

**RANGELAND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
**Wednesday May 1, 2024**  
**9:00 AM-2:00 PM**

**PRESENT**

***Members:***

*Chair, Diane Ahlgren*  
*Member, Leah Lewis*  
*Member, Sigurd Jensen*  
*Member, Jim Anderson*  
*Member, Ron Devlin*  
*Advisory Member, Raylee Honeycutt*  
*Advisory Member, Marissa Sather*  
*Advisory Member, Reyer Rens*  
*Advisory Member, Sean Heinert*  
*Advisory Member, Rachel Frost*  
*Advisory Member, Kelvin Johnson*  
*Advisory Member, Becca Boslough-King*

***Staff:***

*Stacey Barta, DNRC State Rangeland Resources Program Coordinator*  
*Shantell Frame-Martin, DNRC Rangeland Resource Program Specialist*

***Public:***

*None present.*

**Call to Order**

Chair Diane Ahlgren called the meeting to order at 9:05 am. Everyone in attendance introduced themselves.

Diane asked if there was a motion to approve the meeting minutes from the February \_\_\_\_, 2023, meeting. Sigurd motioned to approve the minutes as submitted and Leah seconded. No discussion, motion carried.

**NEW BUISNESS:**

Stacey requested business items be addressed first due to people needing to be done with the meeting by 10:00. Diane asked for discussion on the Rangeland Improvement Loan Program interest rate. Jim Anderson asked Stacey how many applications were submitted for 2023-2024, Stacey responded that there had only been one, and with that Jim recommended that the rate stay the same to encourage applicants. Sigurd Jensen and Leah Lewis agreed. Diane also agreed with that recommendation and noted that she felt the current rate is sufficient. Diane asked for a motion to leave the interest rate, Jim made the motion to leave the rates as is and Sigurd seconded. No discussion and motion passes. The recommendation will be taken to the Director for final approval.

Jim asked Stacey what the current loan balances are for the Rangeland Improvement Loan Program, \$313,000 outstanding, \$341,000 available for loans.

Diane asked for the committee to review the draft Bylaws. Stacey noted that the RRC has never had Bylaws in their existence. At the February meeting these were presented and outline terms, absences, etc. and gives the RRC a foundation to work off for the committee. Diane called for a motion to approve the Bylaws as presented. Jim made the motion and Ron seconded. No discussion, motion passes. This is the first Bylaws that the RRC has ever had in its 40-year existence.

Diane then asked for Coordinator Updates. Stacey outline of what she's been doing. She attended the Private Lands Biologists meeting in Lewistown in early April. Stacey also updated the group on the Working Lands Internship interns schedules for the summer. Stacey is also working on updating the Section 8 Grazing MOU. Stacey asked Shantell to provide an update and she echoed that she has been helping Stacey with logistics on the 406 Grazing Academy and Leopold Tour this summer. Shantell also shared that the application for the Western SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research Education) grant for \$100,000 was awarded to help with costs for the 406 Grazing Academy.

Diane asked for a budget update and Stacey shared that the budget is right on target and spending is the same as it was last year at this time. Stacey noted that the budget planning process has started and that the committee should be thinking about any special items they'd like included in the budget. Jim asked about the logistics of the SARE Grant and how it will impact the budget; Stacey said that it's a 3 year grant and that in the future the grant will help significantly reduce the cost to register for those wanting to participate.

Diane called for committee members' updates.

Sigurd told the committee that he's been calving and not much else going on.

Leah informed the group that they had their FS meetings last week and asked Sean Heinert questions about their allotments. A short discussion ensued. Leah is also sorting monarch butterfly seed and planting cover crops.

Jim attended his first Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) meeting where they reviewed the conservation easements and leases. He noted that there are federal level proposed changes to sage grouse management and recommended that anyone that has concerns about that to submit comments regarding the proposed changes. Jim mentioned that it's still very dry in his area.

#### Rachel-MSU (Dan Scott)

Informed the committee that Bach Saul is retiring in December. Rachel discussed the logistics and changes that the university undergoes before they hire replacement for professors. MSU is experiencing student growth and the College of Ag is the largest growing college at MSU. Stacey asked about the number of Range Ecology students; Rachel mentioned that she wasn't exactly sure but had been about 30 something students.

### Reyer-BLM

Noted that BLM is waiting for the Public Lands rule to be rolled out and added to the federal register. BLM has released a drought tracker tool that they are using and will not have a public facing to it. Reyer also mentioned that there is a lot of traction for flexible grazing permits and geospatial representation of condition of all public lands including BLM.

### Sean-FS

Provided FS updates that include published a few chapters on unauthorized trespass use/excess use and the big change with that is the fee change from \$1 to \$24/head. FS is also in a hiring pause and they are evaluating their hiring needs.

### Kelvin-FWP

Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) has 10 projects that they are going to bring before the commission this year. They would like to come to the commission 500,000 acres instead of the 10 projects. Fiscal year ends June 30 so there is the potential for additional projects for this either this summer or this fall for conservation easement program. Reported success on Spotted Dog with virtual fencing. Going out with an EA to expand grazing on that project as well as a water development. FWP is getting involved with virtual technology on a ranch in E.MT to assist with upland game bird management—the producers are thinking about a corral of some sorts and this would be the first time doing something like that. FWP has a new plant ecologist, Jarrett Payne from MSU. Jarrett has been working on a lot of wildlife management areas with 15-20 acre polygons to get a current pulse on condition and trend of landscape health.

### Raylee- MT Stockgrowers

Producer Profitability Initiative-Improving tax climate. gov't programs, eliminate barriers for young/beginning producers, labor, mentorships. Will roll out findings for that at the mid-year meeting. MSGA is also trying to be more creative with helping people gain access to land which continues to be one of the biggest challenges to producers. In the first 10 session there have been almost 600 people attend. MSGA is intervening in potential federal/state lawsuit with predator trapping/snaring because it impacts agriculture as predator control component. Diane asked the question regarding the state going after water rights from a private well that has been piped to state lands and Raylee clarified there are two separate issues including HB286 which was successful in removing state trust lands from water rights claims. The other issue is Schutter vs. State of MT where state trust lands did object to a water right and was awarded the right by water court and supreme court awarded that portion of the water right to the state of Montana unanimously. These instances will be case-by-case basis.

### Marissa- USFWS

Haven't heard anything about sage grouse lately. She noted the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances program to help property owners. That is a set of voluntary practices to enroll in-anyone can go through that process and obtain a certificate to ensure that any threats on your property to sage grouse are being addressed and afterwards you get a cert. After cert. is issued, you have

regulatory assurances if the species does get listed that you won't have any further changes required on your private property. She also noted "Safe Harbor" and Candidate Conservation Agreement is going to be combined. She also noted that the Pinion Jay is considered to be listed. USFWS is really trying to support ranchers and entities that support ranchers especially when it comes to land access in particular expiring CRP parcels in E. MT. Also working on wildlife friendly fencing for migrations, invasive grass control, and upland game bird management. Also trying to hire a Private Lands biologist in RSA's territory in E. MT—partnering with RSA and Pheasant's Forever to fund this position.

#### Becca-MACD

Spring board meeting June 11-13 in Helena and area meetings last week September/first week in October—these are on their website. Convention is in Great Falls, November 19-20. Ranching for Rivers (R4R) program has 4 projects in 1<sup>st</sup> contract and 3 projects in initial stages and 2 contracts currently open. Brenna Reitman manages that program and she can be contacted with questions. Stacey also noted that the Rangeland Resource Program is a part of R4R and that her and Shantell are working with Brenna to put on a riparian workshop in Big Timber on July 10. Details will be coming soon.

#### Mark-DRNC CARDD

Noted that agencies are working in their executive planning processes right now; several of the policy bills that DNRC has put through have made it to the Governor's Office and the next steps are to take to the Environmental Quality Council and see what the legislature thinks. He and Stacey have been working to carve the budget out as its own entity for the program. One of the policy bills is to transfer MSGOT as an administrative attachment from the Governor's Office to DNRC. The way it is setup now is that the chair is the Governor's Natural Resource Advisor, if transferred to DNRC, the chair could be selected from the members of that committee. Also proposed is reform to irrigation district financing options for funding/loans. Also, notable items proposed are to clean up conservation district law to eliminate the surety bond, and procurement limits to sync with federal and state funding limits for CDs to help eliminate audit issues, and to allow special districts to be attached to CDs as an "administrative attachment" of sorts.

Leah mentioned the *Montana Quarterly* had an interesting article on gravel pits and recommended that information be shared in the 406 Rangelands Newsletter.

#### Meeting Dates:

July 17-Virtual

Stacey will ask John Hollenback to host the meeting in the fall.

#### Public Comment

No public comment.

#### ADJOURN

Diane asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ron made the motion and Sigurd seconded. No discussion and the motion carried. Meeting adjourned at 10:35 am.