

## Hidalgo County PLAC

February 5, 2014

### Minutes

The meeting was called to order at 3:05 p.m. Judy asked everyone to introduce themselves.

In attendance: Judy Keeler, Walt Anderson, Meira Gault, Jimmy Stewart, Chuck McGhee, Roger Payne, Butch Mayfield, PLAC; Darr Shannon, Commissioner, Stephen Gault, Robert Barrera, Bradley Springer, Jennifer Ruyle, Jamie Kingsbury and Kevin Warner, Coronado National Forest, guests.

#### Guests:

Bradley Springer, Hidalgo County Attorney, introduced himself explaining he was there to discuss the predator ordinance the PLAC passed at their last meeting.

He stated the ordinance appeared to cloak local concerns about the Mexican Wolf and might invite a legal challenge. He also felt the predators listed in the ordinance should be limited. He believed it might be a little too early to pass this type of ordinance since negotiations were still ongoing with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's wolf expansion proposal. He suggested an ordinance that mirrors Luna and Catron Counties' wolf ordinances might be more appropriate since it had already withstood a court challenge. Discussion followed.

Judy explained she had been in on many meetings with federal and state agencies, non-government organizations and the public regarding endangered species. Based on her experiences, she was hoping the ordinance would be proactive and would make a statement that Hidalgo County was empowering its citizens to protect themselves, their property and their families from predators that might be reintroduced and/or allowed to recolonize in the area. After more discussion, Bradley was asked to look into the Apache County wolf/predator ordinance and any Arizona initiatives that might be on their table.

Jimmy Stewart moved the predator ordinance be tabled, seconded by Roger Payne. The motion passed unanimously.

Jennifer Ruyle, CNF Forest Planner, explained the Forest Service is required by the National Forest Strategic Act of 1978 to do a strategic planning document and update it every 10-15 years. The first strategic plan was completed in 1986. The present Draft Plan is their second attempt to update the '86 plan.

After many public meetings one consistent theme was heard. The participants wanted their forests managed in much the same way they had always been managed.

The Service determined there were five (5) priority topic areas that needed to be addressed: 1) More treatments to prevent catastrophic wildfires and to protect and restore ecosystems; 2) More public access; 3) Better visitor experiences. Safety is now of greater concern than in the past. The Service, however, is limited because they are not a law

enforcement agency; 4) Preserve open space. Not a lot the Service can do within their boundaries but they can encourage preservation of surrounding areas; 5) Do a better job working together with their partners.

The Service kept a lot of the goals from the old plan but hopefully improved the language and provided better direction in the new plan.

A Desire Conditions statement has been added in hopes of painting a picture of what the Service hopes to achieve. The goals statement will help determine how the desired conditions will be achieved. The Standards and Guidelines statement will provide constraints on the Service's projects, i.e. avoid projects in certain habitat areas for specific species. The District Rangers will have the flexibility, using best management practices, to determine what, where, when and how projects will be undertaken by the Service and their partners on a local level.

The only two suitable uses the Forest Service is required, by law, to consider is timber harvesting and livestock grazing. In addition to these two uses, the Service evaluated about 12 other activities to determine which were suitable and could be permitted, i.e. motorized transportation. There is also a new chapter on monitoring where measurable goals and time frames are defined. Discussion followed.

One PLAC member expressed their concerns with the difficulty of following the Service's train of thinking when organizing the Draft Plan. For instance, one must know what the plan calls for regarding a specific vegetation community then try to find how the management criteria for this vegetative community will be applied in their specific area. Another questioned the wisdom of singling out particular areas for special management; i.e., mesic microenvironments for talusnails in Skull Canyon; when writing a general criterion for the whole management area might suffice.

Several PLAC members questioned the ability to access the forest. They presented a specific plan for a road that would provide access to both the northern and southern portions of the Peloncillo forest. Recognizing one of the desired future conditions is to improve access, they felt there were no specifics on how this would be achieved.

Jennifer explained access into the Peloncillos is addressed on page 134 of the plan. Discussion followed on ways to open up access into the forest. Another PLAC member asked how the travel management plan fits into this plan.

Kevin explained it had been a challenge to have continuity on the Travel Management Plan between the times Bill Edwards left the Douglas District and the hiring of a new ranger. As the new District Ranger, he had reinvigorated the Travel Plan. They have organized all the comments that were received. A meeting with their interdisciplinary (ID) team will held on Friday, Feb 7th, to discuss each team member's particular position. The ID team is made up of different disciplines including; archeologists, wildlife biologists, range etc. These concerns will be organized and documented to be addressed in an Environmental Assessment (EA). When completed, the EA will be available for public review and comment.

Kevin explained the Travel Plan only looks at existing roads. Punching in a road, as suggested by the PLAC, is not precluded. However, it will have to be done through another process at a later date.

Kevin also explained that district rangers often wrestle with what the public would like to see in their areas and what the Service allows through direction and guidance criterion. Discussion followed on how long Hidalgo County and the PLAC had tried to work with the Service to preserve access into the Peloncillo forest.

Another PLAC member questioned the future conditions statement on vegetation communities, especially the grasses. A discussion on the take-over of Lehman Love grass, a non-native plant, introduced by the Forest Service and the resulting reduction of animal units in the Dragoons ensued.

According to Jennifer, the Service recognizes that Lehman Love grass is here to stay and utilization should be 25-45%. They do allow for heavier grazing under certain conditions. Some districts have found if Lemans is grazed early in the spring native grass populations will increase. The Service has also changed to plant frequency tests instead of the Parker 3 step. Jennifer added they are trying to make their desired future conditions achievable and now they're doing monitoring. If the conditions are not achievable then they will do adaptive management. Allotment Management Plans usually address particular concerns of the permittee.

Judy expressed her concerns with the collaborators and cooperators listed in the management approaches on page 135. She felt the County should be included since it had a Memorandum of Understanding with the Service. Explaining the County wants to be a partner with the Service, she gave copies of the Hidalgo County Natural Resources Land Use Plan to Jennifer and Kevin.

Jennifer encouraged the PLAC to send in comments on the Draft Plan and apologized for not including the obvious involvement of the County. Discussion followed regarding the frustrations local governments feel when trying to work with federal agencies. Everyone agreed Counties should be included in the planning process.

Another person addressed access into the forest, not only for hunters and recreationalists, but for law enforcement also. He felt the forest lands were dangerous because law enforcement was limited in their ability to access certain areas. Also of concern was how NM Game and Fish Dept was managing hunting opportunities in the Forest - too many hunters are being forced into ever increasing smaller areas because of road closures and illegal fencing.

It was suggested that someone in the Forest Service office be responsible for ensuring access remains available when an allotment changes hands.

Also of concern was the increase in size of the Bunk Robinson and Whitmire Canyon Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). Several of the PLAC members remembered these WSAs as being much smaller on older maps. Discussion followed on WSAs. Jennifer explained only

an act of Congress can get a WSA released for a Wilderness designation. After discussion, it was assumed the Service had combined the Roadless Area and WSA areas into the current map.

Kevin gave the PLAC an update on the District plans. The Douglas District is currently undertaking a mastication project to thin the manzanita on the Buckhorn pasture. The Cloverdale Cienega project was also discussed. Several projects have been completed on the private lands near this cienega but the EA has yet to be completed. The Service is also doing several small projects to ensure the watershed is not impaired during the prescribed fires called for in the Peloncillo Fire Plan. They're hoping to do more thinning projects across the whole District. The turkey project has been put on hold because the Turkey Federation, proponents of the project, had a staff member get sick. This work was to be done through a grant from the Forest Service. Hopefully these types of grants will encourage partner groups to propose restoration projects in the forests.

Old Business: Judy reminded the PLAC of a discussion about WSAs at their last meeting. Since this meeting, Deming Soil and Water, Luna County and Hidalgo Soil and Water have all passed a version of the proposed resolution she sent the PLAC. Discussion followed. It was decided to drop the number of WSAs in the County from the resolution. Meira moved the PLAC present the amended WSA resolution to the Commissioners for their approval, seconded by Roger Payne. The motion passed unanimously.

New Business: Judy stated that Dennis Parker is doing comments on the Coronado National Forest and did the PLAC want to ask the Commission to work with Dennis on a set of comments. Discussion followed.

She then introduced Robert Barrera to the PLAC as a potential member. Jimmy moved that Robert Barrera be recommended to the Commission as a new PLAC member, seconded by Meira. The motion passed unanimously.

Judy then identified the present officers as being herself as Chair, Jimmy Stewart as Vice Chair and Meira Gault as Secretary. She asked if there were nominates from the floor. Roger moved the officers stand as posted, seconded by Chuck. The motion passed unanimously.

One PLAC member mentioned his appreciation of the BLM update that had been sent out. A brief discussion followed regarding the hunting pressures placed on southern New Mexico, specifically Hidalgo County, by the New Mexico Game and Fish Department.

The minutes of the meeting were then presented for discussion. Roger moved, seconded by Butch the minutes be approved as written. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 5:40 p.m. The next meeting will be May 7th.

Respectfully submitted

Judy Keeler, Temporary Secretary