

OFFICIAL MINUTES
PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY ADVISORY COUNCIL
Zoom Teleconference
Thursday, July 23, 2020

A meeting of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council (PRCAC) was held on Thursday, July 23, 2020 via Zoom Teleconference due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Thank you to Vice-Chair Rique Campa for arranging use of the MSU Zoom platform for the first ever PRCAC virtual meeting. Chair Paul Rose called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m., then led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Paul Rose, Lisha Ramsdell, Rique Campa, Don Horrocks, Barb Curtis, Randy Keen, Sandy Franz, Rob Pallarito, Bill Wood, Conan Smith, Greg Walz, Bill Loney, Doug Reeves and Brent Shank.

MEMBERS ABSENT: Brian McPhail, Heather Shaw, Dave Smethurst and Drew YoungeDyke.

EX-OFFICIO & DEPARTMENT STAFF PRESENT: Cody Stevens, Kerry Wieber, Kelly Kinser, Madeline Jazdyk, CO Eric Bottorf, and Karen Chapman.

EX-OFFICIO ABSENT: Andy Stempky, Mike Shelton, Tim Cwalinski, and Brian Mastenbrook.

OTHERS PRESENT: Andrew Knapp, Samantha Peterson, and Miranda Van Cleave.

INTRODUCTIONS – PAUL ROSE:

Chair Paul Rose welcomed all to the meeting; and introduced new member Greg Walz. Paul also noted the passing of Ray Hoobler; there will be more to come in remembrance of Ray and his contributions to the PRC at a future date.

AGENDA:

Don Horrocks made the motion to approve the agenda as presented, seconded by Rob Pallarito, agenda approved.

MINUTES:

Don Horrocks made the motion to approve the minutes from the January 24, 2020 meeting, seconded by Lisha Ramsdell. With no additions, corrections or deletions offered, all voted in favor to approve the minutes.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

No public comment was offered.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

FOREST COVER & WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT – HEATHER SHAW / BRIAN MASTENBROOK:

Paul Rose reported that Brian Mastenbrook was unable to attend, however Brian noted that treatments for some wildlife openings were completed, with approximately 130 acres of opening maintenance taking place this season. The PRC Forest Compartment Review will take place in the near future, and there are some treatment recommendations exceeding 40 acres which will require review and approval from the PRCAC. Due to the short timeline involved, Rose requested a motion from the council to authorize the Forest Cover & Wildlife Committee to review any proposals that require a recommendation, and to make those recommendations. Motion made by Sandy Franz to recommend that the authority for the review and approval process for the PRC Forest Compartment Review be given to the Forest Cover & Wildlife Committee, seconded by Bill Wood. With no further discussion, motion passed.

RECREATION & ACCESS – RANDY KEEN:

Randy Keen stated there have been no issues brought forth requiring a meeting of the Recreation & Access Committee. It seems there has been increased ORV usage noted outside the Pigeon and Randy inquired if there are issues within the Pigeon. Cody Stevens stated nothing major has been detected, however, staff has been made available to work on berms where there has been illegal ORV use.

EDUCATION & ENGAGEMENT – LISHA RAMSDELL:

Lisha reported that the Education & Engagement committee met after the January 2020 PRCAC meeting. Good discussion on all of the different projects in the PRC and the opportunity to capitalize on those, then COVID-19 hit in March, and put those opportunities on hold.

AQUATIC RESOURCES & FISHERIES MANAGEMENT – DREW YOUNGEDYKE / TIM CWALINSKI:

Paul Rose reported that Tim Cwalinski was unable to attend tonight but provided a full report. To summarize, there is work taking place on the Upper Black River, upstream from Saunders Dam. Because of the work that Huron Pines was able to do in years past, much of the instream work is an extension of that healing process. Tim also mentioned that with COVID-19 work restrictions, a lot of the Fisheries field work has been very limited. Fisheries is planning survey work in the Pigeon River, and upstream from the old Song of the Morning site. Will complete population estimates for this year, and they hope to have temperature and oxygen profiles this summer for all the sinkhole lakes. Water levels are high at the sinkhole lakes, which has decreased pedestrian shoreline activity which caused erosion. The Fisheries order for the Walled Lake acquisition was approved at the February 2020 Natural Resource Commission meeting.

RESOURCE USE & EXTRACTION – SANDY FRANZ:

Sandy Franz deferred to Bill Loney or EGLE staff for comment. Madeline Jazdyk, EGLE reported that all clean-ups in the Pigeon are progressing towards closure. All site reparations are being completed, however, they are not yet to “plugging approved” status. With the Enbridge Line 5 shutdown, which caused most Northern Michigan oil operators to shut their wells, there may be variances in the production volumes reported this quarter. Sandy inquired if Lambda sold any wells within the Pigeon to Core Energy, Madeline responded that the wells in question were in the annexed area of the Pigeon. Wells that were transferred were not subject to the unit operator agreement. Cody Stevens shared that FRD is following up on the issue as well, and will share any information with the council.

SPECIAL COMMITTEE REPORTS

DISCOVERY CENTER – SANDY FRANZ:

Sandy thanked Paul for his remembrance of Ray Hoobler at the meeting opening. The Discovery Center has not opened this year, and they do not anticipate opening until the spring of 2021. The time off has been used to update records, update steering committee job descriptions and other operational policies. Met with Sandra Clark of the Michigan History Museum, who will be the primary contact for the trust fund grant. Due to current circumstances, the money has not been acted upon by the Legislature yet, delay is anticipated. They have been working on a couple of new exhibits, one temporary and one permanent, in order to have new material for visitors to see in 2021. Before COVID-19 hit, there was a 3-year educational plan developed for classes to be held at the DC. However, those plans were upended. Samantha Peterson has worked hard to maintain the DC social media presence and change classes to an online format. The MSU Master Naturalist program was changed to an online format and achieved good attendance.

PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY EQUESTRIAN COMMITTEE – BARB CURTIS:

Barb reported that due to COVID-19, events she discussed at the January meeting were canceled. No work-bee, no Elk Hill Pavilion dedication, and no chainsaw certification class. There has been no Equestrian Committee meeting since November 2019. Meetings scheduled were canceled due to COVID-19 and they are hoping to hold a meeting this November.

OLD BUSINESS

PRC UNIT MANAGER POSTION UPDATE – CODY STEVENS:

Cody stated that there is an overall hiring freeze until the end of the fiscal year (September 30, 2020), and it is unknown what fiscal year 2021 will bring, therefore, he will continue on as PRC Acting Unit Manager.

STATUS UPDATE ON TUBES AND CORNWALL FLOODING PROJECTS – LISHA RAMSDELL:

Lisha started with good news, Samantha Peterson, AmeriCorps Member serving in the PRC was selected as the AmeriCorps Member of the Month. Thank you to Samantha for all her hard work. The Cheboygan County Road Commission has been working on a few small road stream crossings in the upper part of Milligan Creek, per Brent Shank, two sites at Osmun Road have been completed, and one at Walker Road, with one more to be completed at Osmun Road. Many thanks to Brent and the crew for these great improvements.

With regards to the Tubes, the Otsego County Road Commission is ready to do the work, however the construction bids from contractors came in much higher than the engineer estimated. In addition, with the freeze on DNR grants, revenue was impacted which placed the project on pause. They have since raised more funds from other sources and are still planning on 2021 work to move forward.

For the Cornwall Flooding project much the same news as the Tubes, the freeze on DNR grants impacted funding. Work continues with the engineer to finalize the design, with trying to balance the level of water draw down that is necessary to fix the site, while maintaining enough water in the impoundment to prevent a major fish kill, and maintain flow of water down Cornwall Creek. The DNR grant has been reinstated, and

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Huron Pines has applied through an EGLE dam safety program for a FEMA grant to obtain the balance funding required. Plans are still on to start the project in 2021. Along with that, the crossing at Tin Bridge Road will need to be replaced, and Lisha is working on funding to complete this project.

TIMBER HARVEST/HABITAT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION/OUTREACH – L. RAMSDELL / B. MASTENBROOK:

Lisha reported on the timber harvest planned for Inspiration Point (which has already passed the compartment review process). Part of that project was to inventory the invasive species in the area, with Brian Mastenbrook working with the Michigan Natural Features Inventory to document the invasives. The next step was to remove the invasive species so that when harvest began, the desired trees would grow back, and to avoid transfer of invasives to other parts of the forest. This process has been delayed probably for a year due to COVID-19.

TYROLEAN HILLS HOA ACCESS UPDATE – REPORT

Informational update for council – Cody reported that the Tyrolean Hills easement issue was still being reviewed by the Attorney General’s office.

NEW BUSINESS

PRC BOUNDARY REVIEW PROCESS UPDATE – KERRY WIEBER:

Kerry reported that the purpose of the boundary review of state forests ,state game areas, state parks, and state recreation areas, is to serve as a guide for the prioritization of state land acquisitions, exchanges and disposals as it relates to consolidating larger blocks of state land ownership. The boundaries are intended to be long term goals, but they are updated periodically. The project boundaries include not only state ownership but also private ownerships that are a priority for the Department to acquire to consolidate those holdings. What the boundaries don’t do is prohibit land acquisitions of property that lie outside of those boundaries. For example, both Storey Lake and Walled Lake property were outside of the DNR project boundaries, but the values and importance of the properties were recognized, and therefore their acquisition was pursued.

Back in 2013, the Department Land Strategy was developed as a result of statutory requirement and was approved by the Legislature and adopted by the Governor in 2018. As a result, the Department is now required to implement the strategy, which requires the Department to establish updated project boundaries around the state forests, game areas, parks, and recreation areas with a goal of reducing the privately held inholdings within those boundaries by one million acres statewide.

The boundaries have not been updated since 2004, and are now going through the process of review, which began with DNR staff (statewide - all divisions) in March, and making recommendations on where boundaries should be reduced and eliminate private ownership within them, and in other areas add or expand boundaries. Local staff initiated a complete review starting in March and April, with regional reviews by the next level of divisional staff in late April and early May for further refinements. Public and stakeholder comment and review will likely occur this fall, then will move to the Director for approval in December at the NRC meeting.

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As this process relates to PRC, based on PRCAC council comments and Department internal discussions, the recommendation right now is for Walled Lake to fall within the PRCSF boundary and managed by the Concept of Management. It is also likely that some boundaries for the Pigeon River may expand, whether that includes areas that are managed under the Concept or other areas such as Storey Lake, may be managed out of the Pigeon River Country office, but may not be managed under the Concept of Management, which is all yet to be determined. Interactive maps for public and stakeholder review and comment will be made available on the DNR website.

The Land Strategy review and Boundary review are two different things. When the legislature approved the 2013 Land Strategy, and the Governor adopted, included in that legislation is a requirement for the DNR to update the land strategy and provide the update to the Legislature by July 1 of 2021. The Department is working on implementing the 2013 Land Strategy, and at the same time they are in the process of updating the 2013 Land Strategy. Therefore the boundary review is part of the implementation of the 2013 Strategy.

Kerry would like to give a presentation to the council at the October 2020 meeting as to what has been done to update the land strategy document and get feedback and input. There is a separate team working on the issue, and Kerry is on both teams. With regards to the update, they will be doing quite a bit of stakeholder and public engagement in the September and October timeframe, there should be draft components of the update for review. Hoping to have the final draft completed by the end of the year and will provide another public comment period in January. There is more information available on the DNR website, under public land strategy.

LAND USE ORDER UPDATE – SINK HOLE LAKES, WALLED LAKE – CODY STEVENS:

Cody reported that all divisions have met to review the Land Use Order and are trying to determine best use for both Walled Lake and Storey Lake properties. To date, no plan has been developed to put forward to the public, still under development. The Land Use Order for the Sinkhole Lakes and Walled Lake are under review by Matt Fry in Lansing, we are trying to assure that the lakes are under the same set of guidelines. Trying to have order ready to present to NRC for information in October, with approval at November.

EXISTING STRUCTURE REMOVAL –FORMER WALKER AND STEVENS PROPERTIES – CODY STEVENS:

Cody stated that with regards to the Walled Lake property structures, the landowners have removed all items from the cabin and pole barn and had their auction, all debris has been taken out and dumpster been removed. There is a lock on the current gate.

The Walker and Stevens properties have significant structures on them, as do Walled Lake and Storey Lake. As the state budget currently stands, the department will most likely not do anything with these structures at the present time. There is someone interested in purchasing and moving the cabin on the Walled Lake property, the department may have an auction.

PRC UNIT REPORT – CODY STEVENS:

Cody reported that the foresters are back out in the field again, but doing computer work from home. Office time is very limited. Temporary lay-off days for the balance of fiscal year are ending as of July 27. All hiring and transfers are on hold, Rick McDonald is retiring in September, which will impact the work plan for the year. Samantha Peterson, AmeriCorps member has been doing a great job, we will be applying for a new member to serve in 2021. There are no current plans to change the limits on office time for PRC staff, nor

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open to the public anytime in the near future. Foresters have just completed their forest inventory work, switching gears to timber sales, will be close to completing plan of work for the year. With Rick McDonald leaving, and layoff days, will need extra help to complete the timberwork. Recently received an application for a land exchange from Mr. Sides, who owns 40 acres surrounded by state land. Mr. Sides had a trespass (gate and access issue on state land), last year Mr. Sides proposed to buy an acre of land to resolve the trespass, the application was denied, then Mr. Sides offered to do an exchange, acre for acre, to resolve the trespass. Under review in Lansing right now. Sam Peterson and Scott Thompson have been installing new signs that were purchased last year. Compartment review open house will be done remotely. Cody review the forest viewer application online and noted that the public comment period is open from August 4 – September 9. The final compartment review is October 5, not sure of meeting format at this time.

RESEARCH PRESENTATION – LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF ELK/DEER BROWSING ON ASPEN STANDS – MIRANDA VAN CLEAVE:

Miranda is currently a graduate student at MSU, Rique Campa is her major advisor, she is working on a study in the PRCSF to evaluate the effects of elk and deer browsing on regenerating aspen in Michigan core elk range, roughly 40 years post clear-cutting , also in collaboration with Brian Mastenbrook and Dean Byer, DNR Wildlife division. Her primary objective is to quantify the long-term effects of ungulate browsing on stand characteristics and habitat quality, with the goal to provide forest and wildlife managers with aspen and elk management recommendations.

EX-OFFICIO REPORTS

RECREATION REPORT – KELLY KINSER:

Kelly reported that as Barb Curtis mentioned, the work bee at the Elk Hill pavilion was canceled, due to Covid restrictions, and has not been rescheduled at this time. The campgrounds were open on June 10, attendance has been normal to slightly above normal, compared to the last couple of years. Camping numbers across the state have been high. Experiencing an issue at Town Corner Lake campground with water well, repairs may be expensive, waiting on quotes to be returned. May be cheaper to install a new well. The well is not operable at the moment, PRD is providing water for campers. MTRA horse rides were canceled for the year. With regards to staffing, both PRC summer positions were filled this year, and PRD is moving forward with the new PRC full-time ranger position.

LAW ENFORCEMENT UPDATE – LED:

Eric Bottorf, CO reported there are a couple of ongoing investigations with regards to the illegal elk kills from the December season. He has noted an increase in illegal ORV activity. Have had a couple of rescue issues, with lost mushroom hunters, and an overdose situation at the old honeymoon cabin in the Green Timbers area.

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS:

Please forward any agenda items to Paul Rose.

Next meeting is scheduled for 5:00pm, October 22, 2020. Location and format to be determined.

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ADJOURN:

Meeting adjourned at 7:11pm

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

KAREN CHAPMAN, DNR