

Mono County Collaborative Planning Team

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MEETING NOTES

July 25, 2013
(Adopted 10.31.13)

Members Present: Larry Johnston, Mono Supervisors; Jon Regelbrugge, USFS/Inyo; Gayle Rosander, Caltrans; John Eastman, Town of Mammoth Lakes; Doug Power, Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center; Steve Nelson & Becca Brooke, BLM; Deanna Dulen, Devils Postpile National Monument; Carl Benz, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service/Ventura (by phone)

Members Absent: Mike Crawley, USFS/Humboldt-Toiyabe; Mike Gauthier, Yosemite National Park; Justin Nalder, Bridgeport Indian Colony; Chris Plakos, LADWP; Debra Hawk, CDFW; Adora Saulque, Benton Paiutes

Staff Present: Scott Burns, Wendy Sugimura, Courtney Weiche, Gerry Le Francois, C.D. Ritter

Guests Present: Kay Ogden, Eastern Sierra Land Trust; Jim Leddy, Mono CAO

1. CALL TO ORDER/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE/INTRODUCTIONS: Acting chair Larry Johnston called the meeting to order at 9:11 a.m. and the pledge of allegiance was recited. No introductions.

2. PUBLIC COMMENT: Kay Ogden, Eastern Sierra Land Trust, announced Sinnamon Meadows (actual spelling) acquisition by end of 2013. The ESLT's annual benefit will be held Aug. 3.

3. MEETING NOTES:

MOTION: Approve meeting notes from April 25, 2013. (*Ayes: All but two abstentions.*)

4. AGENCY ROUNDTABLE: Members presented agency planning issues & pending projects.

5. MOUNTAIN YELLOW-LEGGED FROG/YOSEMITE TOAD: Carl Benz, USFWS, presenting by phone from Ventura, acknowledged attention and concern in Inyo and Mono counties. He contrasted "endangered" (likely to become extinct soon) with "threatened" (likely to become endangered). FWS is looking at proposal published April 25, 2013, to list Mountain Yellow-Legged Frog and Yosemite Toad to determine threat severity. Critical habitat is essential to species recovery. Primary constituent elements are biological and physical features for conservation of species, which involves breeding, feeding, connectivity of adjacent populations, and long-term subsistence as well as unexpected factors such as climate change.

Why list? Back in February 2000, two entities petitioned species at risk, and in October 2000 a full status review of species was completed. Although both species were indeed at risk, other at-risk species were identified as higher priorities. Petitioners wanted a due date of the final decision. Public was concerned with inadequate review time and requested extension plus public hearings/workshops (east and west of Sierra) in autumn. Official open comment period would coincide with economic analysis. Comments would be incorporated into administrative record, analysis, and final findings, which could differ from initial proposal due to comments. An outside firm would be contracted to determine economic impact.

Listing requires agencies to consult with FWS so their actions won't jeopardize species recovery. The FWS works with them to minimize harm/injury that could occur from a project or activity. Critical habitat affects only federal agencies; ensure actions would not adversely modify critical habitat. Economic analysis will examine how changes in projects or management might affect local economics. Strongly encourage looking at proposal to list,

identify missing or misrepresented information to help make best decision. Proposed rules are out for peer review to double-check science applied. Next steps are public comment, workshops, public hearing (formal structure with FWS, court reporter, chair of hearing – no discussion, just presentation, comments written or spoken). Economic analysis will be released in September or October.

Colored GIS maps of Mono were distributed, noting sites such as Saddlebag Lake, Lee Vining Canyon, and Rock Creek Lake. Businesses are oriented to recreation in canyons. Could economics trump scientific conclusions? Areas can be excluded for economic reasons, but need to look at why. Review management action plans of federal agencies that may affect listed species. What actions are needed to promote conservation by ability of species to exist, reproduce to keep populations viable? Allow actions to go forward but minimize impacts. Threats include disease, fungus, and water sources. Yes, overriding economic concerns exist, but federal agencies consult on actions that may affect species. People like a healthy environment for their enjoyment.

John Eastman, longtime resident, gets out weekly to enjoy the High Sierra. He noted that in the Sabrina Lake (Bishop) southeast drainage, a few small lakes used nets to get rid of fish. Trout removal brought back frog population with a vengeance. *Benz indicated species experts with State likely undertook actions.*

If species are listed, FWS must create recovery plan by team of scientists and stakeholders. Community effort on recovery plan would include private and public meetings to discuss lake basins, drainages, etc. Federal agencies are not obligated to implement recovery plan, but can lay out road map of bringing species back and getting off list.

Johnston expressed concerns focused on “then what” if listed. Lakes Basin is a huge economic engine. Would listing close campgrounds and prohibit fishing or hiking? How would public know what listing really means?

Benz described listing of birds, where areas were taped off, identified as nesting areas and closed during breeding season, but open during non-breeding season.

Johnston noted fear factor in both counties makes it difficult to see real impacts. Public is up in arms, he said. Is Town concerned about Lakes Basin? How would listing affect Yosemite?

Benz noted critical habitat map requires federal agencies to promote conservation of species. Some areas could be excluded due to conservation plans in place. Questions of fear can be raised at public workshops.

Jon Regelbrugge acknowledged that much of designated critical habitat lies within Inyo National Forest (INF). Critical habitat might be larger than occupied habitat. INF must consult with FWS if it believes ongoing activities can affect listed species. If species is listed, in position of violating rule if conduct ongoing activities? Already prohibited in designated wilderness. Screen all areas where species are believed to exist today, review activities there, engage FWS in conferencing discussion while rule is pending. Come to agreements on which activities could result in “take.” What if entities want consultation on areas of economic importance? *Benz cited work flow and timing issues, as FWS is responding to court-ordered settlement due dates.* Regelbrugge indicated regional Vallejo office is looking at staffing changes to respond to listing effects on ongoing activities and reassigning staff to work on this across three national forests.

Benz indicated Sacramento office mostly would identify priorities to help provide request needs. Sequestration precludes hiring.

Johnston opined it’s not really fair to proclaim something like critical habitat and then cite insufficient staff to respond to public input. If taking action that’s potentially significant, need staff to react; creates public perception of Catch-22. He thought the listing decision should be postponed due to lack of manpower to legitimize the process.

6. BIOMASS FEASIBILITY STUDY: Wendy Sugimura distributed a document compiled by Dan Lyster, Larry Johnston, and Sugimura. No funding was available for two years, and then grant funding from air control district and State was awarded. Technical data collection is under way. An interagency effort is looking for suitable facility sites. Transportation to biomass facility is most expensive. Technical side is conversion to heat or energy as well as environmental impacts such as air emission and noise. Mono is leading the effort, but does not want to own or operate the facility. Currently, more questions exist than answers.

Johnston noted a good consultant and money for feasibility study. Concern with biomass started back with fire chief doing management activities that accumulated slash. Sugimura cited healthy forests goal.

Regelbrugge indicated the actual machine is small, but biomass storage takes up lots of space. Issues exist with Benton Crossing landfill. He met with Tony Dublino re waste-processing facility on USFS land via land transfer.

Cardboard to biomass? *Feed-stock stream has specific parameters on what can be used. Not sure about paper products instead of straight wood. Inclusion in waste stream depends on type of equipment.*

Nelson suggested looking at pinyon and juniper, which threaten sage grouse habitat.

7. MONO COUNTY TRAILS: Courtney Weiche spoke of Mono trails efforts in various communities. Paradise: Small working group recognizes existing trails, bike climbing lane, walking path, trailhead improvements at mountain bike trail terminus. Long Valley: Updating area plan, looking at trail connections, analyzing survey results,

and considering a trail to Mammoth. June Lake: Working on Down Canyon trail from Gull Lake campground to Yost Creek and Double Eagle. Grant funds are pursued for trail construction. Mono Basin: Collaborative effort on connecting Lee Vining community to Lee Vining Canyon. At open houses tribal concerns arose about trail proximity to creek. Early stages include mapping where trail could go. Goal is Yosemite, but constraints exist. Bridgeport Valley: Identify existing non-controversial trails. A Sierra Nevada Conservancy intern is working on getting maps published soon. Second phase is longer-term planning effort to improve trail system for mountain-biking community, viewed as a growing economic sector. Antelope Valley: Connect Mountain Gate recreation area to Walker and add pedestrian facilities. Tri-Valley: No information available.

Scott Burns mentioned an Eastern Sierra Regional Trails system discussed a few years ago. Tourism commission liked the potential umbrella concept. Mono Supervisors held a workshop that showed interest in trails, but concern for maintenance.

8. BRIDGEPORT MULTI-AGENCY OFFICE & VISITOR CENTER: Wendy Sugimura recalled a 10-year conversation on this topic. Humboldt-Toiyabe is looking for office space, and many agencies are participating. Overlap could improve visitor experience. The facility would be located in Bridgeport, providing easy access with parking (integrated into, but not dominating the project), restrooms, pet area, retail sales, and art/event venue. Also included would be office space, conference room, and medical clinic. Site possibilities include former Buster's Market and two parcel assemblages. Properties are listed for sale, but owners have not been contacted. Mono County would like to find a third-party developer to purchase, construct, own, operate, and maintain the facility. Conceptual site plans were shown. Balance would be sought between office (paid by Humboldt-Toiyabe), visitor center and interpretive space. Strict federal requirements are involved. CHP has interest in relocating its facility or leasing space.

9. MISCELLANEOUS REPORTS

A. Land Adjustment Subcommittee: Steve Nelson, BLM, became committee chair after Bernadette Lovato was promoted to a new position in Carson City. The subcommittee met recently. A land transfer between Humboldt-Toiyabe and Marine base is complete. As mentioned in public comment, ESLT is acquiring Sinnamon Meadows. Small projects also are being considered. Kay Ogden confirmed two potential projects near Benton.

10. FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS: 1) frogs/toads; 2) biomass; 3) visitor center; 4) DEPO visitor stats; 5) sage grouse status; 6) forest plan revision

11. ADJOURN at 11:55 a.m. to Thursday, Oct. 31, 2013, at 9 a.m.

Prepared by C.D. Ritter, CPT secretary