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**Quarterly Meeting Minutes
June 18, 2015
Yogo Inn Conference Room
Lewistown, MT**

At 10:20 am Chair Dean Rogge opened the MRCDC quarterly business meeting. Council members present: Dean Rogge, Jim Beck, Dick Iverson, Shonny Nordlund, Bruce Anderson, Karl Christians, Rachel Frost, John Chase, and Paul Gies.

General:

1. Minutes were read and John Chase moved to approve the minutes as corrected. Paul seconded. All approved.
2. Rachel Frost read the unpaid bills detail, John Chase moved to approve as submitted, Bruce Anderson seconded. Motion carried. Rachel read the full financial report. A discussion of the importance of keeping track of donated miles also took place. John Chase moved to approve the balance of the financial report. Dick Iverson seconded the motion, which passed by all those in attendance.

No public comment.

Reach Reports:

Upper Reach – John Chase: North Bank Refinery project, Shawn Higley out of Helena with (*John do you have the full name of the contractor?*) WWC will be onsite next week to start the evaluation. A meeting of the cooperators will occur shortly thereafter. The project timeline will be determined in more detail at that time. It would be good for the Council to be represented at the meetings and participate where appropriate with the project. Fire issues were also brought up as a concern and fuels reduction may be something that MRCDC could promote. Opportunities may exist through the Firewise grant program, urban interface grants, or through the BLM. The Council may be asked to submit letters of support for projects.

Middle Reach – Bruce Anderson: Blaine County Conservation District hosted their soil health and salinity event last week. Despite rain, 30 people attended the event. As a result of the workshop, there will be three projects that Montana Salinity Control Association (MSCA) will follow up with. Paul Gies – Rob Hazelwood will have a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) project on his land and Paul will be following the project's progress. The mention of this project spawned a short discussion on riparian projects for cottonwood enhancement. Council member Rick Anderson (not present) has a fencing project on BLM and private, where funding was obtained to fence off a section of riverbank and plant cottonwoods. Grazing will be limited within the planting area for a few years, but then allowed after the trees reach a certain height.

Gallatin Conservation District
Broadwater Conservation District
Lewis & Clark Conservation District
Cascade Conservation District
Chouteau County Conservation District

Blaine County Conservation District
Big Sandy Conservation District
Fergus County Conservation District
Petroleum County Conservation District
Phillips Conservation District

Garfield County Conservation District
Valley County Conservation District
McCone Conservation District
Roosevelt County Conservation District
Richland County Conservation District

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The Friends of the Monument brought volunteers to help with the plantings, and plan to handle the maintenance of the trees. There is a lot of opportunity for positive work with cottonwoods and grazing management. Good discussion regarding wildlife, fencing protocols, priority areas etc. followed.

Reservoir Reach – Dean Rogge: CMR met in June but it was primarily agency folks in attendance with little representation from conservation district supervisors. Garfield is working with McCone County to host a soil health tour in Baker. A tour was held in Baker last year, and this one will feature different producers. The tour is tentatively scheduled for the 27th of July and there will be a pickup in Jordan and Circle. The statewide Bison EIS has been released and the public comment period is open through September 11th.

Lower Reach - Dick Iverson: Reported that the US Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) plans to keep river levels at 7,000-8,000 cfps for irrigation pumps. There are indications that MRRIC, the ACOE and several environmentalist groups feel that the river should be run at high levels, followed by low levels, and so on throughout the year which would be hard for irrigation. Landowners have worked to lessen the amount they are running in the winter so the large sandbars do not form under the ice. The goal in doing high flows, followed by low flows is to make the River look more natural.

Dick also reported on new efforts to improve response to pipeline breaks by private companies and federal agencies. The recent pipeline breaks on the Yellowstone River have increased awareness and resulted in a law passing the North Dakota legislature demanding quicker response to spills and more oversight in construction processes. For both spills in the Yellowstone, pipeline owners simply were not watching how the river bed was changing over the years. Dick also informed the group that the Keystone pipeline is currently slated to cross the Missouri near Fort Peck, but that the Fort Peck tribe does not want it coming in above their rural water system. Instead they want it to go across the reservation and cross the River near Wolf Point.

Cottonwood regeneration has worked where irrigation has flooded or a sprinkler floods. This seems to be successful and the number of trees propagated is generally large enough that beavers do not take out the whole stand.

DNRC- Karl Christians: Final budget allocations to the Council for both the remainder of 2015 and for FY 2016 is still uncertain. The employee organization (EO) training went really well. Karl's goal is to get everyone on the same system for Quickbooks so that everyone can more readily move into the BARS accounting system. This means more consistency among districts and DNRC; and helps track finances for tax purposes and IRS standards. The permissive mill levy is an important topic as well. If Districts want to provide health insurance for employees, they have to start the process this July to receive a certain amount of money next year. It does not have to go to the people for vote in order to get this income. McCone CD did it this year and can provide guidance about issues and pitfalls.

The Governor's Range Tour will be held in Ennis hosted by the Madison Conservation District. Stops include the Wall Creek Game Range, a demonstration site for a partnership program on weed control, and riparian pastures established for stream bank health and stabilization on Janet Endecott's, (Madison County supervisor) ranch. The tour will be conducted Sept 16th and 17th.

The Range Specialist position for DNRC should be advertised within the next week or two. One of the new goals for that position is to support districts in revamping their range committees. Again, McCone set the example by reinstating a range committee, which should prove to be a valuable asset to districts in the future.

MACD – Elena Evans: There was lots of scrutiny directed toward Conservation Districts during the Legislative Session, but overall, CDs came out well. There was an increase of around \$1M for 223 grants and

administration funding, but there was still a cut to the overall DNRC budget because of reduced coal tax revenues.

NRCS – Joe Little: New NRCS software has kept staff busy, lately. The new state con is Lisa Coverdale. She spent many years in Utah, has a good grasp on Western issues and will be a good asset to the state. The state's been working on animal feeding operations (AFOs) lately in a number of counties; with lots of individuals interested in relocating their operations off the major tributaries. One thing to keep in mind is the Regional Conservation Partnership Project (RCPP) pre-proposal is coming up soon. Some of the key things to look at making sure there are smaller projects nested within larger projects. The last RCPP was awarded to a group in Gallatin County because of a combination of interested landowners, committed partners, and matching funds. All these factors weigh heavily in project rankings.

Coordinators Report – Rachel: It has been a busy spring with a lot of projects shaping up and starting to take off.

CMR CWG – As Dean mentioned, attendance by landowners and conservation district folks was at an all-time high at the Ft. Peck meeting, however, that number has declines since, partially because of season and operation duties. A sage grouse subcommittee was formed at the Fort Peck meeting to explore opportunities for landscape scale conservation that are available because of interest in the bird. The group met at the Matador Ranch in early May and the minutes are available online. The goal for the subcommittee is to address Education of landowners, agencies, stakeholders and policy makers and to provide clarity on the vast array of different plans, programs, etc. Products that we hope to create include a list of services available through different agencies and NGOs so that there is a menu to ensure that landowners can really figure out what fits their operation. Another goal is to help provide input as to where the state fund goes in terms of projects and get those resources in the hands of producers. We want to work on engaging landowners. We need to make sure that the tools are suited to landowners. In order do this in the best way possible, we need to figure out ways that we can use our staff efficiently to move things forward while also not only focusing solely on sage grouse.

The next CMR working group meeting is tentatively scheduled for August 13 in Circle. We are hoping to get Bob Bud, the director of the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, to discuss how things are working in Wyoming.

The BLM released the Resource Management Plans (RMPs) for sage grouse and there are concerns based on the vegetation characteristics tables and how those characteristics will be weighed in grazing allotment assessments. Concern comes from the research that the metrics are based upon being conducted in different ecotypes, and the characteristics being measured directly at nest sites vs. at random locations on the landscape. There is also confusion about the methodology used to determine grass heights, whether it is a stubble height, or the height of the tallest grass at the location. MRCDC will be working with MACD to ensure that there are clarifications as to how the grass height is measured and how these grass heights are to be implemented in the final allotment health assessment. Local BLM leaders in Montana are still unsure how these will be measured, as the RMPs have been written at the National level without much input from the local range leads.

Montana Rangelands Partnership – Nick Schultz was interested in organizing a comprehensive range monitoring effort in the Winnett Grazing District, and this idea grew in scope as more people found out about the plans and wanted to become involved. Currently, efforts are in place to coordinate monitoring methods between the NRCS, BLM, MSU Extension, and the USFS to streamline monitoring efforts for livestock producers running on multiple landownerships. Discussions are underway between the range leads for NRCS,

BLM, MSU Extension, and USFS, to determine the most appropriate methods for rangeland monitoring in Montana, and the potential for creating whole ranch plans so that everyone can work together with similar metrics. Whole ranch plans could also be used to qualify interested landowners for Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA). Rachel submitted a proposal to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to fund two range monitoring technicians in Montana to start working on this effort. This proposal was submitted under SWCDMI and is supported by all the agency range leads in the state, at least in concept.

Rachel shared the pre-proposal submitted to NFWF to hire two people to put them on the ground in eastern Montana so that they can help landowners with monitoring and ranch planning. They would work under SWCDMI with assistance from MSU extension. The ranch plans would be used to streamline plans for NRCS, CCAA ranch plans, and options for them to be verified sustainable. Once they have a ranch plan they can use it for whatever they want. Workshops would also be held through local conservation districts. The proposal was for three years and about 380k.

Paul moved to support submission of a full proposal should NFWF offer that opportunity. The motion was seconded by John Chase and passed unanimously.

Rachel has also been engaging in conversations with NRCS about supporting two rangeland monitoring technicians. The Board approved submission of a draft budget and proposal to NRCS by acclamation.

Riparian Pastures – Currently seeking funding for the project. We submitted 2 grants, one of which was denied, and we are awaiting a decision on the other one. Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE) grants are due in October and Rachel plans to submit one for this project.

NACD – Rachel traveled to Minot to attend the Northern Great Plains region of the National Association of Conservation Districts meeting with Mark Bostrom, Steve Hedstrom, Elena Evans, Jeff Wivholm, and Lisa Coverdale. The NACD Missouri River Team also met and Jack Majeres, National representative on the Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee, had requested states to report on current conservation projects. Montana and North Dakota provided presentations at the Missouri River Team meeting. presented what they are working on. Rachel discussed the projects that MRCDC is pursuing and highlighted that districts have the unique ability to bring together public and private partnerships. MRCDC undertakes a large number of projects and this presentation really demonstrated how successful the Council is. Rachel will be putting a list of the projects together so that everyone knows how many projects are currently underway and what the status of each project is with regards to funding and progress.

Coming up: FWP is hosting a conservation workshop at the Calvert Hotel in Lewistown– Tuesday the 23rd of July. Next Wednesday, (July 24th) is the TNC science day at the Matador Ranch.

MRRIC – Rachel hasn't been to a meeting recently, as Buzz Mattelin has been attending. Defenders of Wildlife and Earth Guardians filed a notice of intent to sue the US ACOE and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to halt progress on the project at Intake. Paperwork is currently being filed for the lawsuit, while the Corps continues to make progress on the project. Buzz and Rachel are communicating and Rachel participates in the webinars to stay current on the issues.

Rachel went to the Gallatin Conservation District (GCD) meeting last month and met Council member John Venhuizen last month. He said that it is hard to engage when the Council's efforts are focused on Eastern Montana issues. Rachel reminded the GCD that the key thing is for districts to support one another as issues

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arise. GCD is interested in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, (CREP), and other opportunities to improve vegetation health in riparian areas. They may be interested in forest health regeneration, and the Riparian Pastures project would fit well with their priorities.

Matthew Schmidt, Big Sky Watershed Corps Member with Americorps provided a 15 minute presentation over lunch on his efforts with the Montana Saltcedar Team. The presentation was both an update and an opportunity to provide direction for Matt and the team as a whole. The presentation covered the GIS saltcedar mapping system and monitoring plan that Matt is undertaking.

Discussion followed about the *Diorabda* beetle, the insect biological control agent that attacks saltcedar. The beetle has been found in Idaho, and there is the possibility for a multi-agency effort to allow the bugs to be released outside of south western willow fly catcher environment. Additionally, scientists have identified two subspecies of the beetle, which may improve survivability in Montana. Should the beetle be found in Montana, the Department of Agriculture would need to approve transport of the bug within the state.

New Business

Budget – DNRC has requested a draft budget for 2016. It was recommended that Rachel develop a budget broken down by project, to give DNRC a better idea of the return provided by the Council for the money we receive. Rachel hopes to eventually be able to fund projects from sources outside of the council budget through individual grants, and keep the DNRC budget for operating, salary, and travel.

River Rendezvous - The tour will likely be in late August in the Seven Blackfoot region of Garfield County. Patricia Gilbert, with the Army Corps of Engineers has volunteered boats for the tour and Rachel is contacting potential speakers. The goal is to get decision makers for weed projects out to see the saltcedar infestation to raise awareness for future funding opportunities.

Public Comment Opportunities

It was passed by general consent that Rachel would work to prepare comments on the BLMs RMPs. For the BLM RMPs, Rachel will work with DNRC, MACD, and other scientists to make them more palatable or easier to interpret. Rachel will proceed by having comments to DNRC and make these available to districts, moved by general consent.

MACD will take the lead on comments directed toward the statewide bison EIS.

With no further business coming before the Council, the meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m.

Submitted by:

Approved by unanimous vote on Sept , 2015

Carie Hess, Secretary

Dean Rogge, Chairman