



**PLATTE RIVER RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM
Land Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes
In Person PRRIP Conference Room & Teams Conference Call
August 16, 2023**

Land Advisory Committee (LAC)

Meeting Participants:

State of Wyoming

Michelle Hubbard – Alternate, Wyoming State Engineer’s Office (online)

State of Colorado

Kara Scheel – Member, State of Colorado (online)

State of Nebraska

Ted LaGrange – Member, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (online)

Catlin Kingsley – Alternate, Nebraska DNR (online)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Matt Rabbe – Member, USFWS

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBOR)

Brock Merrill – Member, USBOR (online)

Power Districts

Dave Zorn – Member (Chair), Central Nebraska Public Power & Irrigation District

Jim Jenniges – Member, Nebraska Public Power District

Environmental Entities

Cody Wagner – Member (Vice-Chair), Audubon Rowe Sanctuary

Tim Smith – Member, Crane Trust

Local Nebraska Rep. – Central Platte Natural Resources District (CPNRD)

David Carr – Member, CBNRD

Local Nebraska Rep. – Tri-Basin Natural Resources District (TBNRD)

John Thorburn – Member, TBNRD

Local Nebraska Rep. – Joint CPNRD/TBNRD

None

**Executive Director's Office (EDO)**

Tim Tunnell
Jason Farnsworth
Mallory Jaymes
Helen Davis (online)

Other Participants

Josh Weise – Crane Trust (online)

Welcome and Administrative

Chairman Zorn called the meeting to order at 10:03 am Central Time. Tunnell recognized members who were attending in-person at the PRRIP conference room and acknowledge members attending virtually. Zorn asked for agenda modifications. None were offered. Zorn asked for the LAC's recommendation on the minutes of the May 17, 2023, LAC meeting. Thorburn made a motion to approve the minutes from the May 17, 2023, LAC meeting. Motion seconded by Rabbe and passed unanimously.

General Update and Other Committee Coordination

Scheel gave an update of TAC activities and spoke of the recent studies (Wet meadow & Sed Aug) that are going out for peer review. TAC has reviewed germination suppression release summary, whooping crane monitoring report & whooping crane site selection report.

Farnsworth updated the group on WAC and GC. WAC is focused on the 2 things:

1. NP chokepoint- a consultant has been hired to investigate alternatives to increase the capacity at the NP chokepoint. A chokepoint working group meeting coming up to look at alternatives and past work.
2. Expanded Recapture study- a consultant was hired to look at taking recharge water being put in the ground at Elwood, Phelps and Cottonwood and getting it back to the river. Big picture water acquisitions are on hold and expect to have an update at the GC in September.

September GC will be in Kearney at Public Library on September 18 & 19. Agenda items include peer review panels, contracts, and wet meadow ecotone paper discussion.

Land Management Status Update

Tunnell updated the group that there is no change to the Land Objective status. Work items include Dyer lodge RFB was posted and bids due September 29, RFQ out for In-channel disking closes on August 23, received clearance for tree removal project on the Dippel tract regarding NLEB though the FWS IPaC system, and developing shapefile to provide targets for the helicopter crew spraying phragmites though PVWMA this fall. Farnsworth provided an update on EDO efforts to address the channel breakthrough on WY tract which now directs all low flows into the north channel while reducing flow in the Rowe reach. Permitting contractor has done field work to obtain a COE permit for work to be done as soon as a permit is obtained. Farnsworth gave an update on the structures at the Meyer Estate. The family is looking into costs to move the structures off the site. They are to make their decision and let EDO know by the September GC. Rabbe asked about the habitat management of the MCA island at the Chapman complex this year. Tunnell reported that it was disked this spring, preemergent was applied and it will be disked again this fall. Waiting on summer imagery to evaluate.

Overview of the Land Plan and Role of the LAC

Farnsworth brought up the LAC charter document for the Program from December 2005. Pointed out



that the Land Component of the Program was probably the most contentious aspect of the Program. Thorburn talked about the local trepidation of the Program, and would it affect land values both positive or negative and would the Program be good neighbors, which lead to the “Good neighbor Policy”. A discussion of LAC meetings prior to the Program being very large and somewhat contentious because of several local “groups” wanting to stop the effort. Farnsworth pointed out the fact that there was to be 3 local representatives of local Nebraskans which was effective for the first 10 years. Farnsworth discussed the organizational structure of the LAC and the Land Plan. Buying land was the primary effort of the LAC and secondarily evaluating management plans and work being done on properties, providing recommendations to GC on changes to management. Farnsworth spoke to the group about spending time focusing on when and how often to meet and how to shift responsibilities of the LAC to guide budgeting and management planning, etc. Quarterly meetings may need to be replaced by a spring and fall management/ budget planning meetings, etc. Historically the LAC was very acquisition focused and the TAC was more management focused. Jenniges pointed out the Framework document makes sense rather than individual management plans for each tract every 5 years. Jenniges reflected on his 30-year career of work on the Platte and spoke to the difficulty in envisioning the future. Tunnell spoke of the story map that the EDO is developing and explained how it will capture some of the historical management actions performed at complexes. Jenniges added that the Land Plan started as a memorandum of understanding prior to the Cooperative Agreement and was headed up by Bill Bagoza (sp?) in 1984. This was a basis for many ideas, concepts, and definitions of habitat that have been carried through the Program and may be time to readdress many of these definitions and desires, etc. Rabbe spoke of the evolution from individual tract plans to complex plans to the overall framework strategy document to address issues on a reach basis rather than tract by tract or complex by complex basis. Tunnell asked Rabbe to confirm that the Framework Document is the best path forward and Rabbe agreed that it is and that it makes things easier for FWS as an informal check of ESA compliance on the Framework document rather than individual plans that may be repetitive. Farnsworth pointed out that a lot of time was spent on “footprint consultations” back in the early days of the Program. Farnsworth said this was a good time to reflect on the role of the LAC for new folks and old timers as we are at a place where we need to readdress some items. Rabbe mentioned that as we have heard through LAC, TAC etc., as we are evolving how we want to make changes to how we manage complexes or management- the issue of changing the actual Land Plan causes angst, so rather than changing the actual Land Plan- there is an opportunity to create new paths forward. Farnsworth spoke of the opportunity over the next 5-6 years for the LAC to focus on what the second increment will look like. Items to consider include counting conservations lands with GC sideboards and habitat managements. Thorburn pointed out that one of the major accomplishments of the LAC that does not get a lot of recognition is the PRRA program with NGPC. This is still a major responsibility of the LAC. Farnsworth noted that the LAC is also to help with education and outreach and reported that a group of folks are looking at how the Program can refine in education and outreach. One of the questions of the group centered around how schools and other groups gain access to Program properties through the PRRA and this should be addressed in the future. Rabbe report that it has not been an issue for FWS to block of sites through the PRRA. Thorburn asked if it is still an obligation for the PRRA subcommittee to have an annual public meeting. Tunnell said that a notice for public comment is advertised in the paper every spring prior to the subcommittee coordination meeting. Comments can also be added to the surveys that NGPC sends out or via Facebook page. Thorburn mentioned that legislation was passed for a state website where all public notices will be posted. Tunnell pointed out an idea from a BSR neighbor had was an email notification or text message regarding BSR ops. Rabbe pointed out the NGPC website as an option and LaGrange spoke of the idea of education and expansion of recreational activities would be viewed positively from his agency and warrant further discussions with NGPC staff. Thorburn noted that staff who could interpret habitat management and serve on guided tours would be beneficial, and many schools would have interest in a structured tour. Farnsworth said that this will be on the GC agenda.



LaGrange spoke of Rowe, Crane Trust and PPRI that could be available. Wagner talked about the opportunity for groups to get on Program lands would be positive and mentioned the new Ft. Kearny Naturalist position with NGPC as another source. LaGrange said that this needs to be part of the overall discussion with other staff including parks and education staff with NGPC. Zorn mentioned that there was a lot of discussion on PRRA allowable uses, and it is geared more to the hunter, fisherman and worth exploring other opportunities such as kids, naturalist etc. Tunnell noted that the river access restrictions during LT/PP seasons have been lifted which allows summertime use of the river. LaGrange pointed out there may be a need for additional expertise in the PRRA subcommittee such as education/ naturalist down the road. Zorn included that the LAC would continue to evaluate parcels for acquisition as well as focus management of Program lands and that the Grassland Working group is a good segue as to what the future of the LAC will include and asked the group to ponder the frequency and timing of future LAC meetings. Tunnell pointed out that there will always be an online option for meeting attendance and Rabbe noted that there is always the option of canceling if not needed but should still be scheduled at least quarterly as there are a lot of items to discuss. Zorn reiterated that the EDO has asked for agenda items from LAC members for future meetings.

Grassland Working Group (GWG)

Zorn asked Rabe to update the group on recent activities of the GWG. Rabbe reported that the group first met virtually to discuss the results of the latest vegetation monitoring report from January 2023. He noted the GWG was developed initially as a response to some discussions regarding the recent grassland monitoring report that came out. This sparked discussion about recommendations made in the report, discussions of conditions at each of the tracts and discussion on whether or not we are still in the same place/ space we were 5-10 years ago when management strategies were first developed. At the initial meeting, the group essentially walked through each tract/ complex on a case-by-case basis and looked at what was evaluated such as spp. comp. cool vs warm season and some of the recommendations that were provided. It was an open forum to toss out ideas and all the committee members have experience managing land in the Platte valley that we can pull pieces from other folks recognizing that some of the things that may have been roadblocks back then as tools in the PRRIP toolbox, specifically as it may related to MBTA and as to how the FWS is applying that act currently. Rabbe noted that themes from the discussion that were noted was a moderate shift or increase in cool season exotics non -native grasses which is likely a result of the timing restrictions of the MBTA (hard start point of Rx fire & haying of July 15) that were written in documents and imposed on the Program. The removal of the MBTA restriction period of April 15- July 15 gives an opportunity to look at alternatives to shift burning and grazing periods earlier or later. Additional items that are related to some of the wet meadow discussions of late is the thinking of possibly shifting management more towards ecosystems health rather than specifically targeting structure or short vegetation. Under the thinking that after reviewing a lot of wet meadow documents and hydrology that many of these areas are closer to what we would refer to more as an upland grassland and provides an opportunity to reevaluate goals and objectives for these grassland community and apply shifts in management such as haying earlier or late fall etc. Zorn reiterated that historical management for structure and the ability to change management dates regarding the modification of the MBTA restriction period will allow activities to have a more positive effect on native WS grass communities. Tunnell noted that historically the spring fire component was restricted after April 15 and we were not able to implement fire after that date to where fire has a better chance of suppressing cool season, nonnative grasses. Additionally, large grasslands such as Llyod island, John's & Binfield tract were being burned in early March prior to whooping crane migration to test whether there was an effect on whooping crane use. Tunnell additionally noted that burning outside of the optimal time to suppress cool season grasses was one of the reasons that the EDO



initiated the grassland monitoring protocol in order to document the effect on grassland composition because of management restrictions. Tunnell noted furthermore that changing the timeline still does not address other challenges of getting safe/ effective Rx fire on the ground at PRRIP complexes at scale. Rabbe noted that the small group that took advantage of the tour of PRRIP grasslands had a lot of discussions on fire and challenges that the Program has with management with the scale of ownership from Lexington to Chapman. Additionally, the group talked about the need for changes in grazing and haying strategies as well. Wagner emphasized the need to incorporate more rest periods in grazing/ haying strategies and the need to manage tracts based on hydrology. Rabbe added that after the story map is complete and the GWG members have had a chance to interpret past management, it provides an opportunity for the group to reconvene and either evaluate on a tract by tract or complex by complex to address changes on management or look at overall management strategies changes such as season long grazing vs IES grazing vs spring grazing vs fall grazing, etc. and consider the needs of grazing tenants. Zorn closed the discussion with stating that creating elaborate grazing/ fire regimes over all properties comes with challenges when it comes to working with tenants/ contractors to get it all done requires infrastructure. Smith noted that all tenants have different capabilities and Tunnell noted that each tenant has individual needs. Rabbe said that the tours showed the challenges that comes with land covered over a large scale. Tunnell commented that the geographical scale of the Program is the nature of the business and a goal of the Program and moving forward with having a plan by September 1 for the following year will help with flexibility. Smith reiterated giving the tenant as much notice as possible of any changes that may happen in the following grazing season. Wagner and Tunnell mention that it is a positive approach to have all land managers within the valley work together and to learn from management strategies across the reach. Wiese reiterated that changing up management from year to year provides more variability in composition and structure and that knowing what infrastructure for grazing is in place on each tract would be helpful to formulate strategies. Tunnell said that infrastructure development has been a priority for the Program and most tracts that are grazed have good perimeter fence and water. Farnsworth added that the EDO is looking at the possibility of consolidating lease management to one farm management company rather than two and add responsibilities such as utility payments and lease collection to their responsibilities and have them attend LAC and GWG meetings. Jenniges summarized that the TAC is wrestling with the wet meadow issue and with the hydrology report pointing out the range of conditions in grasslands/ wet meadow from no wet component to its all wet. Over the course of the next year, the TAC and GWG will likely wrestle with what is the purpose of the grasslands, potential management, and ecological benefits to other species. Tunnell agreed there is value in having TAC and LAC members on the committee.

Land Restoration and Management Story Map Development and Demonstration

Davis provided an introduction of the story map and explained how its purpose is to show management activities and research on Program lands to better communicate project progress to stakeholders. ArcGIS is moving to sharing and interacting spatial data online, although not perfect, there are good tools to share and interact with data in a way that is informative and useful. Davis gave an online demonstration of the dashboard with the grassland monitoring data and used Cook and Dyer tracts as examples. Jenniges asked if the vegetation monitoring surveys were consistent? Tunnell and Farnsworth said the end of June through July was the survey period. Tunnell affirmed that the protocol was developed to monitor at the same time, same sites and the transects were randomly selected and permanently marked to revisit each time. Davis further demonstrated that the dashboard background could be changed from aerial imagery to topo map, etc. Wagner asked if a legend could be added to charts. Davis replied that it could be added but seems to clutter the chart and using the hover



functionality will tell you what it is. Davis added that this framework could be applied to more data such as management and restoration activity data. Davis went on to demonstrate a story map which is less data driven and more used for telling a narrative. She demonstrated Ag Ops & Maintenance data on the Cook & Dyer tracts as an example using buttons to click to show activities for each year. Discussion was had about grazing data such as number of pair, days of grazing, season etc. which can all be included in the data and likely better represented in a dashboard. Davis reiterated that this is good discussion and helps her to see what would have the best utility for stakeholders. Davis will share a link to the dashboard and story map for committee members to access. Davis mentioned that the story map content mirrors the “Habitat Restoration and Management Framework” document from 2018 to make it more interactive. Tunnell mentioned that the update and revisions to the document will be reflected in the story map and document as needed. Zorn stated that the dashboard and story map are both useful and informative, but the story map should be housed on the Program website for the public and others to see and that the dashboard will be more useful for management decisions. He asked committee members to access the links and play around with it and provide feedback on other things that may be added. Wagner inserted that it seems that this project will require multiple dashboards to get to what the committee is interested in. He asked about the organization side of the things and suggested that the story map could be public facing and dashboards for decision making and if ArcGIS hub could be utilized to combine all information to make it easier to flip back and forth between data sources? Davis replied that she is of the mindset to keep things simple but agrees that it would be useful to focus on few topics (veg monitor, mgmt. activities, grazing activities, etc.) and have dashboards with links provided for each but she could do more research into ArcGIS hub. Tunnell asked Wagner to give a brief explanation of ArcGIS hub. Wagner stated that it is one step up from a dashboard and a way to pull in all open data sources and link to dashboards and story maps- essentially a gathering and organizational place of data. Davis stated that the Program is entering this frontier but a greater online presences for Program data would be good. Smith asked about Davis’ training. Davis said she is mostly self-taught from previous jobs, but the technology is getting more accessible. Session ended with discussion on ArcMap transitioning to ArcGIS online.

Land Restoration and Management Framework for PRRIP Habitat Complexes- 2023 Revision

Tunnell sent out a redline version of the 2018 document and stated his main revisions were to the tense of the document as it was originally written for the implementation of the extension. It was sent out as a first step in revising the document at the 5-year mark and asked for revisions to be made and sent back. Tunnell will then consolidate all edits into one document for review by the committee. Rabbe asked for timeline, Tunnell stated that it would be good to have to the GC in December. Rabbe said that edits and comments could be done and then final review at the LAC meeting in October for a recommendation. Zorn asked for edits/ comments be sent to Tunnell by the end of September to be finalized on October 18 LAC meeting. Tunnell said that will work. Rabbe mentioned that if we are not able to update sections, such as Grassland Management, due to waiting on more information- it could be further revised in 2024. Tunnell reaffirmed that the whole intent of this document is to be a “living” document and updated as needed. Tunnell suggested that members look at content and sections and add if needed.

Public Forum

Chairman Zorn asked for public comments, none were offered, and meeting adjourned at 12:02 pm Central Time. Next LAC meeting will be October 18, 2023, at 10:00 am Central Time.