

Tongue River Watershed Alliance

*Meeting Minutes
General Meeting
January 12, 2006*

Art Hayes opened the meeting at 6:15 pm with 34 people in attendance.

OLD BUSINESS

- The first item on the agenda was the National Wild Turkey Federation's EPA grant proposal. Art gave an overview of the proposal, which would span two years and study the effects of irrigating with coal bed methane water on wild turkeys. Art then informed the group of the board's recommendation not to support the proposal. The board felt that the money could be better spent elsewhere (the study involves planting cottonwood trees, and two years is not enough time to grow a roost tree). The board's other concerns involved irrigation; they were unsure if there was a permit to discharge into Squirrel Creek, and in regards to irrigating with a sprinkler gun, they knew of no beneficial use permit in place on the CX Ranch. Jae Notti pointed out that the Alliance is not getting any money from the study; we'd only be lending our name to it. Denise Wood stated that she feels the study is vague and ambiguous and that our time would be best spent on something else. A stakeholder pointed out that it is an important issue since the study would observe the results of irrigating with CBM water; Marjory West's 200 trees dying has been covered a lot in the media and the study may prove that there is no harm in irrigating with the water. A lot of discussion centered around the question of whether or not beneficial use permits were issued. A stakeholder stated that we should speak to Fidelity first before deciding anything. After more discussion and a show of hands, the group decided not to support the grant proposal.
- The second item discussed was the watershed plan. The board had come up with a list of possible priorities: weed strategy, water aging, aquatic life, pine tree control, and soil sampling. Discussion of each area followed.

Weed Strategy: Rick Rice asked if grants are available to buy bugs to kill weeds. Laurie Kelley said that grants are available and that Jewel Davenport does that kind of work. She suggested having Jewel present at a future meeting.

Ray Muggli suggested having a weed identification presentation. A lot of us see weeds but don't recognize what they are; taking pictures of unknown weeds for future identification might help. Art said he would work with the weed board on getting a presentation at a future meeting.

Water Aging: A stakeholder asked if we have any studies available to us on aging water. She also asked how water aging works. Art said we do have studies and tritium is used to age the water. The stakeholder asked if there is any baseline data for how much tritium is in the water; yes, there is. Another stakeholder, who lives on Pumpkin Creek, stated that due to the drought, anything we can do to enhance recharge would be very beneficial. Art said that John Wheaton's studies show that we only get enough rain 1 in 10 years to recharge the aquifers. Is anyone interested in having John come to a meeting and discuss aquifer recharge? The group said yes.

Aquatic Life: Birney Smith at Colstrip High School has been doing a lot of studies on aquatic life in the Tongue with his classes. Megan will talk to him.

Pine Tree Control: Jae stated that the purpose of controlled burns is to get more groundwater to wells and other water sources and to help the grass. Another stakeholder suggested going in to thin and harvest the trees and keep the renewable resource instead of burning it. Jae said that economics is a limiting factor for that. The same stakeholder also voiced concern about what burning would do to the wildlife.

Another person asked if it would be possible for the group to work with USFS. Art said yes, we can work with USFS and BLM to get a plan made. We can get a grant to help get the planning completed. He also said that if we can get controlled burns going, we won't have the bad August fires. A stakeholder stated that they had previously worked with USFS to burn on private and Forest Service land and they were very easy to work with. Art stated that there is a lot of fire control money available, and Bill Isaacs said that now is the time to do the burns because BLM's fire budget is being cut, so they should be more willing to do it.

A stakeholder stated that widespread burning may further impact river impairment. She's for controlled burns, but she thinks they should be done in slow, progressive manner; it's a manageable tool and a good idea. She just doesn't want us to be held responsible for damage to the Tongue River.

Soil Sampling: How will soil sampling work? Art stated that the board discussed bringing together and evaluating all the soil samples that stakeholders already have, then we would fill in the gaps. Mark asked if everyone's soil samples would be public info; Art said we can withhold them if the person doesn't want them to be public. A stakeholder asked who we would get to do the sampling. She suggested going with a single, unbiased company if we are going to do a lot of sampling so the results

would be consistent. Suggestions were NRCS or Ray Choriki with B&C Ag Consultants in Billings.

Mark asked what would be done with the soil samples and how they would be organized. Laurie said that she thinks the Conservation District could handle it; they are currently managing soil samples for Rosebud Watershed Group. Laurie will put it on the agenda for the next district board meeting and get an answer for us.

The group prioritized the top 3 issues as follows: 1. Weeds; 2. Soil Sampling; 3. Controlled Burns. Denise pointed out that as Megan studies all the issues, they should automatically prioritize themselves.

- The next topic discussed was whether or not to bring Mickey Steward in to speak to the group. Denise said the Mickey is teaching now, so she may be unable to come. She suggested bringing in the current Wyoming CBMCC coordinator if Mickey cannot come. The group agreed to this by a show of hands. Megan will work on it.
- The open Miles City/T&Y Irrigation District board member position was discussed next. We have had no real interest in the spot yet. Roger Muggli has been trying to get ahold of Pat Stoltz at the golf course; he's level-headed and would bring another dimension to the board. Roger will continue to pursue that angle. Ray will approach Corey Cyrus (sp?), a private biologist. People from Miles City will ask around to see if anyone is interested.

NEW BUSINESS

- **BLM Funding of Water Stations:** Mark Fix spoke with BLM and found out that some of their funding for monitoring stations has been cut, so they may be unable to continue funding them. He suggested that we talk to BLM to see if their funding came through; maybe we could step in with a grant to fill in the holes. Megan will contact BLM and USGS to see how much they will be short and what they are planning to do.
- **CAFO:** Possible rule changes for CAFOs were briefly discussed. Mark said that the Miles City Extension Agent can come out and check to see if you have a CAFO.
- **DEQ Commenting:** A stakeholder told the group that DEQ is looking into the lower reaches of the Tongue River and is taking comments. There is a high SAR – is it coming from natural alluvial springs or CBM discharge water? He said he's not sure what can be done if the river is declared impaired, but the group needs to monitor it and keep everyone informed. Does the group want to comment? No decision was made.

- Photo Gallery: Denise asked if anyone was interested in contributing pictures for a photo gallery of the watershed. It would provide a valuable tool to visually track the watershed. People would take pictures on their own and then we would compile a database. Mark said that the conservation district did aerial flights a couple years ago over the Tongue and Hanging Woman Creek (not Rosebud County), so that's available, as well.
- Grazing Land: A stakeholder suggested looking at grazing land condition since it has a lot to do with water quality and runoff. NRCS, BLM, and USFS have a lot of grazing information.

Jae Nottie moved to adjourn the meeting Denise Wood seconded. The motion passed and the meeting adjourned at 7:45 pm.