**SOUTHEAST DISTRICT MEETING**

**Osage WMA, July 18, 2019**

**Attendees:** Scott Luedtke, Wildlife; Rick Souerdyke, Wildlife; James Sluka, Wildlife; Jacob Durflinger, Wildlife; Kyle Smith, Wildlife; Chris Coonce, Wildlife; Cody Dreier, Wildlife; Travis Kopf, Wildlife; Eric Fowler, Communications; Chance Brueggemann, Northern Prairies Land Trust; Krista Lang, Northern Prairies Land Trust; Adam Jones, Parks; Regan Hoover, Parks; Matt Seitz, Law Enforcement; Mike Remund, Wildlife; Jason Luebbe, Wildlife; Sam Cowan, Wildlife; Justin Haas, Fisheries, Neal Van Winkle, Wildlife; Nathan Wiesler, Wildlife; Dusty Schelbitzki, Wildlife; Kirk Hansen, Wildlife; Bryce Schilousky, Wildlife; Steve Smith, Wildlife; Kent Pfeiffer, Northern Prairies Land Trust

There was good attendance with multiple divisions and partner organizations represented. Following are staff notes:

**Justin Haas, Fisheries – Missouri River Program**

* A lot has changed with in the Missouri River Program since October last year. There used to be three separate crews working on their own individual contracts through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Now, we have one USACE contract with two crews doing telemetry, population and habitat assessment.
* **Population:**
  + No standard trawling sampling has been conducted due to limited boat ramp access and safety concerns of trawling in the main channel during flood conditions.
* **Telemetry:** 
  + NGPC crews completed a tandem river sweep from Gavin’s Point Dam to Ponca State Park. This resulted in the location of one Pallid Sturgeon (1425). It migrated upstream 180.6 RMs from the confluence of the Platte River in a little over a year.
* **Habitat Assessment:**
  + NGPC completed standard grid sampling with larval drift nets and benthic trawls at 40 sites in Upper and Lower Hamburg Bends. Larval drift nets collected 1 age-0 sturgeon in Upper Hamburg Chute. Benthic trawls yielded no age-0 sturgeon, but did collect 3 age-0 Paddlefish. Sampling results from chute sampling in June are presented below (Table 1). All age-0 sturgeon collected so far have been sampled with larval drift nets. One Pallid Sturgeon was collected with the benthic trawl and was a hatchery origin fish that was 500 mm in length.
* **Table 1.** Sampling effort in Segment 9 for the Habitat Assessment and Monitoring Program – the number of gear deployments and fish collected.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Sampling Sites | * OT04 Trawls * (Number Deployed) | * Larval Drift * (Minutes Sampled) |
| * Upper Hamburg Chute (RM 555) | * 34 | * 238 |
| * Lower Hamburg Chute (RM 553) | * 39 | * 255 |
| * Total Fish | * 342 | * - |
| * Age-0 Sturgeon | * 0 | * 12 |
| * PDSG | * 1 | * - |
| * PDFH | * 3 | * 0 |
| * SGCB | * 1 | * - |

**Dusty Schelbitzki, Wildlife:**

* Pollinator Workshop in Ponca
* Wildlife, Management Section Meeting
* R3 Summit @ NOEC
* Quail Whistle Counts
* 2019-20 Mt. Lion Season
* Burn Plans / Resumes / Wildfire Response
* Safety (Emphasized this point to all staff)
* Big Game (turkey survey, permits)
* Depredation Complaints (please get these to me)
* Flooding in SE District
* Deer Check (CT’s still on will help somewhere)

**Osage WMA, Wildlife (Mike Remund, Kyle Smith, Chris Coonce, Cody Dreier):**

* Flood issues remain @ Peru Bottoms, Peru Boat Ramp, and Langdon Bend. Kyle and I were able to get onto Peru Bottoms by boat two weeks ago. Two complete levee breeches and one partial along east boundary of the WMA. Fences, parking lots, well and control panel still under 4-5 ft. water and too early to assess damage. Peru Boat Ramp facility is inaccessible due to bridge out on access road leading from Peru. Langdon Bend access road still closed, but wells, transformers and control panels remain above flood water.
* Potential plans for 4 growing season burns at Pawnee Prairie, Burchard Lake, Hickory Ridge and Bowwood. Primary goal to reduce S. lespedeza and invading brush. Last year’s burns @ Osage & Burchard Lake would indicate reduced lespedeza and brush, also with some improvement in plant diversity.
* Completed Johnson, Pawnee, Nemaha Co. bobwhite whistle count surveys. Numbers significantly down compared to last year.
* Began dove trapping and banding July 1. 100 banded, 140 to go.

**Krista Lang, Northern Prairies Land Trust:**

* Researcher Dr. Sabrina Russo from UNL is putting in a long term forest research plot at ICSP to follow tree survival and provide a baseline for climate change over time. Her crew will be working on surveys from July until sometime in the fall.
* Understory thinning at ICSP planned for this summer has been delayed by contractor problems, but may still happen this summer, or perhaps next year.
* Prairie restoration at ICSP is underway, including overseeding wildflowers on ridge-top prairies and in other grasslands. Shredding brush in grasslands/oak savannas will be done this winter to facilitate burning, invasive plant control, and wildflower establishment. Additional wildflower seed collecting will be done this summer, with seeds spread this coming winter.
* Growing season burns to control invasive sericea lespedeza are planned for some private properties later this summer.

**Neal Van Winkle, Wildlife:**

* Quail counts down on both routes.
* Spraying sericia and brush (mostly dogwood).
* Still boating to Schilling Headquarters.  About 27-28 inches of water over road yet.
* Got tractor out from Schilling Headquarters that was a flood victim.  Runs great.

**Jason Luebbe, Bryce Schilousky, Steve Smith, Branched Oak Wildlife:**

* Ran Quail route. I was up 2 from last year (7.5%) in northern Butler County and also heard many pheasant crows.
* Spraying Sericea.
* Southeast Goose banding.
* Flew Jack Sinn looking for Phragmites.
* Prepping fields for wheat and alfalfa.

**Travis Kopf, Brook Fox, Wildlife:**

* Flew helicopter survey for Phragmites @ Jack Sinn
* Banded geese in the Sandhills
* Working with the Lincoln Branch of the Big Game Conservation Association on a few projects
* Plenty of noxious weed control

**Shon Thelen, Wildlife, Lincoln**

* Noxious weed and brush spraying on the Field Trial Area and several other WMA’s.
* Respond to nuisance animal calls.
* Goose banding in the Southeast.

**Meridian WMA, Wildlife (Brad Seitz, Rick Souerdyke, James Sluka, Jacob Durflinger):**

* Dove Banding- great start 196 so far
* Veg. Control- all areas, multiple target species
* General Maintenance- signs, parking lots, gates, equipment, etc.
* Quail Routes- NBCI and Spring Whistle counts, both showing slight declines
* Climate Change Workshop- extremely educational
* Fall Foodplot planning and prep
* Growing Season Burn prep and planning

**Eric Fowler, Communications**

* Noted photo flights of the Missouri River, Platte River, and other flood-impacted areas
* Invited the group to submit story ideas

**Kirk Hansen, Wildlife, Salt Valley:**

* Noxious weed control including: Musk thistle, Phragmites, Serecia.
* Tree and brush control including spraying and hack-n-spray techniques on WMA’s.
* Meeting with contractors on upcoming habitat share contract work.
* Quail route Branched Oak route down from past two years about 40%.

**Bruce Sprague, Pheasants Forever:**

* CRP- Currently available for only a few Continuous practices.
  + Filter-Strips, Riparian Buffers, Waterway, and a couple wetland practices are the ones that pertain to Nebraska
  + No more SIP-Signing Incentive Payment (used to equal a one-time payment of $150-$100 per acre)
  + No more PIP – Practice Incentive Payment (additional 40% cost-share making it 90% cost-share for landowners)
  + Payment Rates are only 90% of the county average.
  + Cropping history dates have changed to having to be farmed 4 out of the 6 years between 2012-2017
  + No more cost-share available for Mid-Contract-Management practices, but it is still required
  + Contracts expiring this year are eligible for a one year extension
  + There will be a General CRP sign-up in December
* EQIP- We received another 5% increase for funding for wildlife projects. Now 10% of the states total EQIP funds are set aside for wildlife practices.
  + Cost-share only program that covers approximately 75% of the practice cost
  + A few examples of practices that can be utilized in EQIP are: Native seed mixtures, prescribed burning, brush management, shrub plantings.
  + Some counties are eligible for RCPP-EQIP
    - The Grassland Bird Initiative-RCPP is basically the same as EQIP-WIN but only has funding for one more year
    - Please contact a NGPC Private Lands Biologist or Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist for more information about this program.
* Pathway for Wildlife – New Pheasants Forever Program that has 3 different categories:
  + Pathway For Grassland- Ex. Rangeland, Wasteland, Pastureland
  + Pathway For Precision Ag- Ex. Cropland, Corner Buffers, Cover Crops
  + Pathway For Community Habitat- Ex. Parks, Schools, Retirement Centers, Community Green Spaces
    - 1 – 3 year contracts
    - No cropping history is required
    - Incentive payments
    - 75%-100% cost-share
    - Annual payments are available– rates vary across the state

**Adam Jones, Superintendent, Indian Cave SP**

* Took lateral to Buffalo Bill Ranch SP; Transferring soon
* Noted that the Park is now on rural water!
* The Boat Ramp road is still closed, due to flooding; water is lowering some, but the gravel access road is now growing grass and weeds (due to sediment)
* The road leading to the namesake “Indian Cave” is closed due to the bluff having sloughed in numerous places; Frequent rain this spring ultimately caused the sloughing; portions of the Cave’s boardwalk are buried and damaged; Pursuing contractor bids to remove material

**SE District Law Enforcement (Submitted by Matt Seitz)**

* Game Wardens Hiring up to Six new positions closing for the posting is early August
* Southeast Supervisor interviews have been held just waiting to announce appointment
* Southeast lakes have not been out of control usual behavior and suspects
* Electronic Tickets now being issued on site
* Lake Mac was busy over 4th of July weekend; High water creating competition for space
* Drowning at Two Rivers
* Fish Kill at Burchard Lake

**Jeff Jackson, Aaron Blank, Jordan Katt, Mathew Perrion, Fisheries:**

* Restocked Largemouth Bass and Bluegill in several lakes that experienced fish kills
* Initiated boating access project at Standing Bear which will be started in the fall of 2020
* Completed fingerling walleye stockings at 4 reservoirs
* Summarizing data and aging scales and spines
* Picked up new electroshocking boat
* Hired Mathew Perrion to replace Tony as Biologist II in SE District
* Helped with fishing event at Willard Meyer

**Kent Pfeiffer, Northern Prairies Land Trust**

* Continuing NNLP project work for “at-risk species”; Working on both private and public lands (i.e. ICSP, Rock Creek Station SHP)
* Emphasis on fire implementation on the landscape; This was a challenging fire year due to rain; Still provided assistance to multiple LOs, with ~5K acres burned; Noted that this was about 10% of needed acres and much less than previous years

**Chance Brueggerman, Biologist, Northern Prairies Land Trust:**

* Currently, Reagan Hoover, Andrew Pavel, and I are continuing our control efforts on the state noxious weed, sericea lespedeza, to further promote native plant diversity in our open oak woodlands and grasslands at the park.
* On July 17 I taught a mushroom ID course at the Lauritzen Garden facility. The first hour we discussed how to successfully ID mushrooms and the next hour we took to the field put what we learned into action. I will be leading another mushroom ID course at Lauritzen Gardens on the 27th.
* Also at Indian Cave State Park, we are getting our gear ready to help control Caucasian Bluestem, an invasive grass that is invading Rock Creek Stations grasslands. Rock Creek Station is one of our Legacy demonstration sites.

**Michele Fuhrer Hurt, Wildlife:**

* Kirkman’s Cove NRD property-assess sericea lespedeza from 2018 growing season burn-burn was spotty and low intensity but still had a high rate of kill on all sericea plants; NRD thought spraying this summer would take 1 hour versus 1 day in burned area.
* MQI spring surveys complete-total number of whistling quail I heard compared to previous 3 years was about a 30% decrease
* Iron Horse NRD PR project is behind schedule due to wet weather; NRD has extended contract to allow contractor to complete the work; Contractor on-site and working now
* OFW contract renewals and drops are complete/site checks for new potential contracts
* BPP-made payments on burn contracts completed in spring; continuing with site visits on potential projects
* Partners Section Meeting  in NE City-helped plan and attended
* Office relocation is ongoing

**Sam Cowan, Wildlife:**

* Developed 3 "new" OFW contracts; Pulled signs on the 9 OFW’s that dropped.  5 of those had the LO pass & family decided to hunt it themselves.  The other 4 had CRP that expired & did not renew.
* \*Completed MQI quail surveys.  Personal observation was there are still quail out there, just not as many as the previous 2 years.  (Very scientific huh?)
* \*Looked at a couple of potential tree projects in the  SEPOA/BPP area.  Had a site showing on one south of Hebron on 7/11/19.
* \*Had Krista Lang talk about “growing season” burn results on Slominski property.
* \*Attended section meeting @ Nebraska City 7/8 thru 7/10.
* Assisted with numerous Rx Fires with Beatrice crew (Kent, Krista, Chance [NPLT], Michele, & participating landowners in Sandstone Prairie & Southeast Tallgrass Prairie BUL's.
* Completed MQI Surveys

**Scott Luedtke, Wildlife:**

* **OFW**: District staff finalized 85 renewal contracts; 17 drops/3 adds; 7 drops were CRP expirations; 3 were leased; 7 were pulled for family reasons; 3 adds contained CRP; We lost portions of CRP on 10 additional sites and gained CRP acres on 2; One sold site was re-enrolled by the new LO; Habitat upgrades done on 8 sites; 6 upgrade contracts in place; Beyond renewals, 11 additional sites were contacted about upgrades, based on CRP expiration dates (no takers; LOs are only wanting to do what is required by FSA; This will be a problem in the east where moisture drives vegetation and especially with no MCM c/s on future CRP contracts); ~210 active contracts in SE District (Down from a high of 290 sites when CRP acres were at their peak)
* **BPP**: Laux sent ~900 OFW postcards to SEPOA CRP LOs-No responses; Statewide news release (1; resulted in 2 new contracts with significant CRP); phone calls (0; Want more money mostly); USDA contacts (0); FBWB (0); Multiple habitat projects ongoing in SEPOA area.
* **Farm Bill**: (Provided a brief discussion on CRP changes; **Note Bruce Sprague’s comments above**).
* **New FBWB Positions**: Evan Liable, Fairbury; John McClinton, Lincoln; These two positions were hired to replace staff that left for other opportunities; The GI position was recently vacated by Bryan O’Connor, who is with NGPC in Kearney now.
* **Missouri River**: Discussed NGPC involvement in providing LO options using Disaster Relief easements via USDA; Reached out to USACE on MRMIT authority for residual land acquisition or outright purchase; Trying to engage with USACE on levee repair projects requiring spoil, to maximize wildlife benefits (No responses from USACE); Many landowners have expressed interest in selling their land, but do not have entities positioned to acquire. These same LOs will likely be forced to pursue USDA CPE funds to recover flood-impacted sites. Many of these are the same LOs likely to be impacted by future flood events.
* **Completed MQI bird surveys in the MQI reference area**: Quail were clearly down early, but later surveys appear to be only slightly down. Waiting on actual results.
* **Other significant activities**:
  + Attended the Climate Change workshop: Planning process used at workshop is applicable to other planning efforts; Practicality of CC options relates strongly to the species and scale applied [i.e. Salt Creek Tiger Beetle vs. NA Waterfowl]; Ecological processes [i.e. “form and function”] still required for all applied options; Process largely an adaptive management feedback loop; Doesn’t overcome invasive species threats [i.e. C3 species increasing with winter-spring moisture].
  + Attended Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Meeting in Ohio: Private lands workgroup discussed Farm Bill program policies, R3 issues, Decline and management of bobwhite quail over significant portions of its range.
  + Coordinated with District staff to host the recent Habitat Partners Section meeting; Provided a Missouri River presentation

**Kevin Holliday, Regional Park Superintendent:**

* Indian Cave - Completing bids for mudslide cleanup at cave area. 7 inch rain in May caused major mudslides onto the lower cave road. Access to cave is temporarily closed at this time.
* Christmas in July - This weekend at Indian Cave, many activities for families to enjoy on Friday and Saturday.
* Rural water is near completion. Rural water has been turned on however, finishing pump operations, telemetry and disconnecting from our water treatment plant.
* Riverview marina - Closed since March due to high water from the Missouri river. Major cleanup will need to take place once waters recede.
* Rock Creek SHP and SRA - New bathhouse in place and open for use.
* New pressure tanks added and working good.
* Lagoon is complete and in operation.
* Trails day and living history events were very successful activities for our guest.
* Branched Oak, Pawnee and Salt Valley lakes - High visitation. Near full capacity for camping. Thank you to the Law enforcement for their continued assistance in enforcing the rules and regulations at these areas.
* Carp-o-rama at Branched Oak - Very successful event with many fisherman and families who took part in this event. Many carp were caught, cleaned and served. Thank you to fisheries for their hard work in producing a great family event.

Respectfully Submitted by Scott Luedtke, District Manager