

LANDOWNER-LESSEE/SPORTSMAN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Minutes of Regular Meeting

Saturday, January 25, 2020

Arizona Game and Fish Department Headquarters - Phoenix

Committee Members Present

Steve Carmickle, OHV-Sportsmen Representative
Joe King, Livestock Grower
Sanford Cohen, OHV-Sportsmen Representative
Pat Headington, Sportsmen Representative
Jim Lawrence, Sportsmen Representative
Jim O'Haco, Livestock Grower
Dan Rodriguez, Livestock Grower
Maile Adler, Bureau of Land Management
Steve Rusiecki, Arizona State Land Department
Don Larsen, Arizona Game and Fish Department

Committee Members Absent

Kurt Bahti, Sportsmen Representative
Darcy Ely, Livestock Grower
Jack Mann, Livestock Grower
John Titre, United States Forest Service

Others Present

Bill Brake, Arizona Game and Fish Commission
Ty Gray, Arizona Game and Fish Department Director
Steve Clark, Arizona Elk Society
John Gebhart, Mule Deer Foundation Regional Director
Lucas Olson, Cooperative Mule Deer Biologist
Megan McWard, Partner Biologist
Kyle Dutro, Landowner Relations Program, AGFD
JD Eddy, Landowner Relations Program, AGFD
Troy Christensen, Landowner Relations Program, AGFD

Meeting Notes

The Landowner-Lessee/Sportsman Relations Committee (Committee or LLSRC) meeting was called to order at 9:00 a.m. Roundtable introductions were completed. The minutes from the last 2 meetings were approved.

Commissioner's Comments

Commissioner Brake thanked the Committee members for attending and expressed that this is a very important committee. He stated that it is extremely important to maintain good working relationships between the agricultural community, sportsmen/recreationists, and the land management agencies. He spoke of his own experiences as a rancher partnering on ranch

improvements, and he explained how partnering with farmers and ranchers is an efficient way to get wildlife habitat improvements accomplished. In relation to that, he was happy to inform the Committee that the Habitat Partnership Committee (HPC) will soon be delegating \$2.5 million amongst many cooperators for mutually-beneficial project proposals. Due to the many common goals, it is important for the agricultural community and sportsmen/recreationists to be allies. As examples, the commissioner mentioned a couple bills at the legislature. One proposing to meter wells would create direct problems for ranchers and hurt wildlife by making it difficult for ranchers to leave waters turned on when livestock were not present in pastures. This could harm the good working relationships which have developed between the agricultural community, sportsmen, and the department. Another bill meant to reduce issues of hunters inhibiting livestock from accessing ranch waters was worded in such a poor manner that it could have the unintended consequence of totally eliminating hunting around water. Commissioner Brake said communication between sportsmen and ranchers/farmers is very important, and he would like to see this committee grow to include more representatives from each group.

Updates from Land Management Agencies

Steve Rusiecki provided an update from the Arizona State Land Department (ASLD). He informed the Committee of some personnel changes: Mike McIntire left the agency, and recruiting is underway to fill that resource area manager position in southeastern Arizona, as well as the one in northwestern Arizona, which Chris Lowman is currently doing double duty to cover. Mr. Rusiecki said the agency is introducing an electronic system and simplifying the grazing lessee questionnaires, which should speed up that process. He informed the Committee of multi-agency efforts to speed up archaeological clearances. The ASLD is pursuing grant funds to make improvements at Desert Wells Multi-Use Area, protect cultural sites, and address invasive weeds. He mentioned that ASLD has been addressing unauthorized locks on gates, which would be discussed in more detail later in the meeting.

Maile Adler provided an update from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). She informed the Committee that Kathryn Lloyd was hired on as the new Travel and Transportation Management Program Lead for BLM Arizona and will be taking over as the Access Coordinator. Ms. Adler said, as part of its efforts to implement the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act, the BLM is seeking public assistance in nominating lands managed by the agency on which the public is allowed to hunt, fish, or use the land for other recreational purposes, but to which there is no legal public access or where access is significantly restricted. She said recommendations from the public will aid the BLM in creating a report to Congress that provides options for reasonably providing access to such lands, such as by acquiring an easement, right-of-way or fee title from a willing owner. The public nomination period to identify parcels for inclusion on the BLM's priority list will close on Saturday, February 29. Public nominations will be accepted via the BLM's ePlanning website. The BLM plans to post its first priority list by Thursday, March 12. Ms. Adler also informed the Committee that the Recreational Shooting Sports Project has made it through the Environmental Assessment process, clearing the way for the construction and operation of five recreational shooting sites to be built on public lands near the Phoenix metro area. The sites will provide active management, enhanced access, and increased safety for shooting sports enthusiasts and

other public land users. Development of the first site will begin this spring. She cautioned that temporary closures may be necessary during construction.

No representatives from the United States Forest Service (USFS) were present.

Landowner Relations Program Updates/Current Issues

Don Larsen gave an update on the Habitat Enhancement and Landowner Relations Program (LRP). He said LRP has 77 active access agreements, which has opened access to 4,547 million acres of private and landlocked federal and State Trust land representing an increase of 18,140 acres in 2019.. Six of these are with new cooperators. Last year, LRP enhanced over 926,000 acres of habitat. LRP continues to pursue grants and new partnerships pretty aggressively. An application was submitted for a 5th Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant of \$2.3 million - our previous RCPP projects resulted in \$6.6 million of federal funding which is leveraged with multiple partners for landscape-level habitat improvements in various parts of the state. LRP recently applied for another Voluntary Public Access Program grant - if awarded, this will be another \$2 million to use for projects on ranches which provide access across their private property. Mr. Larsen informed the Committee of a new department strategy being implemented which puts a 5-year/\$5 million focus on cooperative landscape-level habitat improvements meant to increase game populations in game management unit 18A. If successful, this method will be used to enhance other parts of the state in the future. Kyle Distro added that the USFW Partners Program has granted \$200,000 for improvements to wildlife migration corridors. Discussion followed regarding the importance of projects being mutually beneficial and getting more ranchers around the state informed and involved. Commissioner Brake again stressed the importance of good working relationships between the agricultural community, sportsmen/recreationists, and agencies. Troy Christensen gave an update on the Landowner Respect Program, which has over 400 farms/ranches participating. He reported that 39 Adopt-A-Ranch projects were completed in 2019. Various outreach efforts are being used to try to bring even more ranchers and volunteers into the programs. Dan Rodriguez offered that many ranchers are not members of ACGA and suggested that LRP attend various county cattle grower association meetings to make new contacts.

Wildlife Migration Corridors

Lucas Olson, Cooperative Mule Deer Biologist, gave a presentation on efforts to identify, prioritize, and improve wildlife migration corridors. Maintaining migration corridors is very important for wildlife's survival in the face of the growing human population and expanding development. The research modeling is useful in identifying important areas to enhance habitat and mitigate issues. The modeling can help LRP access additional funding sources to use for cooperative habitat improvement projects.

Commission Sponsored Committees Review

Director Ty Gray informed the Committee that all of the AGFD Commission-sponsored committees are undergoing an efficiency and process improvement review. Consistent with the principles of the Arizona Management System and the Commission's priority to continuously review and improve processes, the Department will be evaluating the role, function and value of the committees, including the LLSRC. Information is being gathered to determine if each

committee should be kept, transformed, or possibly even discontinued. Don Larsen explained that a variety of information is being requested; much of it being about the origin, establishment, structure, membership, attendance, etc. There are also questions which LRP could use the committee members' input on. Sanford Cohen admitted that the LLSRC had morphed since its origin in 1987. In regards to a question about the accomplishments and successes of the committee, Joe King mentioned that that would be difficult to measure for the LLSRC. Commissioner Brake and various Committee members expressed that the LLSRC provides an important venue of getting various groups together to discuss access issues. Pat Headington suggested that there ought to be more representation from the farming community. The Committee debated about whether or not it would be beneficial to develop a charter or mission statement. Any members, who would like to provide input for the assessment, should email their ideas/suggestions to Troy Christensen at tchristensen@azgfd.gov.

Access to AZ State Trust lands

Steve Rusiecki and Don Larsen informed the Committee of progress being made addressing the illegally locked gates on State Trust land around the state. Over 100 locked gates have been reported; however, ground truthing is still needed to confirm that all of them are actually on State Trust land. As each location is being addressed, staff find out why it was originally locked and if issues still exist - Mr Rusiecki mentioned one example where the lessee didn't even know why the gate had always been locked and he willingly removed the lock. At sites where issues exist, staff from both agencies work with the lessee to determine if something can be done to correct the problem and reopen access. If a particular gate is unimportant for public vehicular access, a process is followed to authorize the locking of that gate. Commissioner Brake added that it is important to show the public that the agencies and ranchers are working on this. Steve Clark suggested that people might be more accepting of a gate being locked if they knew the reasons; there should be outreach regarding why a lessee might need to lock a gate. Dan Rodriguez agreed that education could help; as an example, he said the installation of Respect Program signs informing dove hunters to not obstruct livestock from getting water was quite effective for the ranches in Mohave County. Commissioner Brake mentioned the series of Department videos which highlight how the efforts of ranchers and farmers benefit wildlife through improvements made to private, state, and federal lands and spreads the message of how respect and proper etiquette helps keep public access open. Mr. Larsen asked the Committee to help spread the word that AGFD and ASLD are making progress resolving unauthorized locked gates on ASTL, but that it will require time.

Identification of Current Issues and Possible Solutions

Jim O'Haco told the Committee about how heavy snow in November resulted in the closure of the national forest right before the general elk season putting the pressure of all the hunters on the O'Haco and Aja Ranches. If there had been earlier notice from the USFS, maybe some kind of emergency temporary closure to vehicles could have been enacted to protect the two ranches from so much road damage. Steve Clark told Mr. O'Haco that the sportsmen groups might be able to help with road repairs. There was discussion about how to possibly avoid or deal with this type of problem in the future. This issue led to some members mentioning the importance of USFS sending a representative to these meetings. Dan Rodriguez suggested that AGFD work

with the ranchers in Coconino County regarding hunting on waters - it's better to address the problems cooperatively (as was done in Mohave County) than through legislation. Commissioner Brake said that there had been a lot of good communication and discussion regarding various issues during this meeting, but he suggested that in the future the Committee might want to consider picking a certain issue and developing specific ideas for addressing that issue. As an example, the Committee could come up with specific ways to educate hunters regarding how game cameras can adversely impact livestock, or inform the public on why some roads get closed to vehicular access.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will likely be scheduled in conjunction with the ACGA convention - the convention itself is scheduled for July 16-18 at We-Ko-Pa Casino/Resort in Fountain Hills. Committee members will be informed as details develop.

Action Items:

1. Email Committee members to request input on specific committee review assessment questions (LRP staff and all)
2. Help spread the word that AGFD and ASLD are making progress addressing unauthorized locked gates on ASTL, but that it will require time (All)
3. Contact USFS to get more consistent agency representation at the LLSRC meetings (LRP staff)
4. Distribute meeting minutes (LRP staff)

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