

Weston County Board of Commissioners
November 22, 2016
Coordination Meeting: Prairie Dog Management in Weston County
Official Minutes

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Bill Lambert at 1:00 p.m. Commissioner Rossman delivered the invocation. Commissioner Barton led the Pledge of Allegiance. Chairman Lambert invited all present to introduce themselves, and then provided the ground rules of the meeting to the audience.

Opening comments from Dennis Jaeger/USFS: Mr. Jaeger introduced himself and addressed their areas of responsibility, including delineating the details of Thunder Basin Grasslands. He admitted early drought and prairie dog expansion that was unexpected. It does affect its local economies. His challenges include the USFS budget, as costs for firefighting are increasing; included pleas for help from Commissioners to put pressure on congressional delegation to support fires as disasters, creating new line items to pay for them. He will scope projects for the year with budget and personnel. The issue is prairie dog control. He said they've been focusing on boundary control. He has been in touch with Bob Harshbarger and grazing associations. They want to switch to density control, but acknowledges that reduces boundary control. He asked for partners. They are working with Weed and Pest and the grazing associations. He suggested that the plan is in place, and that they need more time to do work on the ground. He said he's been in touch with landowners, and will be attempting something new with five particular landowners.

The question and answer session began.

Chairman Lambert: Is the strategy completed? The Chairman asked Jaeger to address air and water quality.

Mr. Jaeger: The 2009 Forest Service Plan Amendment received 58,000 suggestions. Each were considered. Strategy is based on what can be done on the ground. The USFS takes into consider range, water, air, forage, oil and gas, wildlife, grazing, etc. Jaeger admitted that there are areas that look terrible, stating that prairie dog numbers are cyclic; numbers are up. His challenges are balancing between time and money, limited staffing and best use of resources and assets. Expansion this year was unprecedented.

Commissioner Ertman: If we are basing everything on the 2015 strategy, how is that a defensible strategy? Would you consider this strategy as a guideline or a policy?

Mr. Jaeger: The USFS basically has a contract with the people to manage lands. Adaptability is key to moving forward. He must maintain strategy, but adjustments are possible without the amendment process. He was limited to 1600 acres of lethal control, and asked for suggestions for other alternatives. Forest plan amendments take 2-3 years.

Commissioner Ertman: Regarding the notice of intent, is it still on the table?

Mr. Jaeger: Ranger Walker will be available for meetings, as requested.

Chairman Lambert: What part of the strategies did the commissioners provide?

Mr. Jaeger: They are rolling out a draft charter, called Thunder Basin Working Group; invitations to go out; meetings on a regular basis. He suggested that the membership will drive the action. A draft charter will be available in a couple of weeks.

Commissioner Barton: What percentage of the budget goes to prairie dog management?

Mr. Jaeger: \$30 per acre, for the latest contract. Non-lethal. Between \$50-100K overall.

The Chairman recognized Mark Stenson, who stated that he was underbid by the awarded contractor, so it didn't come out at \$30 per acre.

Commissioner Hunt: Are you adding into that for management, admin, etc.? Is that just for the lethal control?

Mr. Jaeger: They awarded the contracts for the money allocated, which dilutes the work completed.

Commissioner Ertman: The prairie dog is designated as a pest in Wyoming. How many acres in Category 1 are there? She stated that it has certainly surpassed 18,000 acres, and because of this explosion of numbers, the entire county has been put in jeopardy with the designated pest, for health and disease reasons.

Mr. Jaeger: Yes, the black tailed prairie dog is considered a pest, but also a species for conservation. Prairie dogs create a habitat for other wildlife. Challenge between pest, multiple use of lands, etc. Jaeger stated that 18,000 acres of prairie dogs will not be eliminated; it is not in the foreseeable future. He struggles with finding the balance between pest and conservation species.

Commissioner Ertman: Why can't the numbers be brought back down to 18,000 for Category 1? Where are the priority areas for USFS efforts? Do they ask for input from landowners and the counties, and try to guide their projects?

Chairman Lambert: Regarding the money issue, has the USFS gone out to the counties and state associations, asking for other funding sources?

Mr. Jaeger: Partnering has been talked about, but not enough. Focus has been through the Cooperators Group.

Commissioner Rossman: Can ranchers do the control themselves?

Mr. Jaeger: Yes, but they are limited. They are poisoning in the fall. It must be done by a licensed applicator, and permitted by USFS. They will accept proposals for consideration. The landowners can work with their district rangers.

Commissioner Barton: Regarding the draft charter, concern is that money isn't enough to solve the problem. How can other funding sources be identified? Like using grazing fees. Commissioner Barton encouraged that shooting restrictions be lifted completely.

Mr. Jaeger: He is currently working through three grazing associations. They determine their conservation contributions. Water is critical, and they use those funds to address water and better distribute cattle.

Commissioner Hunt: It seems like the USFS is doing a meager effort to address prairie dogs, with the excuse of monies. USFS policies have left the landowners and residents stuck with this pest. Monies spent on dusting for fleas could be better spent elsewhere, possibly on prairie dog control. Plague will happen again; it will be best control mechanism. The current population is above highest numbers. Health and safety concerns remain, and they need to try better to control within one mile of residences. If the ferrets are here, what number of prairie dogs allows for the ferret habitat?

Mr. Jaeger: He did not answer the question. Instead, he turned to the Commissioners, asking how can we move forward? Funding? Control methods?

Chairman Lambert: The working group needs to be established. It will be led by the USFS, with cooperation with affected agencies and landowners.

Mr. Jaeger: He committed to the group being up and working by January or February.

Commissioner Ertman: Regarding the human element, as an explosion of population and plagues occurs, this must be addressed by the USFS.

Mr. Jaeger: He was not aware of any human plague outbreaks in the recent incident in South Dakota. He only knew of one illness in Colorado in last outbreak there.

Chairman Lambert: If the plague wipes out prairie dogs, are you going to transplant them back into the grasslands? Is it your intention to move them back in?

Mr. Jaeger: They would follow protocols. He would not say yes or no. They would work through Wyoming Game and Fish, and comply with state laws. Yes, they would follow translocation.

Commissioner Ertman: If translocation is pursued, then landowners must be contacted; they were not in the last strategy effort.

Break was called at 2:06 p.m.; reconvened at 2:16 p.m.

Chairman Lambert: What is "The Adjustment to Stocking Rate for Prairie Dogs?"

Mr. Jaeger deferred to Shane Walker/USFS, who explained that the term came up in conservation assessment strategy, where they were trying to figure out forage requirements for wildlife and livestock, and capacity.

Commissioner Ertman: Is there any way to get the Category 1 shooting restrictions from February 2016 lifted? With the population explosion, why can't that be lifted?

Mr. Jaeger: That's part of the 2009 amendment, and to do so would take more consideration and coordination. It was lifted on Category 2 by 24%. New maps will come out showing where you can

shoot prairie dogs (vice where you cannot). Shooting is a tool, used on private and state lands. Opening up more area in Category 1 would take more processes to update, i.e., processing of paperwork, etc.

Commissioner Barton: Regarding the 2015 strategy, he suggested that it could be opened up if USFS had met their acreage. Since there won't be many controls used until next fall, he recommended opening up the options to bring the numbers down, chances of plague, etc. so that something is being done between now and next fall.

Matt Avery/Campbell County Commissioner: The USFS is considered a bad neighbor, as they aren't helping to get anything done. With the downturn of the economy, counties cannot afford to battle prairie dogs. He would like to see a separate budget for prairie dog management and control, so it does not come out of firefighting budgets. Ranchers are losing; USFS is winning, because it is further encroaching on landowners.

Commissioner Ertman: What is the status of the Federal advisory committee?

Mr. Jaeger: He doesn't know - too many unknowns. Secretary of Agriculture and positions in the new administration are unknown.

Rusty Bell/Campbell County Commissioner: He will carry the message to congressional delegates, etc., but draft charter is overdue. We are already out of time this fall. What are USFS goals to come out of this meeting? Implores Jaeger to listen to landowners, who know how to handle prairie dogs. They need all options at their discretion. The NGOs have money; have they been approached to actually help?

Commissioner Ertman: Why has the black-footed ferret been introduced here, somewhere it has never lived before? Can the ferret be removed by the amendment process? And then prairie dog control can be addressed?

Mr. Jaeger: The black-footed ferret is one of the most endangered mammals in the world (corrected, in the US). The USFS manages habitat for species. Some ferrets were released on BLM. Mr. Jaeger manages habitat; the decision to release ferrets is not his, but he is a player in the plan. Wyoming Game and Fish does not support introduction of ferrets. He recommended a different approach, such as addressing as "grassland restoration." He filibustered off subject for several minutes, talking about the untapped potential of agencies working together for the betterment of all the grasslands.

Commissioner Ertman: Wouldn't all that be easier without the ferret?

Mr. Jaeger: He turned it back, asking how would it be different without the ferret? He maintained that the USFS job is to balance all the uses of the land.

Chairman Lambert: Prairie dogs are actually new in some areas of the county; it's not all due to this year's drought, as Jaeger suggested.

Commissioner Avery: Our ecosystem here has survived without the ferret; maybe they should introduced elsewhere in the nation?

Tyler Abbott/US Fish & Wildlife: They are working with Wyoming Game & Fish, and the decision is left to Scott Talbott/Director, Wyoming Game & Fish. There are groups and people who want to see the ferrets saved and reintroduced.

Commissioner Avery: He reiterated that the landowners are going to lose, competing against ferrets and prairie dogs, and the USFS.

Justin Binfet/Wyoming Game & Fish: In 2014, they completed a statewide study that determined that ferrets are experimental and non-essential. Under Section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), "there would be no prohibition for incidental take of ferrets"... Mr. Binfet stated that this rule provides for ferrets to be eliminated without penalty. According to Wyoming Game & Fish, ferrets will not be reintroduced in Thunder Basin without consensus from the state and landowners here.

Commissioner Ertman: The ferret was never here in the first place, so it can't be *reintroduced*. She also reiterated that the rule allows for shooting ferrets.

Chairman Lambert: Going back to the group being put together, he asked if it will be advisory or a decision-making group?

Mr. Jaeger: Decision-making responsibility will remain with the USFS over federal property. He suggested it will be a cooperative/advisory group. The first meeting will be in January or February. His intent is for state, county, weed and pest and conservation districts to be invited.

The official question and answer session ended, and Chairman Lambert opened the floor to the public in attendance that had signed up to speak at the end of the meeting.

Bob Harshbarger/Landowner: According to law, he stated that the USFS is required to manage the lands with funding from US Treasury. He asked for other control mechanisms. Regarding the advisory group, where will the landowner stand? Is a landowner invited? He believes an advisory committee is a waste of time. Many landowners have preexisting rights. Thunder Basin National Grasslands (TBNG) is different from forest and Bureau of Land Management lands; TBNG was set aside for livestock grazing, and the USFS is encroaching upon those rights.

Jean Harshbarger/Landowner: Landowners and ranchers have offered to help control prairie dogs at their own expense, and have been told no by the USFS. Translocation did not follow protocols last time; why would we expect that they would do it according to protocols if they do it again.

Ty Checketts/Landowner: He politely implored the USFS to put a rancher or two on the advisory committee. His lands have gone from 10-30-45% prairie dogs in the last two years. He is running 10-15% less cattle, all with pressure from the bank to produce more. A long-term sustainability plan is needed for better use the grasslands. There are over 22,000 acres of prairie dogs just on his property; it's time to lift the shooting ban.

Lenard Seeley/Former Weston County Commissioner: He suggested using full scope of efforts in the fall, for poisoning. Then also poison in the spring.

Stephen Lorenz/Sportsman: The loss of grazing land is affecting other parts of the economy as well. Elk have moved out, as well as deer, antelope and other wildlife, because the grasslands don't support

them anymore. Prairie dogs are also destroying sage grouse habitat. The ecosystem of other wildlife is being ignored, all to populate the ferret and prairie dog.

Jim Darlington/Inyan Kara Grazing Association: He stated that it was time to give up on ferrets, and allow shooting.

Mark Stenson/M&M Services: He addressed the population explosion and Jaeger's explanation of it. The barriers are not effective. He advised the USFS to do a better job on *specified* projects, and suggested opening up opportunities for control, so that it's allowed based on conditions rather than on calendar dates. Plague comes through now and only 90%, so there is some resistance.

Ogden Driskill/Wyoming Senator: He asked who has the final say on ferrets. He stated that the USFS should be embarrassed, as the current condition of the grasslands is environmental destruction. This is a management problem. He encouraged the Commissioners to take action, to force the issue, in court if necessary, so that the lands will be taken care of properly.

Randy Oleson/Inyan Kara Grazing Association: Grazing fees are allocated toward water and weed control. Some of that may need to be put toward prairie dog control. Regarding budget constraints, he asked if landowners have been invited to help. He advised that the unnecessary administrative hoops be eliminated, for efficiency. Private owners are spending more money than the USFS, which illustrates the seriousness of the problem.

The meeting adjourned at 3:33 p.m.

Bill Lambert
Chairman

Attest:

Jill Sellers
County Clerk