

INTERLOCAL HIGHLIGHTS, FEBRUARY 15, 2017

(Molly Shepherd, Lois Walker, Allen Chrisman)

The Winter 2017 North Fork Interlocal meeting was held on February 15, 2017 in the Community Building at Glacier National Park. Park Management Assistant Lauren Alley (responsible for public affairs and the park inholder program) presided. Some highlights of the meeting follow, based on notes taken during the meeting by Molly Shepherd and Lois Walker.

North Fork Compact - Don Sullivan expressed concern about the short-term zoning amendment, suggesting that many of the provisions are inappropriate for properties on the North Fork. [see briefing by Mark Mussman of Flathead County Planning at the end of the meeting]

North Fork Preservation Association - Bill Walker reported that the NFPA is working on legislative issues and keeping an eye on developments in Helena, particularly those affecting public lands. Their annual meeting will be held on July 29, 2017.

North Fork Landowners Association - President Randy Kenyon observed that the NFLA has had a quiet year. The focus for 2017 will be the association's 70th anniversary.

Molly Shepherd, co-chair of the NFLA's Fire Mitigation Committee, reported on plans for the annual Firewise Day workshop; on the status of the North Fork's current hazardous fuels grant (still working on the 4th grant with \$10K left), and on updating the North Fork Wildfire Mitigation and Planning Report (including mapping of fuels work accomplished since 2003). To date, North Fork landowners have contributed over \$80K in cost sharing or in-kind labor to fuels reduction projects. Flathead County is also updating its Community Wildfire Protection Plan. There will be a presentation at Flathead Valley Community College on April 25th, from 6-8 pm, on mega fires, hosted by DNRC. Bill Swope and Carol Daly from the Flathead Economic Policy Center were also in attendance.

North Fork Road Coalition for Health and Safety - Ray Brown asked the Forest Service about back country road access. The topic was addressed later in the program.

North Fork Trails Association - Bill Walker anticipates a busy summer, including reopening the Cleft Rock trail. He thanked the Border Patrol and several other organizations for working with them on trails projects.

Flathead National Forest - Rob Davies, Hungry Horse/Glacier View District Ranger, covered multiple topics on behalf of the Flathead Forest.

Personnel: The Forest Service had a scare when the new administration instituted a federal hiring freeze. The Agency now has been cleared to hire 2 seasonal workers, however. Recreation Director Chris Prew has transferred to the Forest Supervisor's Office in Kalispell; M.J. Crandall has been hired for the position.

Recreation: Forest Service personnel are monitoring river usage, Sondreson Meadow, and dispersed camping sites on the North Fork. They feel that public education is the key to the Sondreson Meadow human waste issue. They continue to work on a long-term solution, which may or may not include a toilet. And although the number of people using the river undeniably has increased, it's still within established standards—three or less encounters 80 percent of the time. [It was pointed out, however, that the counters are floating when they do their work, rather than standing on the shore, so obviously they see fewer people. Also, a party of multiple crafts is counted as one encounter.]

The Forest and the Park Service are working together on a comprehensive river plan. Their respective rangers coordinate their efforts. They will only have three seasonal people working the river this summer, and those folks also have to cover the Middle Fork. The Forest Service hosted a River Partnership meeting last year, with representatives from government, community organizations, rafting companies, fishermen, etc. It went very well, and they want to hold another meeting in April. It's a start, to achieve a balance on the river, between recreation and preservation.

Law Enforcement: The district only has one law enforcement person currently, for the 2 million acre Flathead National Forest, following the untimely death of Brad Treat.

Fire: Toby Thompson is the new fuels specialist. The district hopes to complete the landscape burn components of the Trail and Red Whale projects. They were unable to wrap them up last year due to wet weather. They're also considering a "Center Moose" logging/fuels plan. It's several years out, however.

Roads: The 2017 budget for road work is down about 30 percent. The district expects to blade about 30 miles of road.

Back-country road access and gated road usage: Core grizzly habitat and related road restrictions are set forth in the existing forest plan. They probably will remain the same in the new plan. There may be some exceptions for emergencies, in which case the Forest may brush out gated roads. One instrument they have is a 30-day administrative opening for specific purposes, and that has been helpful.

Forest Plan Revision: The Forest anticipates that it will have a draft decision and a final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in June 2017, on budget and on schedule. Comments on the draft decision will be limited to objections. A final decision is expected in late 2017 or early 2018. The new Flathead National Forest public affairs person, Janette Turk, was introduced.

Events: Requests to hold events on or across Forest Service land in the North Fork are increasing. Examples include ATV/UTV overflow parking in Moran Meadow last summer, prompting the need to mow the meadow; a dog sled race in February; an American Cycling tour; and a multi-sport event in August. Personnel try to vet proposals with members of the North Fork community.

Weeds: The district sprayed roadsides last year, with considerable success. They also have introduced weevils to control knapweed. It is only effective to spray in early summer when plants are growing.

FLAP Grant: Flathead Forest Staff Officer Gary Danczyk addressed the \$2 million Federal Lands Access Proposal (FLAP) grant (which was successfully selected last summer) and North Fork transportation corridor improvements. Work on the road won't begin until 2019, which allows time to come up with an appropriate management plan. The project will focus on the 5–6 miles immediately south of the Border. That section of the road must be re-engineered; putting down gravel is the easy part. The Whale Creek gravel pit will be reopened. Easements may need to be adjusted where the river runs near the road. Some money will be spent on signage and communications, recognizing that more people already are coming to the North Fork and that a better road means that still more will come. It will also address the slumps near Ray Hart's place and on Wurtz Hill. Sustainability is a key concern. Relieving congestion in downtown Polebridge and avoiding negative impact to the businesses there is also a concern.

Archeology: Mr. Danczyk also mentioned that the Forest has hired a new archaeologist, Mike Flowers, who wants to look at the old schoolhouse, the Polebridge district that is on the National Historic Register, and other historic sites.

AIS Threat: Forest Supervisor Chip Weber addressed the aquatic invasive species (AIS) threat, following detection of invasive mussel material in Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs in Central Montana. He sits on the Governor's Invasive Species Council, as well as the Flathead Basin Commission. He remarked that it's appropriate for the State to take the lead on the issue; the federal government mostly acts in a support role, except in the Park. Prevention, including check stations and perimeter control, is crucial. The Forest Service will do what it can to help.

Flathead County - The Road Department's Ovila Byrd presented on behalf of the county, expressing excitement about the FLAP project. He acknowledged that the last 5 miles or so of the road are "tough." In addition, the department is finalizing bids to replace the Moran Creek Bridge in August. The road will be kept open to traffic. The bridge will not have a concrete surface. Several North Fork residents voiced support for reopening the Polebridge Loop Road, which would help particularly during the 4th of July festivities in Polebridge. Ovila said he'd talk to the county commissioners about the possibility.

Glacier National Park - Ed Visnovske, Branch Chief of Ranger Activities for the Park, also covered a number of topics.

Personnel: Polebridge Ranger Sharon Olsen has married and taken a job in Alaska. The Park has named Jim Dahlstrom as her replacement. He is currently working with the Niobrara National Scenic River in Nebraska and won't report for several months. The change of administrations in Washington has hit their hiring; they're waiting for a green light to staff the Park for the summer. They know that Reggie and Lyle will be back, however, and Ty at Bowman Lake.

Visitation: 2016 saw 600,000 more visitors to the Park than 2015. 34,000 entered the Park at Polebridge, a 23 percent increase over 2015.

Transportation: The Park is developing a corridor transportation plan that attempts to address the visitor experience. It's now in final draft form; they hope to release it for public comment soon. There will be public meetings later in the year.

Inside North Fork Road: Park personnel are working on an EIS and hope to have it out for review by the fall of 2017. They have also requested funding. The Inside Road is impassable and will be closed to vehicles in 2017, as it was in 2016.

Dark Sky Initiative: Glacier is collaborating with Waterton Park in an effort to achieve full Dark Sky status. The purpose is to preserve the night sky. Actions include retrofitting lights to avoid “washing out” the sky. They plan to gradually work toward full status. They have also had assistance from the Big Fork Astronomy Club.

Aquatic Invasive Species: Park waters are closed to boating until further notice. The closure does not affect boating on the North Fork or the Middle Fork, however. The Park is working with the State to decide what to do this summer; there’s a spectrum of potential actions, including staffing 4 more inspection stations and deploying mussel-sniffing dogs. A station may be located in Polebridge. They are aware of the need to be sensitive to locals who canoe or kayak on Bowman and Kintla and whose crafts never leave the North Fork. They hope to have a preliminary plan in place in March.

Air and Water Quality Monitoring: Phil Wilson, the Park’s Chief of Science and Resources Management, addressed questions about the effects of road dust on air and water quality. He commented that road dust consists of larger particles that generally are not associated with haze. The particles abate fairly quickly, although they may cause unpleasant local impacts on the road itself. Furthermore, there’s no evidence that road dust affects the rate at which glaciers melt; if dust had such an effect, he acknowledged that the Park would be obliged to take action. Dr. Dan Fagre is the USGS person working on the glaciers and the rate at which they are retreating.

In response to a question about the absence of any monitoring data from the northwest corner of the Park, he replied that there was no evidence that road dust was having an effect on Park flora and fauna. In addition, Mr. Wilson cited studies showing that road dust does not affect water quality. According to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, road dust is not an issue on the North Fork. For example, DEQ data shows that suspended particles in the water are about the same in the winter as they are in the summer. Also, water entering Flathead Lake does not show elevated levels of suspended particles, so the dust is not having a measurable impact on the river.

[Homeland Security/US Border Patrol](#) – Scott Ernsberger said local Border Patrol agents haven’t received any new or different guidance since the change of administrations. The Patrol was thanked for helping people on the road. Their Explorer scout program has been a success.

[Montana Department of State and DNRC](#) - Dave Ring is the new Unit Manager of the Stillwater State Forest, which is headquartered in Olney. Brian Manning has retired after 28 years with the DNRC. Mr. Ring discussed activities on the Coal Creek State Forest. The fish access project has been completed. The North Moran Timber sale is ongoing; it doesn’t close until 2019. DNRC personnel have completed an environmental analysis on a 700-acre pre-commercial block, where they plan to thin predominantly lodgepole pine. They’ll continue to spray weeds and will do some tree planting in May. They normally contract with the county to do most of their spraying. Cyclone Road has been brushed in the lower reaches, and they want to go from Cyclone Lake up this summer. The Coal Creek fish passage project is completed.

[Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks](#) - Tim Manley reported 3 grizzly bear captures on the North Fork in 2016. The first capture was a young male who had been hanging around cabins. The bear was fitted with an iridium collar, which provides location information every 30 minutes. He traveled widely after a hard release and hasn't caused any problems. The second capture was a young male up Moose Creek. He dropped his collar; his whereabouts are unknown. The third capture was an adult female near Red Meadow Creek, who was believed to have broken into a garage. She was put down.

Overall, Tim noted that there had been 16 management captures in his territory in 2016; the average is 17 per year. Six of the bears were released into the Whitefish Range, none of them stayed. FWP still has a grizzly augmentation program in the Cabinet Range. Tim anticipates continued trend trapping, probably concentrated in the Grave Creek area west of the Whitefish Divide.

Diane Boyd said she was glad to be back where she started many years ago. She reported that there are currently 4 wolf packs on the North Fork: the Kintla Pack, with a minimum count of 4 wolves; the Akokola Pack, with a minimum of 5 wolves; the Dutch Pack, also with a minimum of 5 wolves; and 2 wolves up Whale Creek, probably a breeding pair. She commented that it's the peak of the breeding season, so we shouldn't be surprised to see them. Camera traps provide valuable data on wolves; she encourages landowners to send her photos and videos.

Statewide, 77 wolves were harvested, up from the average. One of them was taken in the Blankenship area. Other harvest numbers included 101 mountain lions, 23 otter and 273 bobcats. FWP will no longer maintain a North Fork game checkpoint. The couple who was cited for poaching on Trail Creek last fall, the gal pled guilty, but the guy pled not guilty and is fighting.

According to a fisheries representative, FWP hopes to reopen both Tiber and Canyon Ferry Reservoirs once they're ice-free. They plan to beef up boat inspections; they're hiring 160 seasonal employees in 2017, compared with 60 in 2016. Any boat coming into the state must be inspected, as must any boat coming across the Continental Divide. Game Warden Chris Crane followed up on behalf of FWP enforcement.

Statewide, FWP has a new director (Martha Williams) and enforcement chief. The AIS threat is having a significant impact on their operations. They'll probably staff the check points, at which all watercraft must stop, which means fewer wardens in the woods. They would appreciate any augmentation that they could get. They are converting to a sophisticated new mobile CAD system whereby enforcement officers will have computers in their trucks.

[U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#) - Wade Fredenberg gave an update on the status of wolverines (back to proposed) and fishers (petitioned to list).

[Special Topic—Short-Term Vacation Rentals](#) - Mark Mussman, Director of Planning & Zoning for Flathead County, provided background information on the short-term rental text amendment proposed by the Northwest Montana Association of Realtors. The Planning Board met on February 8 and took public comment on the proposal. The board will meet again in March and thereafter will forward a recommendation to the county commissioners. The commissioners in turn will meet about 45 days later.

Mr. Mussman commented that the North Fork doesn't need the proposed text amendment, since the North Fork's own zoning regulations already address rental cabins as a permitted use. Accordingly, the planning staff has recommended that the North Fork not be included in the proposed amendment. County-wide, at least 200 properties are being marketed as "Vacation Rentals by Owner," or VRBOs.

Currently, renting a home for less than 30 days in a residential area is not a permitted use in Flathead County. Mr. Mussman believes that the issue must be addressed, at a minimum to assure that the accommodations tax is collected and some uses are mitigated. He doesn't know how many properties are marketed as VRBOs in the North Fork. [A recent website count revealed 21 properties currently listed. There are probably a few more in the summer.]

[2017 Summer Interlocal](#) - The Summer Interlocal will be held on Wednesday, July 19, 2017 in Sondreson Hall. The North Fork Preservation Association will host the meeting.

A potluck lunch will be served at noon and the meeting will begin at 1 p.m. Although a date for the North Fork's annual Firewise Day workshop hasn't been determined, it probably will take place from 9:30 a.m. to noon, preceding lunch and the Interlocal meeting.