

2023 AWCP Summer Meeting
Monday, August 7 – Wednesday, August 9

This semi-annual meeting was held in Big Sky, Montana on August 7-9, 2023. This was the summer meeting. There is a winter meeting that is held in conjunction with the North American Wildlife and Natural Resource Conference. We were not able to attend the winter meeting. NAFSR has been an AWCP partner for many years. Kevin Martin attended this meeting for NAFSR.

First, I'll start with a little background information about the AWCP: In 2000 the Boone and Crockett Club organized an historical conservation summit that has had a profound impact on the future of wildlife. This meeting resulted in the creation of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners – a coalition of 35 wildlife organizations. Today, AWCP has grown to over 50 organizations that represent the interests of America's millions of hunter-conservationists, professional wildlife and natural resource managers, outdoor recreation users, conservation educators, and wildlife scientists.

Individual organizations each have their areas of interest, collectively all are dedicated to ensuring the vitality of our wildlife resources, providing sustainable public use and enjoyment of those resources under science-based management of the state and federal fish and wildlife agencies, in cooperation with habitat and land management by federal, state, county, and local governments.

Many of these are our (USFS) long-time partners, who have been working with the agency on planning and implementing, including bringing resources, expertise, and funding to the table. These organizations look on the agencies as partners and are willing to support us with Congress and Administrations to assure wildlife interests are being met and a priority.

The meeting itself was well attended. Representatives were there from the many wildlife and sportsmen/women organizations as well as several agencies. The summer meetings are much shorter and focused more on AWCP working groups and actions and are not tied to the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, and so are less attended by agency and administration representatives.

The Biden Administration representative was USFWS Director Martha Williams and some of her staff. She spent quite a bit of time with the group. She emphasized landscape resiliency, climate change, lead concerns, and partnerships. There was discussion around funding and agency capacity, worry about the pipeline of new professionals and lack of applicants for advertised positions. She was aware of many of the concerns of the group and was interested in working directly with organizations on issues. She has an emphasis on direct, open, and often communications. She understood the issues and wanted to find ways to address them together.

We spent most of the meeting working on the AWCP's identified Legislative Priorities, each of which was covered in detail, with identified lead organizations covering the topic and taking suggestions and questions from the larger group.

Recovering America's Wildlife Act (NWF, CSF, AFWA, DU, B&C) - the desire is for dedicated funding. This Act is to get ahead of the Federal listing process by providing the States resources. Chairman Westerman is working on a draft house bill, with the Senate expected to be much the same. There is a lot of good communication on this potential bill.

2023 Farm Bill – they are not expecting this to be completed and passed by October 1, expecting an extension. The House side is looking to revamp/retool the CRP program, with less emphasis on wildlife and soil benefits. There was discussion that due to so many new members who have never worked on or passed a Farm Bill, this increased unknowns and uncertainty.

There was a lot of discussion and support for forest management in the Farm Bill. This would include both private and public lands. They discussed the forest conservation easement program (FCEP) was introduced into the House in May and into the Senate two weeks ago. The purpose is to keep private forest lands in forest use through conservation easements. The largest issue in Congress appears to be either mandatory or appropriated funding. Some concerns if this would be used to supplement Forest Legacy, which is a Forest Service program. It was determined this was a distinct program for private land and not public lands.

There continued to be interest in enhancing the Good Neighbor authority, adding Tribes and NGOS with the States. High support in the House.

Cottonwood fix – the House and the Senate has passed bills out of committee and are trying to get to the floor for a vote. The environmental community has been pushing back. This is important to get completed as to the continuing risk of additional litigation. This needs to happen this session as the partial fix has expired. The Western Governors Association is supportive and pushing as well.

Save the Sequoias – this is important to now get across the finish line.

Regulatory Reform/Permit Reform for Conservation Restoration Projects – permits and regulations are getting in the way of restoration projects on the ground. This will be tricky to move forward so as not to cause additional unforeseen issues.

America's Outdoor Recreation Act - little movement though the Senate Committee. Is this going to be part of a larger lands bill, which may move first? The Outdoor Recreation Bill currently includes a provision that "each BLM and FS jurisdiction" would provide a shooting range "Range Access Act". No funding is included to manage these.

Migration Corridors Authorization – looking to include more species, summer ranges. The authorizing bill is drafted and in circulation. Some agencies (FS, BLM, and USFWS) were concerned by loss of budget flexibility. The interest is in public, private and Tribal lands. Ongoing conversations are happening with multiple Governors.

2023 Lands Bill:

- Castle Mtns
- Ruby Mtns
- Community Empowerment of the Owyhee
- Protect CA Deserts
- IN Hoosier National Forest
- Greater Grand Canyon – proposed monument – designated this morning.
- Desert National Wildlife Refuge

RETURN Act – all AWCP organizations oppose – a bill from Congressman Clide of the Freedom Caucus.

Climate Change -

- o Carbon Credit Assurances – Western Governor Conference supports.
- o Tradeable Tax Credits/45Q for NCS – still on the drawing board

Excise Tax Slippage – unique to fishing and archery industries. Economic issues, folks purchasing online may not be paying tax, which is lost conservation dollars. All US manufacturers must pay. Senator Crapo asked for a study to be completed in 2024 to analyze.

The Grasslands Act aims to stop loss of grasslands. Forty percent of grasslands have been lost in the last thirty years. Senator Wyden had a bill in Senate last year, very large and complex. There is bipartisan support and if starts smaller this is one that likely could get done.

Appropriations Requests

- Chronic Wasting Disease – implementation of bill passed with an increase over 2023 funds. State agencies are aware of and applying for funds, including research requests.
- MAPLand – passed last year working on implementation and funding.
- Migration Corridors – in the President’s Budget.
- Feral Horses – \$147 million in 2023 – \$110 million for housing 60,000 animals. Exploring new authorities/options to deal with. There are 89,000 animals on the landscape with an MO of 27,000. The Fish and Wildlife Agencies passed a resolution last month to have the federal agencies deal with the issue.

Administrative Priorities -

- Federal Lands Hunting Fishing and Shooting Sports Roundtable - focus on recreational shooting, historical use and lead issues and concerns. My counterpart on the Public Land Foundation is a member and he has asked if I would be interested in participating.
- Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Interpretation – Department of Education and a few States are misinterpreting the bill language. Looking for a legislative fix and the Senate is working on a bill. There is a new letter out from AWCP asking the Secretary of Education to address.
- Hunt Fish Rule/Lead ammunition and tackle; Protecting Access for Hunters & Anglers Act – comment period ends August 22nd. Lots of response from hunting and fishing organizations.
- Categorical exclusion for sage-grouse and mule deer habitat – 7500 acres – new letter of support from AWCP is being signed. NAFSR has signed.
- FS Climate Rule – advanced notice – political press around mature and old growth. There is an interest in increasing landscape resiliency from AWCP members by increasing active forest management. There are potential deals ongoing and folks feel something is going to happen on this.
- Working Lands for Wildlife – this will be an Administration focus in the Farm Bill programs. Implementation is difficult for NRCS with capacity is more of an issue than funding.
- BLM Conservation Rule – final rule likely very different due to the comments. Expect something in the spring.
- AK Federal Subsistence Board – proposal to move office from USFW lead to BIA.
- Rangeland Health
 - o Grazing Permit Issues - many overdue/expired, huge backlog – looking for funding to accomplish. BLM is looking at streamlining the process utilizing new technology.

Development of Wildlife for the 21st Century – update and assign tasks to complete.

General Observations:

- These organizations want to work and partner with the agencies.

- They are very interested and supportive of working landscapes, including assuring our National Forests are actively and sustainably managed.
- Most have a lot of political leverage – that spans political parties.
- Many are well funded and willing to provide funding and political support.
- They work hard to assure adequate funding is available for the agencies, particularly associated with projects/legislation they are supporting.
 - o This seems like a discussion item for NAFSR – NAFSR appears to shy away from legislation that contains appropriations.
- These organizations appear good at getting funding resources to agencies, especially tied to legislation. They are quite proud of this.
- They have recognized that adequate funding is just one part of the implementation equation, that agency capacity is also needed for success. Agency capacity is going to be a focus area for AWCP.
- They are going to update “Wildlife for the 21st Century”. This is the AWCP’s conservation focus and recommendations for the White House and Congress for the coming years.

Kevin Martin
August 19, 2023