

Lincoln County Firesafe Council Meeting Notes

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

Date: December 21st, 2023

Time: 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Note Taker: Jacob Jeresek

In Attendance: Jacob Jeresek, Steve Lauer, Jeremy Rank, Bob Castaneda, Ed Levert, Doug Turman, Tyson Piper, Murphy McGowan, Jennifer Nelson, Dustin Webb, Cory Farmer, Brian Ressel, Vicki Stephens, Nikia Hernandez, and Dean Whitney

*Red font indicates action items.

New/Old Business:

- Fire Adapted Kootenai Workshop (Jennifer, Jacob, Bob, and Ed)
 - The Kootenai Forest Stakeholder Coalition (KFSC) received a \$5000 collaborative grant through the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) with an emphasis on public education. The KFSC will be applying for an extension of 1-year to utilize the funds allocated in this grant.
 - An idea brainstormed to utilize these funds is to host a 1-day fire adapted workshop in possibly Libby and Eureka. With new information and opportunities, the time is ripe to hold these workshops. The workshop would present information on the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, grant opportunities to landowners in the area, potential homeowner's insurance issues, etc. There is a desire to host these workshops in May 2024 during Wildfire Awareness month.
 - A subcommittee was established to work with Bob Castaneda and Ed Levert coordinating these workshops. Subcommittee members include Jennifer Nelson, Jeremy Rank, Dewayne Burgess, Brian Ressel, and an insurance representative.
 - Bob requested the Lincoln County Firesafe Council to provide a letter of support for the workshop for KFSC to attach to the grant extension application. Jacob will provide this letter by early January. Jennifer will also secure a letter of support from the Lincoln County Commissioners.
- Illegal Burning Outside of the LOBCA (Dustin)
 - Within the Libby Outdoor Burning Control Area (LOBCA), the Lincoln County Department of Environmental Health can manage and enforce illegal outdoor burning. However, outside of the LOBCA, the question was raised as to who enforces illegal outdoor burning. Both the Forest Service and DNRC respond to illegal outdoor burns from a wildfire response perspective but do not have authority to enforce illegal burning. This resides with either the County or State. This December, there have been several reports of illegal outdoor burning in the Yaak and Island Lake areas. Doug pointed out to the group that winter burning is allowed if the burner has Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) approval. It is unclear how this approval process works, and education needs to occur for people to burn legally outside of open burning seasons. Dustin will reach out to DEQ to determine the approval process for landowners. Dustin will also investigate more as to who has the enforcement authority for illegal outdoor burns outside of the LOBCA.

- Potential Operational Delineations (PODs) Phase 2 (Jacob)
 - The Kootenai National Forest was selected to complete PODS Phase 2 in 2024. This effort will focus on identifying the values within the PODS identified this past year during Phase 1. There will be workshops like Phase 1 in 2024. At this time, exact dates are unknown when this effort will occur in 2024.
- Welcome Murphy McGowan (Jeremy and Murphy)
 - Murphy McGowan was hired by the DNRC Northwest Land Office to manage all wildfire defense grants offered by the DNRC. Murphy will manage Community Wildfire Defense Grants (CWDG), Western States, Montana Forest Action Plan (MFAP), Landscape Restoration, and Hazardous Fuels grants. Murphy's area of responsibility includes the Kalispell Unit, Libby Unit, Plains Unit, Stillwater State Forest, and Swan State Forest. Currently, there are approximately 40 active grants, and he will also assist with applying for new grants.
- New Agency Projects (Forest Service, DNRC, NRCS, Lincoln County, Timber Companies)
 - The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) submitted a new application for a Targeted Implementation Plan area called Libby Surround Phase 2. This area will incorporate all lands included within the Libby Surround Joint Chief's project. With Joint Chief's expiring in 2024 and the heavy interest by landowners to complete work, this area was selected. If awarded, funds will be available in 2025 and would be available for three years. NRCS is hoping to hear an answer this spring.
 - Chad Benson signed a Categorical Exclusion (CE) to amend the Kootenai National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan to include Bears Outside Recovery Zone management as a result of the Ripley project ruling. Forest officials are unsure if the CE will be litigated or if litigants will wait to go after individual projects.
 - As a result of a Presidential Executive Order signed on Earth Day 2022, all forest plans across the country will be amended to conserve mature and old growth forests.
 - The Granite Snowshoes 1000 project recently awarded the NEPA contract to Morrison-Marilee. The project hopes to have a signed decision in early July 2024.
- Grant Updates and Planned Grant Applications (NRCS, Lincoln County, DNRC)
 - Western States interest has increased and expanded to the Troy area surrounding the Trojan Defense project. The current Western States grant in the Swede and McMillan areas expires in April 2024, but Jennifer is hoping for a 1-year grant extension. The original grant amount was for \$262,000.
 - Lincoln County Tidbits is a grant proposal that incorporates small parcels of city and County property around the Libby and Yaak areas. This project aims to connect treatments completed on adjacent properties. Lincoln County is awaiting award from the Montana DNRC.
 - The Forest Health Bark Beetle grant at J Niels Park was completed this past November.
 - The Island Lake MFAP grant allocated all funds awarded in 2023. This consisted of approximately \$500,000 being allocated to Green Diamond Resource Company, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, and private landowners.
 - The DNRC is managing two Hazard Fuels reduction grants in the Othorp Lake and Barnaby Lake areas. The Othorp Lake area awarded five contracts of which three are completed. The Barnaby Lake area awarded one large contract to the subdivision developer.
 - The DNRC Libby Unit hired Vicki Stephens to manage the CWDG grant. Vicki has sent out 28 applications to landowners and is completing landowner visits currently.
 - The Fuels crew funded by the CWDG grant is mostly hired. After hiring completed, a couple of the selected applicants declined the position which will create a shortage this season. Marcel is managing the fuels crew, and he would like to start work on small sections of county land to accomplish two objectives. These include training the crew on

public land first before moving to landowner properties and to be able to host pile burning workshops on county lands for adjacent landowners.

- Kootenai Complex Update (Nikia)
 - The initial goals of Kootenai Complex Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) landscape were to treat 7,200 acres with \$19.2 million dollars by September 30, 2024. Since April of 2022, the Kootenai Complex has accomplished 8,548 acres of WCS funded treatments which exceeds the original proposal. In Fiscal Year 2023 alone, 7,558 acres of WCS funded projects were accomplished. Additionally, within the Kootenai Complex boundary, 17,274 acres were accomplished utilizing all funding sources.
 - To date, the Kootenai Complex WCS has utilized approximately \$9 million of the planned \$19.2 million. In Fiscal Year 2023 alone, \$1.7 million in contracts was awarded for 21 unique contracts. Of these contracts, 13 different contractors received awards of which the majority of these contractors were local. Additionally, \$1.9 million was awarded in grants and agreements going to the MT DNRC, US Army Corps of Engineers, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Lincoln County, and Montana Conservation Corps. Also, \$1.2 million was spent on fleet, materials, and supplies. The remaining \$4.2 million was spent on salary and expenses for employees. Salary and expenses include expenses such as overtime, travel, training, and recruitment incentives for newly hired employees as well as costs associated to bring detailed employees to the forest.
 - Some of the untold successes of the Kootenai Complex WCS landscape include significantly impacting our local communities. With current employees and new employees to the forest, these employees are spending their salary on housing, food, etc. Additionally, several contractors are expanding their companies because there is confidence work will continue across the forest in the future.
- New Lincoln County Firesafe Council Chairperson (Lincoln County) and Vice Chairperson (DNRC)
 - Lincoln County will find a Chairperson by the January meeting. The Chairperson will likely not be a fire chief as stated in the Lincoln County Firesafe Council Bylaws but will be a Lincoln County employee. The Vice Chairperson will either be Logan Sandman or Marcel Getz.

Round Robin:

Adjourned

- The Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) program is looking to expand by hiring another forester in 2024. The GNA program and CWDG fuels program recently moved to the Vegetation building at the Canoe Gulch Ranger Station.
- The DNRC is also looking to hire a second service forester this coming year.
- Jeremy was awarded the Service Forester of the year from Montana DNRC.
- In June of 2025, the Libby Volunteer Fire Department is hosting the State Volunteer Fire Convention in Libby.
- Logan, Marcel, and Jennifer visited about the National Fire Protection Association standards to hold a home assessment training in the Spring of 2024.
- The WCS signed a new agreement with the National Forest Foundation (NFF). The \$3 million agreement is for 5-years and will hire a program manager in Libby to implement contracts administered by the NFF.
- The Forest Service Permanent Fire Hire event in December was successful hiring 39 employees of which 15 were new permanent employees to the agency. Preliminary staffing in 2024 looks to be 70-80% of capacity, but other hiring events are planned in the future.
- Marcel and Bill Caldwell recently completed an inspection of the Em Kayan subdivision to renew and recertify the community as a Firewise Community.