they are infested by spruce budworm, a cyclical native pest. At this point, there is an outbreak of spruce budworm in the UP, but not yet down here. If the stands identified as harvestable, approximately a couple hundred acres, would result in individual clear-cuts larger than 40 acres, advisory council review and input may be requested.

The second phase of the Wildlife Habitat Grant will resume in the spring, focusing on opening up and eradicating invasive species in the Inspiration Point area and on restoration of abandoned oil and gas pads.

Equestrian: Many of the additional trails requested by the Equestrian Committee in their draft work plan were recommended for approval by the advisory council at several previous meetings. Those proposed trails that were not recommended for approval were the subject of a facilitated session between Equestrian Committee and advisory council members, held last fall. No agreement on any additional trails was reached during the facilitated session, but DNR staff subsequently approved four of those additional trails. DNR staff is now updating equestrian trail maps and working on a Director's Land Use Order ("LUO") authorizing approximately 8½ additional miles of equestrian trails in the forest "that really complement what's there now".

Advisory council members expressed their hope that the Equestrian Committee's work plan would be viewed as a whole and this LUO would bring "closure" to its review and approval process to prevent incremental future requests for trail expansion. However, review of proposed trails at Inspiration Point, Blue Lakes and Green Timbers have been tabled pending completion of Parks and Recreation's recreation management plan and upon further completion of the Wildlife Habitat Grant work at Inspiration Point. Additionally, as inholdings and other private parcels are acquired for the forest, they will be reviewed by staff for recreation potential, including possible additional equestrian trails.

An illustration of how difficult "closure" on equestrian issues may be is a request just received from the Equestrian Committee to Parks and Recreation (reported by Kelly Kinser later in the meeting) for the building of a pavilion at Elk Hill. This request, some would say, is clearly in violation of one of the Concept of Management's "Recreational Use Criteria" that states: "The activity should not lead to more facilities and more infrastructure." More on this topic later as it comes before the council.

Other: A team relay foot race is scheduled for July 16 or 17 on the High Country Pathway. 80 teams of runners will participate, although the runners tend to run individually rather than in large numbers together. The chairman referred this issue to the Standards and Limitations Committee for further review.

Wildlife Division (Brian Mastenbrook):

- Deer numbers similar to last year for gun and bow season;
- Elk season had two hunts: 12-day early hunt in the fall, 10 day-late hunt in December;

- For the late hunt: 50 permits issued, 33 of 35 antlerless permits were filled; 13 of 15 "any elk" permits were filled, and 5 or 6 animals had 6x6 points, indicating that they were 5 ½ years old or older;
- Higher hunter success than normal; kill overall, numbers and distribution, was about what was expected, fewer outliers;
- Elk survey in progress in mid-January. At time of AC meeting, had flown in helicopter for four days so far; will fly five more days whenever there is good weather, and
- Data compiled in survey will set number of permits for next two years: survey results can be used to adjust dates of the season, numbers, boundaries, but changes must be supported by data.

Fisheries Division (Tim Cwalinski):

- Winter ice can kill juvenile fish populations, resulting in gaps in fish populations in successive seasons. The brook and brown trout monitored in 2015 were of good size and numbers, indicating that the previous winter did not kill them.
- Steelhead can now travel upriver in the Pigeon because the SOM dam is gone; this may result in competition for brook and brown trout.
- An informal survey reveals that zebra and quagga mussels, and milfoil, are in other inland lakes around the perimeter of the PRCSF, but so far are not yet in the forest. Likewise, didymo ("rock snot") and New Zealand mud snails are in the St. Mary's River and Pere Marquette, but not yet in PRCSF. Cleaning equipment, boats and waders after every use is an effective preventive measure.
- Pickerel Lake and the sinkhole lakes are annual fish stocking locations.

Recreation (Kelly Kinser):

- Background work on the PRD recreation management plan is 90% complete; 2/4/16 meeting with "co-management team" to determine what else is needed as background information before preliminary plan can be built by staff. Members requested that they be invited to review and participate in the process at all stages.

- PRD wants to improve existing campground bulletin boards to educate forest users about what's permitted and what's not. Also hopes to put up more "Open to horses" signs.

Old Business:

The Nominating Committee recommended, and members voted unanimously, that John Walters be re-appointed as chair and Enrique Campa as vice-chair. The chairman then proposed, and the council approved, the following committee chair appointments:

- Standards & Limitations: Pete Gustafson
- Wildlife: Drew Youngdyke
- Aquatics: Lisha Ramsdell
- Education & Engagement: Brad Garmon
- Roads, Trails, Forest Access: Randy Keen
- Oil & Gas: Paul Rose

Song of the Morning Dam removal: Chairman Walters gave a comprehensive presentation on the Song of the Morning Dam removal, supported by large glossy photographs, beginning with his and his wife's discovery of the spill, through litigation, up to the recent installation of the timber bridge across the river.

New Business:

Elk Response Study: Michigan is the only eastern state that can claim 31 years of sustained elk hunting and viewing.

Recreational use on public lands, sometimes competing recreational uses, is a growing issue, and forest managers increasingly must try to minimize wildlife disturbance by recreational users. Over the past 20 years, elk use of areas outside the historic elk range has increased, leading the herd to migrate from public to private land. This can result in reduced public viewing opportunities, challenges to continued use of hunting to manage elk, and increased elk-human conflict.

Rique Campa outlined a study project, due to start in February, 2016 and run through 2018, to document and better understand the interaction between PRCSF's elk herd and recreational users, chiefly horseback and bike

riders, in and near the forest. The study will monitor disturbance factors that impact the herd and document how the herd migrates and responds to those factors. It was first proposed 10 years ago and was funded by the DNR last year. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation will partner with the DNR and the MSU Department of Fisheries and Wildlife in the study.