

Lincoln County Firesafe Council Meeting Notes

Location: Libby Fire Department (in person) and Microsoft Teams Conference Call (virtual)

Date: September 21st, 2023

Time: 9:00 AM – 11:30 AM

Note Taker: Jacob Jeresek

In Attendance: Jacob Jeresek, Logan Sandman, Doug Turman, Bob Castaneda, Ed Levert, Trevor Peeling, Dustin Webb, Tyson Piper, Jeremy Rank, Clyde Miller, Marcel Getz, Murphy McGowan, Cory Farmer, Jennifer Nelson, Brian Ressel, Chrissy Day, Matt Chumbley, Brent Teske, Ally Talbot, Seth Carbonari, Sam Martin, Nikia Hernandez, and RJ McDole.

***Red font indicates action items.**

New/Old Business:

- Kootenai Forest Stakeholder Collaborative Grant for Fire Prevention (Ed Levert, Bob Castaneda)
 - Kootenai Forest Stakeholder Coalition (KFSC) received a collaborative grant through Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). The objective of the grant is to enhance media information for carrying out goals identified within the Montana Forest Action Plan (MFAP) and Lincoln County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The grant is for \$5,000 and expires in June 2024. The grant can be used for brochures, costs of meetings, etc. Some ideas brainstormed at the meeting consisted of placing Firewise brochures in newspapers, placing advertisements on radio stations, and paying for a venue to hold a community Firewise meeting. **If you have any ideas or needs that meet these criteria, reach out to Bob Castaneda at bcast@frontier.com.**
- Forestry Fair 9/22 (Jennifer, Logan, Jeremy, KFSC)
 - Forestry Fair is Friday September 22, 2023 from 2pm to 5pm at River Front Park. Lincoln County, Forest Service, DNRC, and KFSC will be there. There is free beer and music along with food vendors. The Fair received a lot of donations for raffles.
- Burning Season Update/Fall Burning Coordination Within the LOBCA (All, Dustin)
 - Lincoln County and associated grants produced 300 acres of piles in the Clay Banks area on the Stephens property, 10 acres of piles by the airport, the Bowen Hill area has a lot of piles and Jennifer requests this area be the priority, and Steve has written a few burn permits for decadent logging piles; Stimson has piles in Brush Creek, properties surrounding Operable Unit 3 (OU3), and south of Libby; The DNRC has a few piles in the Clay Banks area and 200 acres of piles in the Crazy Man area; the Forest Service has 60 acres of piles and 17 landings in the Flower Creek area and 30 acres of piles and 6 landings in the Hoodoo area.
 - Major burners will follow the same approval process for burns by submitting planned burns into the Montana Idaho Airshed Group database for review and approval by the Department of Environmental Quality and State. A question was raised as to whether there is a limit on how much can be burned on any given day. The answer is the environmental agencies use atmospheric conditions and forecasts to determine what and how much to approve on any given day. Another question was raised if there would be added flexibilities being Libby was removed as a non-attainment area for PM2.5. The answer is Lincoln County Health Department is waiting further guidance from the State on mitigations and requirements as to what the non-attainment removal means for implementing air quality standards in Libby.

- Subdivision Concerns and the Bull Lake Estates Structure/Wildland Fire (Clyde)
 - On August 19, 2023 at 4:30am, Bull Lake Fire Department was notified of a structure fire in Bull Lake Estates. Since the merger of Troy and Libby Dispatch, there have been issues with departments receiving pages for emergencies. As a result, Clyde had to make phone calls to ensure engines were responding due to no tones coming through and further delaying response. The response time to Bull Lake Estates is longer than other areas in their fire protection area and upon arrival, the structure was fully involved and spreading to the wildlands in all directions. Bull Lake Fire Department requested assistance from the Forest Service and focused on the wildland portion of the fire until the Forest Service arrived.
 - The root of the issue is fire departments have been pushing for the Lincoln County Subdivision Regulations to be more accurate, definitive, and have some teeth to hold developers accountable for what is approved. Also, enforcement of the subdivision regulations is an issue. Additionally, fire departments are not notified of new subdivisions and as the signee on the subdivision approval representing the fire protection agency, becomes an issue. If developers create Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions with Firewise principles in mind for subdivisions and a homeowner's associations enforce these, some of these issues can be mitigated for individual subdivisions. Clyde had a meeting with the Lincoln County Commissioners to discuss this issue on the morning of the fire but had to cancel as result of the fire.
 - The Lincoln County Subdivision Regulations are up for review again and there is a desire to have the Firesafe Council involved in this process. Jennifer proposed that the Firesafe Council take on this task this coming year. There was also discussion surrounding recent trends in homeowner insurance companies dropping coverage for individuals in forested areas. There was a proposal to add an insurance company representative to the Firesafe Council. **Jennifer will reach out to Kevin Peck to see if he would like to join the Council.**
- Fire Season Wrap Up (All)
 - The Kootenai National Forest has had 100 fires to date this season. The only fire that escaped initial attack was the East Fork fire in the Fortine area. Conditions were ripe for an above average fire season this year but several factors helped the success locally such as resources being largely available with a far below average season nationally.
 - The DNRC has had 20 fires to date this season with the Gravel Pit fire being the only one to escape initial attack. Success this year is attributed to a recent bill passed in the 2023 legislative session which provided money to the DNRC to hire two exclusive use handcrews and additional aircraft including scoopers, helicopters, and an IAA platform for infrared detection. Because of the rush to implement these contracts, there is hope next year that modifications can be made to allow the handcrews to work on Forest Service fires.
- Trojan Defense Project Overview and Scoping (Three Rivers Ranger District)
 - Due to recent litigation, the Three Rivers Ranger District is looking for a project within the Kootenai Complex Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) landscape, a priority area identified within the Lincoln County CWPP, and an area that doesn't have endangered species issues. The Trojan Defense project fits these criteria and is located south and west of Troy beginning around the airport and moving south to Iron Creek. This project will tie in the Sparring Bulls and Starry Goat projects. The project area is 3,900 acres with a mix of Forest Service, DNRC, Stimson, and private land ownership within. Of this total project area, only 2,200 acres is National Forest System lands. The project is in the development phase and tentatively proposes 900 acres of commercial harvest with an additional 800 acres of non-commercial fuels treatments. Additionally, there will be infrastructure improvements to existing roads and potentially 6 miles of road construction mainly in the McConnell Mountain area. The goals of the project are to reduce fuels, trend species towards fire resilient species, and improve fire response. Scoping for this project is

anticipated soon with the hope to have a signed decision in June and implementation beginning shortly after.

- Expected issues with the project surround road construction and impacts to old growth. However, many of the old growth areas no longer qualify as old growth due to insects and disease decimating these stands. The district is looking at a strong public information campaign including Facebook, having a booth at the Troy Apple Festival on September 29th, and holding a public meeting on October 5th. Additionally, the Regional Office recently flew a drone over the project area capturing images and video displaying existing conditions.
- **The district is requesting someone from the Firesafe Council to sit in the booth at the Troy Apple Fest. The Firesafe Council will have a booth at the festival and will set theirs up next to the Forest Service booth.**
- New Agency Projects (Forest Service, DNRC, NRCS, Lincoln County, Timber Companies)
 - The Lincoln County J Niels Bark Beetle grant will begin this October consisting of 16 acres west of the Haul Road.
 - The DNRC is working on awarding timber sales in the Canyon Creek and Cripple Horse Creek areas. They are also in the preliminary evaluations for the 8% area of the Haul Road. The McMillan project is tied up with the Ripley project litigation and if there is no resolution soon, the DNRC may look at doing something different.
 - Stimson is working in the Tepee Creek and Rabbit O'Brien areas with work beginning soon in the Freeman Ridge area.
 - Stimson will be issuing a press release soon about the Plummer Mill downsizing 2/3 of the workforce due to lack of small diameter wood.
 - The Rexford and Fortine Ranger District recently completed a Resource Advisory Council project which identified and developed fill sites for engines in five areas. This may be an option for others in the County to assist in fire suppression and prescribed fire needs.
- Grant Updates and Planned Grant Applications (NRCS, Lincoln County, DNRC)
 - The \$500,000 awarded within the Island Lake MFAP grant has been obligated. This accomplishes three miles of shaded fuel breaks on the west edge of Island Lake on Green Diamond lands, 25 acres of fuels reduction on Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks lands, 275 acres of fuels reduction on private lands, and two miles of shaded fuel breaks completed by the DNRC fuels crew. During this process, there was more demand than money and the DNRC put in a request for additional funds. All projects within this grant need to be completed by November 30, 2025.
 - The Community Wildfire Defense Grant funds the DNRC fuels crew and landowner fuels reduction reimbursements. The DNRC fuels program is working on hiring positions with the program beginning in October.
 - The DNRC applied for a MFAP grant in the Bull Lake area. Within the Northwest Land Office, this was the second priority project submitted this round.
 - The DNRC is working on Hazardous Fuels Reduction Grants in the Barnaby Lake and Othorp Lake areas.
 - The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has three Targeted Implementation Plan grant areas including Fire Adapted Fortine South, Edna Creek, and Glen Lake. This year NRCS put out \$2 million in contracts. There is demand to do more but staff capacity is the limiting factor. Fire Adapted Fortine South funded every landowner that applied this year. Edna Creek is in the final year of funding with quite a few landowners signing up. Glen Lake funded a few landowners this year.
 - Lincoln County closed out the Kootenai Forests to Rivers Initiative grant this spring and revisited some older grants. The Bark Beetle grant will finish this year. Western States consists of \$262,000 with outreach occurring this year and project properties being identified. This grant expires in May of 2025.

- Joint Chief's Update (Brian and Gary)
 - NRCS Joint Chiefs work is picking up in the Clay Banks area with 300 acres under agreement. This year, quite a few landowners in the Parmenter Creek area signed up. Joint Chief's is entering the final year of funding with quite a few landowners signing up for work next year.
 - The Forest Service recently completed all Joint Chief's work within the Hoodoo project area. Gary Kedish recently retired from the Forest Service.
- Kootenai Complex Update (Nikia)
 - Within the Kootenai Complex WCS landscape, the Kootenai National Forest accomplished 12,070 acres this year with 6,050 of those acres funded by WCS. The Kootenai National Forest, through the WCS landscape, committed to treating 7,200 acres above and beyond base targets over three years. To date, 7,500 acres have been treated exceeding the commitment in merely two years. Additionally, this year, \$1.8 million has been awarded in 22 individual contracts. Of these contracts, 16 unique contractors received awards with most of those being local contractors. In addition, there is the potential for another 500-600 acres that may be awarded in contracts this fiscal year. This year, the Kootenai has accomplished over 16,000 acres across the entire forest.
 - Nikia asked for help from the Firesafe Council to help tell the story for the Kootenai National Forest. Litigation is hampering the Forest Service and there's a perception in the community that if we're not selling timber, we're not doing anything on the forest. Across the Forest, there are 16 timber sales that would treat 15,000 acres producing 280,000 CCF or 140 million board feet of timber already prepped but unable to advertise due to litigation or completing a Forest Plan Amendment to identify Bears Outside Recovery Zones because of the Ripley litigation. Some of these sales have been sitting long enough that units will need remarked and identified. Additionally, there are 5 timber sales including a Good Neighbor Authority timber sale that are under contract but stopped due to the above issues. Conversely, there are 30 active timber sales under contract producing 445,000 CCF or 238 million board feet across the Forest that is not under litigation. Additionally, timber is just one program of the Forest Service and other programs continue to accomplish work that often goes unrecognized.

Round Robin:

- October is the quarterly all lands project meeting. **All agencies come prepared to present any new projects or major project updates to agency representatives, line officers, and administrators.**
- During the October meeting, there will be a discussion on the Lincoln County Subdivision Regulations Revision and Firesafe Input. **Jennifer will invite Jesse Haag to the October meeting.**
- Jacob forwarded a grant opportunity for Slip-on Tanks. **The grant application deadline is October 9, 2023 at 9:00am Eastern Standard Time.**
- Bob Castaneda went to the OU3 Jackson public meeting. With all the fuels reduction work either occurring or proposed to occur on Forest Service, State, and private lands, he encouraged the Firesafe Council to issue a letter to WR Grace urging them to treat their lands.
- Considering the Greater Red Lodge project ruling and Carbon County CWPP Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) delineation, there is concern from the Forest Service Regional Office on Lincoln County's CWPP WUI delineation particularly around undeveloped private lands. **Jacob will schedule a meeting in October with the CWPP core team and Regional Office leadership to discuss these concerns.**

Adjourned