

MEETING SUMMARY
Western North Carolina Public Lands Council
February 11, 2011
1:00 PM –3:00 PM

NCDENR Western Office
2090 US Highway 70, Swannanoa, NC

Members Present: Maxine Dalton, Nelda Holder, Delos Monteith, Jason Love, Jonathan Douthit, Eric Jenkins, Myrna Campbell

Members Absent: none

Others Present: Judy Francis; NCDENR, Bill Jackson; US Forest Service, Michael Cheek; NCDFR, Tom Jackson; NCDPR, Melanie Pitroli; US Forest Service, Monika Mayr; Blue Ridge Parkway, Bob Miller; Great Smoky Mountain National Park, Marisue Hilliard; US Forest Service

Call to Order

Chairperson Maxine Dalton called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM.

Welcome and Introductions

Maxine Dalton welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked them for coming. She asked everyone to briefly introduce themselves because some attendees had not attended a meeting before. She thanked Jason Love for providing general information about the Clean Air Act for council members to review prior to the meeting.

Topic Speaker

Bill Jackson from the U.S. Forest Service provided a PowerPoint presentation about Stream Water Chemistry and the Impact of Acid Compounds on Forested Ecosystems. His presentation outlined causes of the problem which are rooted in the combustion of fossil fuels. He provided a brief case study of Copper Hill in Tennessee, background information about the Clean Air Act amendments, an explanation of nutrient cycling, and an overview of stream chemistry. Native brook are trout more resilient to higher pH levels than introduced rainbows and browns. Extreme acidification threatens a number of areas including Linville Gorge and high elevations on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The buffering capacity of streams is being reduced. There is planning underway to achieve target loads for sulphur, but we have to be realistic about policy as well. There are some mitigation options, such as the application of lime, but that needs more research.

Bob Miller briefly talked about stream acidification in Great Smoky Mountain National Park and provided a briefing handout. There are streams on the 303d list in TN and potentially NC. He asked “What is the stick to comply with Total Maximum Daily Load standards?” Bill Jackson replied that there is no stick, we’re breaking new ground.

Discussion of Presentations

Jason Love asked if background levels were known. Bill replied that we don’t really know. Jason asked what rules are in place re: sulfur and nitrate levels that cross state

lines? Bill said rules are in place and will result in reductions over time. The rules should be upheld because human health is at issue. That is a hard thing to overcome. Greenhouse gases are not specifically mentioned in the Clean Air Act and may be subject to more scrutiny from those who do not want to regulate them. Maxine asked if levels of smoke from wood-burning stoves in western North Carolina are reaching dangerous proportions. Bill said it may be a problem in the local community, but it's not really a regional issue. Jason asked if there were any monitoring being done on state lands. Tom Jackson replied that Grandfather Mountain and Mt. Mitchell are being monitored. He can refer us to the research staff for more information. They had to put tables and such under covers years ago at Mt. Mitchell because the acid would eat the paint off of them, but it's not that bad now.

Agency Reports

U.S. Forest Service – Marisue provided a handout regarding the new planning rule process (attached). Pisgah Nantahala will get a new plan under this rule. Judy said there was an NPR story about the new planning rules on the radio this morning. Marisue also provided information about the upcoming Weeks Act activities. The Weeks act is celebrating it's 100th anniversary. An event will be held on April 2nd at Bent Creek that will be open to public from 10 AM until 3 PM. On April 8, there will be an event at Biltmore that is invitation only. The Restoration Steering Committee is still meeting and working on projects such as hemlock wooly adelgid treatment that is focusing on Carolina hemlocks. There is also a Golden Wing warbler restoration project in Graham County.

Great Smoky Mountain National Park – Bob Miller provided an update handout that had the following information:

Early and cold winter weather has help up progress on constructing the \$2.5 million 6,300 s/f Oconaluftee Visitor Center and its adjacent 1,700 s/f restroom building. Even so we expect a “soft opening” of the new center around April 1, and are making plans to invite the Secretary of Interior, the NPS Director and members of this Council to a ribbon-cutting on Friday, April 15.

The exhibits being developed for the new Oconaluftee Visitor Center will focus on the Park's cultural history stories from pre-historic native-American occupancy through the creation of the national Park. The Friends of Great Smoky Mountains National Park has committed \$570,000 to design and fabricate the new interpretive and orientation exhibits.

Specific improvements include: new accessible restroom building, larger visitor orientation space, a connection with the Mountain Farm Museum, expanded sales area and cultural history exhibit space. The proposed facility will achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver or higher certification.

Visitation through the Park's three main entrances and outlying areas in 2010 was 9,463,538, just 0.3% below 2009, the Park's 75th anniversary year. Given the anomalies during the year these numbers don't tell much of anything about the tourism trends in the Smokies. The early months

through April were influenced by the closure of I-40 due to a rockslide, as well as an unusually high number of winter road closures. From February through October nine Park roads including Cades Cove and Clingmans Dome were closed for Stimulus-funded construction. Then December was the coldest and snowiest in years, closing roads with unusual frequency. Monthly stats were all over the board: Feb. -28%, Oct. +19%, Dec. -35%. But given all these impediments flat is good.

Blue Ridge Parkway – Monika Myer provided a handout with information about the closure to do guard wall repair. There is a new employee Chief of Interpretation and Education. Leesa Brandon will be brought on as community outreach coordinator. She will be a state employee but work at the Parkway. The parkway is still the most visited unit in NPS. The budget is bad and NPS may put out a park closure list. There is talk that North Carolina may put an end to vanity plates due to visibility issues.

NCDENR Division of Forest Resources – Michael Cheek provided a handout about DFR activities that included the following information:

- The 2009-10 budget reduced our aviation assets by 6 positions, 4 pilots and 2 aircraft mechanics, and 10 aircraft. The legislature place a value of \$1.5 million on these aircraft which they expect to see generated in receipts or operating funds in the 2010-11 budget in addition to the 3.5%. Unfortunately, most of our aircraft are federally owned and will not generate any receipts to the division. In order to generate the receipts required the division has identified 11 aircraft to eliminate (3 state owned and 8 federally owned), the 3 state aircraft have been listed with state surplus and in addition to our CL-215 water scooping air tanker and associated spare parts supply. Expected revenues from these sales would total approximately \$300,000-\$350,000. At this time the state of Arkansas, state of Main, and USFS in Minnesota have claimed five of the federally owned aircraft.
- As with the rest of state government we have made our 5%, 10%, & 15% budget reduction proposals. It is safe to say that if we exceed the 5% level it will involve positions further impacting our ability to meet our emergency response legislative mandate.
- Fortunately we have not had much fire activity through the fall and winter. We are still in a drought condition and predictions are for the current trend to break and be replaced by a warmer and dryer than normal year. The impacts of the current budget situation will be felt immediately due to:
 - The Division is down from five helicopter pilots last year, to one helicopter pilot
 - for the entire state at this time. The current hiring freeze has stalled the process for two permanent (Hickory & Kinston) and one temporary (Lumberton) pilot positions. If DENR gave approval to hire tomorrow it would be approximately 6 weeks before any new hire could be on station and ready to fight fire. That said, we plan to rely on our federal and state partners for support should (when) the need arises.
 - The NCDFR western regional staff of five is currently reduced by two due to retirements. As with the helicopter pilots, these positions are being held up by current hiring freeze.

- There are two currently open positions and one position that will retire effective March 1, 2011 within the region that are held up due to the freeze also. All of these are initial attack positions.
- We have a large amount of prescribed burning on the books. There will be a big push to perform these burns as the weather breaks so you all should be seeing some smoke in the air in the coming months.
- Final revisions to the DuPont State Forest management plan are being made at this time. The plan will be shared with cooperating agencies and DuPont Advisory Committee next month.
- The Division is currently in the process of developing a Strategic Plan. Effort is reaching out to the field level for input through a series of workshops. We hope to complete the process by January of 2012.
- Making progress on developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans throughout the Region with use of ARRA grant through USFS.
- The North Carolina Forestry Association is making a legislative push to move the Division from DENR to Department of Agriculture. The Division has no official stance on this proposal.

Maxine asked if the BRIDGE Program was included in the upcoming budget. Michael responded that it was in the DFR budget but some positions were cut out of the Corrections budget.

NC DENR State Parks & Recreation – Tom Jackson provided the following information about NC State Parks:

2010 State Parks Visitation

- 14,070,886
- Down slightly from 14,251,310 in 2009

Budget Reductions

The division was asked to submit budget reduction proposals at the 5%, 10% and 15% levels for the 2011 / 2012 fiscal year. Those reductions included:

- Elimination of permanent and seasonal positions
- Complete park closures
- Park closures several days a week
- Recurring reductions in operating, personnel and equipment budgets

Director Lewis Ledford is working closely with DENR and legislative staff to answer questions concerning state parks.

WNC State Parks Friends Groups Increasing

There has been an increase in the establishment of State Park Friends groups in Western North Carolina. These groups are comprised of citizens with an interest in supporting a specific state park. They interact with the Park Superintendent; however, they elect and operate under their own governing board. Friends groups raise funds for equipment and educational supplies, volunteer in the park, and serve as park advocates in the community

and with elected officials. Currently Crowders Mountain, Elk Knob, Grandfather Mountain, Lake James, Mount Jefferson, New River and South Mountains have established groups or groups that are being formed.

Size of the State Parks System as of January 1, 2011

- 35 State Parks (11 in Western North Carolina)
- 4 State Recreation Areas
- 20 State Natural Areas (7 in Western North Carolina)
- 7 State Lakes
- 4 State Rivers (3 in Western North Carolina)
- 4 State Trails (2 in Western North Carolina)

Chimney Rock Park Renovations

The Chimney Rock Park Outcroppings Trail, Sky Lounge and the elevator are all closed while undergoing extensive renovations. Public access to the chimney should reopen in late spring.

Dedication of Lake James State Park Paddy's Creek Access

The Lake James State Park Paddy's Creek facility was dedicated and opened to the public in fall of 2010. This first phase of development includes paved roads with bike lanes, hiking trails, a large swim beach and bathhouse, two large picnic shelters, and a maintenance area. The park offers the only public swimming area on Lake James. Campgrounds, cabins, a community building, additional trails and a park office are planned for future phases of development.

Significant Public Safety Activities

Approximately 30 state park personnel were involved in the Chrystal Ham search and rescue incident. This four-day search began on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Sparta, and the victim was found alive in a remote area of Stone Mountain State Park. Multiple local, state and federal agencies were involved.

Other Business

USFS Gate Issue in Jackson County – Delos asked Marisue about the issue of public access and how is the public notified about changes in access status. Marisue replied that they are trying to plan for what old logging roads will be closed and what will stay open (full time and seasonally). She also said she has concerns about illegal ATV use. USFS uses earthen berms on decommissioned roads. Some people don't want them closed, and some want them closed differently so foot travel can still get in. Nelda asked about the process of public notification. Marisue said that portions of this project did notification through the Environmental Assessment process. The other part was through the categorical exclusion list, which can't be appealed.

Governor's Press Release on January 25 re: Review of Commissions and Councils – Judy explained that the Governor has issued a press release stating that she is going to ask the General Assembly to review a list of Boards and Commissions and make a determination if they are still need. If so, they will reauthorize the enabling legislation. If not, the

General Assembly can repeal enabling legislation. A list of affected Boards and Commissions is on her website, and the Western NC Public Lands Council is on the list. There has been no additional information forthcoming about the review process of criteria. Myrna Campbell said this council is unique in that works with another state. It's worth having because it is very integrated into communities. Judy said it would be good to begin some outreach with your constituents if you have not done so already and focus on accomplishments. Jason said he looked at the list and there is not a lot of redundancy in environmental issues. There seems to be lots more redundancy in schools and colleges. Delos said the election in Jackson County changed the tone there and he does not know how receptive the Commission will be. Myrna said the review can't be about money because we hardly cost anything. Judy said members should focus your message on allowing citizen involvement through boards and commissions. Nelda has prepared a draft informational handout that was reviewed by the Council members. There were a couple small changes suggested. Nelda will make corrections on the handouts and Judy will distribute to everyone.

Delos said the February issue of NC Wildlife has good article on biomass and he recommended that Council members read it.

Maxine asked members to be prepared to discuss comments about the new USFS planning rule at next meeting.

The location for the May 13 Meeting is the Great Smoky Mtn. Railway. Jonathon said the train leaves at 10:30 AM and returns to Bryson City by 3:30 PM.

Adjourn

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 3:20 PM.