

Northeast District Meeting
2/1/2023
Bassett Service Center

President Russ Hamer called the meeting to order.

Roll Call/Introductions:

Russ Hamer, Oak Valley WMA	Tyler Adelman, Bassett
Tommy Hicks, North Central Region Parks	Kyle Schumacher, NPLT, Grove Lake
Jonathan Volker, Lewis & Clark SRA	Matt Rahko, Bassett
Jason Thiele, Norfolk	Dale Davis, Bassett/Norfolk
Logan Epp, Calamus SRA	Kelly Corman, Bassett
John Irons, Calamus SRA	Dan Vanderveen, Willow Creek SRA
Peggy Lyons, Bassett	Tyler Wulf, Northeast Region Parks
Allyson Frank, Bassett	Josh Kounovsky, Grove Lake WMA
Grant Wiemer, Oak Valley WMA	Cole Beyke, Parks Horticulturist
Bryan O'Connor, Wolbach	Jen Corman, NPLT, Bassett
Jeff Borchers, George Syas WMA	

Russ Hamer provided updates on the following topics:

Avian Influenza

- Staff continue to pick up dead or dying birds, mostly waterfowl. Ta-Ha-Zouka Park in Norfolk has been a frequent location for reports. For now, all birds are being double-bagged and disposed in the dumpster, but it is possible that sampling/testing will resume as spring migration begins.
- Be sure to wear appropriate PPE (gloves, mask, eye protection, etc.) if collecting birds.
- Dale Davis suggested trying to find a mobile incinerator to allow disposal of large numbers of birds if major die-offs occur.

Northern Long-eared Bat

- The USFWS recently declared the northern long-eared bat to be endangered (it was previously listed as threatened).
- The window of time to do habitat work such as tree removal, prescribed burning, etc., particularly in woodlands, will be substantially shorter in many cases.
- More monitoring for northern long-eared bats is likely. If you know of any likely hibernacula within the district, please share this information.

- The Environmental Review team in Lincoln is currently swamped with reviews of internal projects as well as reviews for other agencies. Be sure to submit CERT reviews for all projects as early as possible, and be prepared to wait for approval, particularly if consultation with USFWS is involved.
- Expect a FAQ e-mail concerning this topic from Lincoln. In the meantime, please submit questions to your supervisor to be passed along to Lincoln.
- [Update since meeting was held: The NGPC Environmental Review Team has met with USFWS, and many habitat improvement projects (e.g., tree clearing/thinning, prescribed burns) will likely be able to continue under similar conservation conditions to what we have been using. CERT will be updated as soon as possible so that consultation will not need to occur on every project.]

Legislature

- The state legislature is currently in session, and, as usual, several bills with the potential to affect the NGPC have been introduced. Staff are advised to be cautious about making comments on particular bills, especially to the media or the general public. The agency may take an official stance on certain bills.

Agency Fire Policy

- NGPC prescribed fire SOPs and qualifications standards are in the process of being updated. An e-mail was recently sent out from Brian Teeter and Pat Molini with the current documents for staff to review and provide input. Please provide your comments by February 17.
- Communicate training needs and opportunities among divisions.
- During discussion, there was a request for district fire committees to provide annual updates on staff qualification levels.

Other staff were given the floor for individual updates. These are grouped below by division.

Administration

Peggy Lyons / Allyson Frank, Bassett Office

- Staff are getting used to the new permitting system. One of the biggest challenges will be with landowner permits. Legal descriptions did not transfer over to the new system, which uses parcel ID numbers instead. Landowners will need to enter the parcel IDs for the tracts they own or lease into the new system. Also, family members who are eligible to hunt on the properties will also need to be entered under the same profile.

Melody Nuesch, Norfolk Office (provided to Jason Thiele)

- They are planning to send letters to last year's landowner permit applicants asking them to update their profiles.
- The new permitting system will allow online sale of special landowner permits, which will hopefully be more convenient for office staff and customers.

Law Enforcement

Dale Davis, Northeast District Lieutenant

- The Northeast District is fully staffed with officers for the first time in years. The state as a whole is in pretty good shape with staffing. There have been three recent retirements elsewhere.
- Officers helped with a youth mentor muzzleloader deer hunt at Ponca State Park. Six youth participated. Two deer were harvested, and all the participants received a muzzleloader.
- Training demands on officers continue to increase.
- The Law Enforcement division meeting will be held later this month at Mahoney State Park.
- Officers have been receiving lots of calls about sick and dead animals, and they have also been responding to depredation complaints.
- Officers have seen a significant increase in people shooting pheasants from the road this winter.
- They hope to increase patrols on the Missouri River this summer now that more officers are available. The National Park Service has also recently put full-time wardens on the river. Last year, a lot of warnings were given to people using jet skis on the National Recreational River stretch.
- Lake McConaughy has settled down with restrictions on numbers. Crowds have increased at other reservoirs in the Southwest as a result. Five officers are now stationed at Lake Mac.

Tyler Adelman, CO for Rock, Brown, and Keya Paha counties

- The deer season was mostly uneventful.
- There was a lot of ice fishing activity early, but heavy snows have slowed that down. Many areas are inaccessible. There have been a few reports of fish kills.

Parks

Tommy Hicks, North Central Region Parks

- The campgrounds at Keller Park SRA were recently upgraded to 50 Amp service. The planned road project is on hold due to costs.
- Parks is working with the National Park Service on a Wounded Warriors program at Long Pine SRA, which will likely be held sometime in June. More details will be provided later. Flyfishing will be one of the activities this year. They plan to have track chairs available for disabled veterans in 2024.
- Jim Domeier, superintendent at Fort Hartsuff SHP, will be retiring soon.
- A new six-lane archery range has been completed at Calamus SRA.
- The irrigation district needs to fix the liner in the outlet pipe at Calamus, and the lake will be dropped to a historically low level in 2024 for the repair.
- Long Lake SRA was recently auctioned off.
- Burns are planned at Sherman Reservoir, and there should be good training opportunities for staff who need to work on qualifications.

Tyler Wulf, Northeast Region Parks

- Fort Atkinson SHP is preparing to bury the remains of a soldier who died at the fort 200 years ago. The remains were plowed up just north of the park in the 1950s. The park is also preparing for a grand reopening in early June following renovations.

- A new playground has been completed at Summit Lake SRA and will have a grand opening in June.
- Fremont Lakes SRA has made multiple regulations changes affecting watercraft traffic on Lake 10 and Victory Lake. No wake is allowed from sundown to sunrise. Only one person may be towed behind a boat. Nonpowered vessels and vessels with outboard electric motors are not allowed.
- Congressman Mike Flood will be meeting with the Ponca Tribe concerning operations and funding for the new Niobrara SP lodge. A new boat ramp is also planned in the area. A feasibility study will be conducted to determine the best location.
- Planning is well underway for the expanded marina at Lewis & Clark SRA. It will have at least 500 boat slips, jet ski slips, and a new office/store. The new marina will probably go out further into the lake while the existing marina will remain for day use only. They are working through permitting with the Army Corps of Engineers and hoping for a groundbreaking in November if everything stays on schedule.
- Valentine's Day packages at Niobrara SP, Lewis & Clark SRA, and Ponca SP have been very popular.
- Dead Timber SRA will soon be managed along with Summit Lake SRA (Jordan Swenson).
- Parks has four vacant full-time office positions in the Northeast.
- Wayne State College is hosting a job fair on February 22 from 11:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Katie Leware from Ponca SP will be attending; other divisions are welcome. The booth has room for up to three others. Contact Katie for details.

Jon Voelker, Lewis & Clark SRA

- The marina expansion project (one of the STAR WARS projects) is moving forward.
- The Valentine's Day packages have been very popular. Two weekends sold out very within a day.
- Several vacant positions at the park are being advertised.

Logan Epp, Calamus SRA

- The asphalt paving project is currently held up in environmental review before going out for bid. The hope is that construction will begin after Labor Day. It will involve the south road, interior park roads, and the road across the dam. Stoplights may be installed at each end of the dam and could remain in place for a year. The project also includes an expanded parking area at Buckshot Bay.

Dan Vanderveen, Willow Creek SRA

- The reservoir level was down about 6' this summer, exacerbating blue-green algae blooms. Day use was below average, but the campground was still busy.
- Fall/Halloween events were very successful.
- Habitat improvements on the SRA are underway. They are working on implementing a burn rotation and have established several food plots.
- The archery range is getting revamped.

Cole Beyke, Parks Horticulturist

- Hazard tree removal at Fremont Lakes and Two Rivers has been a big job.
- A lot of landscape plantings are planned for spring at various parks.
- Multiple burns are planned for the spring if conditions allow.

Fisheries

Jeff Schuckman, Norfolk (report provided by e-mail)

- Oxygen levels are low in the sandhills lakes, and winterkill is a concern. Fisheries biologists are in the process of checking oxygen levels in district lakes for documentation. Little can be done about winterkill except documenting occurrences.
- The Gracie Creek Pond rehab project is complete. The pond is stocked with trout and things look good out there. Fishing access was also improved below the highway.
- Phil and Rebecca assisted with an ice fishing workshop at Skyview Lake a couple weekends ago. 50+ anglers participated along with Larry Pape and some other volunteers.
- Staff have been attending meetings this winter. The Great Plains Fishery Workers Association met at Deadwood, SD last week. The state AFS meeting is at Ponca this week. Coming up are the USBOR meeting February 15 and the Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference in Kansas City February 12-15.
- The pump is still running at Goose Lake and likely will continue until spring. The water level is coming up. Otters have called it home this winter.
- Husker Grading got the bid for the Willow Lake boat ramp project. Work will start after ice-out.
- Staff have been spending lots of desk time writing sampling summary reports and working up fish data.

Calamus Fish Hatchery (update provided by Tommy Hicks)

- The hatchery is currently short-staffed but looking to fill several positions. Production demands for the hatchery will be about twice as much as normal due to renovations at the North Platte hatchery this year.

Wildlife

Jason Thiele, Private Lands, Norfolk

- Open Fields and Waters has been a challenge, with multiple properties getting pulled from the program for various reasons. Staff are currently working on payments for the 2022-2023 contract year and will soon start writing contracts for 2023-2024.
- A good number of landowners have been able to get brush piles burned this winter. Multiple prescribed burns are planned for the spring, but dry conditions will remain a challenge for getting burn permits.
- A CRP General Signup is expected any day, although interest will likely remain low. State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) is once again available through the Continuous signup and will likely be more attractive to anyone interested in CRP due to higher rental rates.
- The UNL pheasant study will be continuing this spring. Some help from NGPC and PF staff will likely be needed again with crow counts, but details are still unknown. Scott, Cassidy, and Jason hope to have a call with the researchers later this month.

Bryan O'Connor, Private Lands, Wolbach

- Many site visits and bid days have been canceled due to snow.

Kyle Schumacher, Northern Prairies Land Trust, Grove Lake

- The Nebraska Forest Service is rolling out its Nebraska Forest Restoration Program. Several potential forest stand improvement projects are in the works in the Verdigris-Bazile BUL, but work is unlikely to begin until this fall at the earliest.

Jen Corman, Northern Prairies Land Trust, Bassett

- Contractors were able to complete over 900 acres of cedar removal before the snow started. Other projects are planned to begin or resume when conditions allow.
- [additional details provided by Cassidy Wessel via e-mail] Cassidy Wessel and Ted LaGrange helped coordinate builds of beaver dam analogs in Holt and Knox counties. These builds were the Nebraska portion of a multi-state NRCS-funded Conservation Innovation Grant led by Juniper Environmental (a consulting firm out of Kansas City). Partners on the grant included DU, NGPC, KDWPT, and Kansas Alliance of Wetlands and Streams. Before the builds took place, NGPC Stream and the NGPC Habitat Partners Section provided assistance with baseline fish and macroinvertebrate data. To acquire 404 permits in Nebraska, Juniper, NGPC, and DU worked with the USFWS Partners Program and the landowners to submit a Nationwide 27 permit. Builds took place this fall with volunteers from a broad array of agencies making up the workforce: NGPC (both Wildlife-HP and Fisheries-Streams Program), Juniper, DU, Kansas NRCS, Nebraska NRCS, NPLT, PF, Santee Sioux Nation EPA, LCNRD, WWF, USFWS, and Sandhills Task Force. Beavers have already started adding onto the structures at the Holt County site.
- The Nature Conservancy will be hosting the Niobrara Valley Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREX) in April. This is a great opportunity to work on task books. Participants can request to receive training in particular roles. Registration is free and includes lodging and meals. The registration deadline is on February 15.

Grant Wiemer, Oak Valley WMA

- They are wrapping up some Habitat Share projects for tree clearing at several WMAs. Otherwise, field work has been limited by weather.

Russ Hamer, Oak Valley WMA

- Remember that northeast Nebraska is still in a drought. If possible, the Management section is going to try to complete some burns right after snow melts. Otherwise, they may be available to help others burn if conditions are better elsewhere.

Jeff Borchers, George Syas WMA

- It has been hard to get field work completed, but planning for spring is underway.
- A seasonal technician should be starting toward the end of February.

Kelly Corman and Matt Rahko, Bassett

- Thank you to all who assisted with deer check.
- A fair amount of cedar mulching was completed after deer season.

- Snow cover has made pile burning challenging due to access and wet/snow-covered fuels. Their tracked UTV has been a big asset in the snow.
- Depredation complaints, particularly on hay bales, have increased. They have been constructing fences and will also be issuing some depredation permits.
- A few sites have been baited to capture mountain lions to collar. They are targeting some female lions and a previously collared lion whose transmitter has died. Finding bait has been challenging this winter.
- A new skid unit for a UTV is built and ready for prescribed fire action this spring.
- Several wood duck nest boxes have been built and installed at several WMAs.

Josh Kounovsky, Grove Lake WMA

- Like others, snow removal and depredation responses have been taking up a lot of time.
- Remember that we are supposed to respond to depredation complaints within one business day.

Upcoming meetings

- Spring Meeting / District Birding Day
 - Tentatively planned for May 17 (May 16 or 18 are possible alternatives) at Fort Atkinson SHP
 - Hoping to have several administrators present to give updates
 - May also invite some contractors to demo equipment (forestry equipment, drones, etc.) – contact Russ if you know any local contractors with equipment that staff would benefit from seeing
 - Lunch will be provided
- Fall Meeting
 - September 26, location TBD
 - Discussion of fall events, deer check, etc.
- Possible year-end/holiday meeting
 - Early December?
 - Potluck and awards

Minutes submitted by Jason Thiele