

FireSafe Flathead Meeting Notes 12-20-23

Attendees: Mike West (US Forest Service), DC Hass (WF Fire Service Area), Nick Ashenwald (MT DNRC), Dylan Kopitzke (MT DNRC), Emma Merdovic (MT DNRC), Jeremy Pris (MT DNRC), Lincoln Chute (Flathead County), Carrie Johnson (MT West Economic Development), Ben Devall (Big Mountain Fire), Mike Frost (Elkhorn HOA), Rick Trembath (FVCC), Logan Sandman (MT DNRC), Henry Deluca (MT DNRC), Pete Melnick (Flathead County), Randy Sundberg (Many Lakes), Marlee Osterheim (National Forest Foundation), Richard Hildner (NF), Holly Mackenzie (MT DNRC), Sean Johnson (NRCS), Karli Becher (NRCS), Scott Countryman (Goose Head Insurance), Lucas Kopitzke (MT DNRC), Todd Krost (MWED), Allen Christman (NF), Murphy McGowan (MT DNRC), Caleb Dietz (Flathead Ridge Ranch)

Northfork

- Need to follow up with Many Lakes with short term rental fire preparedness information.
- Firewise annual community renewal complete with community \$78,500 in matching commitment. Thank you, Lincoln Chute, for helping with the required updated risk assessment. Question: How often do you renew Firewise? Answer: Renewed annually with updated risk assessment every 5 years.
- In the process of updating Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). Our last update for the North Fork CWPP was 2011.

Montana West Economic Development (MWED) (Fuel reduction grant funding program)

- New employee to introduce is Todd Krost.
- Implementing Joint Chiefs funding with 2/3 of funding allocated to fuel reduction projects in 6 days.
- Foothills area has waiting list of private landowners. \
- Submitting grant funding requests for Good Creek & Many Lakes this week.
- Flathead Electric Cooperative & MWED submitted Community Wildfire Defense Grant application for Columbia Falls, Hungry Horse, Martin City, Coram and West Glacier. Should know by March if the grant was funded or not.
- Submitting grant funding requests for Reservoir Rd. (WF) & West Valley McManamey in March 2024.
- Lakeside & Somers grants recently approved and waiting on insurance before starting to administer grant.
- Kila and Browns Meadow areas approved for grant funding which should be available Jan/Feb 2024.

MT DNRC

- Keep MT Green poster contest is starting up [Rules | Keep Montana Green](#)
- Assisted Wolf Tail Pines neighborhood in Whitefish with firewise community risk assessment.
- Seasonal firefighter hiring begins Jan 1st, 2024, if you know anyone interested in applying please send them our way and please help spread the word.
- Suggest adding firewise community map and information to our FireSafe Flathead website. (Mike West will follow up)

- Holly Mackenzie (MT DNRC Service Forester) spending a lot of time fielding calls about grant funding for fuel reduction work and working with NRCS and MWED to create new grant funding areas or match landowners up with current funding opportunities.
- Completed 150 Hazard Reduction Agreements in 2023. This is required when private lands trees are sent to a lumber mill.
- Grant funding available in Lonepine state park area and working with private landowners to complete prescribed fire projects for grasslands restoration.
- Working behind FVCC in Ponderosa Pine stands to salvage beetle killed timber and improve forest health. FVCC are going to use student/equipment to yard trees.
- MT DNRC completed 300 acres of broadcast burning and 1000 acres of pile burning this past fall.
- In the process of hiring new Community Preparedness Specialist for the Northwest Land Office Area.
- New Montana Forestry Information website look for mtforestinfo.org to become available spring 2024.
- Working on industry timber land site inspection.
- Flathead County Air Quality regulators have been good about allowing folks to burn this winter when historically the airshed has been closed.
- Emma Merdovic is new to the DNRC. Welcome Emma!
- Libby NFPA Home assessment train the trainer being in May.

Big Mountain Fire

- March 5th winter firewise event intended to inform home/landowners who only visit the area during the winter.
- Flathead County is working on reverse 911 and Ben would like to get involved when a contractor is selected to test the system.
- Working with Flathead Electric to consider underground power on lower big mountain road because the powerlines cross the lower section of road nine times. Have determined it's very expensive so may or may not become a reality.
- Big Mtn also renewed their firewise status.
- Richard Hildner would like to help Big Mountain with upcoming firewise events.

Natural Resources and Conservation Service (Private lands funding & technical assistance for fuel reduction, irrigation and other projects)

- Working through 70 (record year) applications for Ashely Lake, Bitterroot Lake, Wedge Canyon and Joint Chiefs.
- Ashley Lake and current Joint Chiefs projects sunset in 2024.
- Working with forest service for next JC project location and application for 2025-2027.
- Working on select projects to expedite application processing and contracting to move things faster for landowners. Some projects can use this expedited process and some cannot so please ask.
- Recent added capacity has helped but will be another very busy year.
- Please send interest to NRCS regardless of if they are not in a current project area as this helps determine areas of interest for future projects and coordination with partners.
- Project to contract 1300-1400 acres of fuel reduction work in 2024.

- Question: Does it look like Patrick Creek area will get funding? Answer: Lots of interest in the area so thinking we'll have a JC project there. Will determine next Joint Chiefs project area soon so will hopefully have an update at our next meeting.

Flathead County

- Working in Many Lakes and coordinating with Holly Mackenzie and MWED to do fuel reduction on 31 acres of county parks. Additional funding will be available to work with adjacent private landowners. Work should start winter 2024/2025.
- Heron Park completed 7 acres last year and looking to do another 20 acres with MWED JC funding along the northern private boundary.
- Working with Homestead group who is proposing forming a fire district within their subdivision and assisting with fuel reduction.
- Pete Melnick would like to get the fire history presentation to share with county planning board and others. Rick Trembath would like to make his fire history presentations available through firesafe flathead. Rick has various presentations and would like to fine tune and narrate some of them and will work with Mike West to add to firesafe website.
- Lincoln Chute would like to create public official presentation to share with planning boards around the Flathead Valley.
- Randy Brodehl agrees this conversation around fire history is important for community planning because history has a way of repeating itself and would help inform decisions.
- Lincoln will coordinate with Pete Melnick and Randy Brodehl to set up a fire history discussion/presentation at the Office of Emergency Services for planning department.
- Lincoln formed a fire committee with fire chiefs to provide information to planning board for questions and clarification and plans to get that to the planning board this January.
- Lincoln pointed to a study showing grass fires destroy more homes than forest fires annually 79% lost to grass/shrub fires. <https://wildfiretoday.com/2023/12/18/grassfires-destroy-far-more-homes-than-forest-fires/>
- Lincoln is working in partnership with Glacier Park and private inholdings in the Lake McDonald area coordinate a wildfire preparedness meeting.

FH Ridge Ranch

- Fuel break project grant funding request in review process. Large grass fires burning onto the Flathead Ridge Ranch from the south/southwest so plan to put in place large fuel breaks along improved road network to create a line of defense for upwind communities (Browns Meadow, Lakeside etc.).

Rick Trembath

- Teaching FVCC wildfire classes.
- Recognizes a shortage of contract instructors willing to teach contractors fire refresher courses. A lot of contractors looking for this training and may not be able to meet the demands. Rick fielded a lot of calls last spring to teach a contract fire refresher course.

National Forest Foundation

- Excited the Keystone Agreement with the Flathead National Forest is moving forward and will initially provide \$3.6M to complete projects on the National Forest. Planning to advertise a position to support this work January 2024.

Many Lakes

- Very appreciative of County plans for thinning in Many Lakes parks. Homeowners have been inquiring about recent site visit and what the plans are.
- Suggests including Era of Mega Fire and Elmo 2 Fire Video links on the FireSafe Flathead Website. (Mike West will follow)

Fire Adapted MT Learning Network

- \$500-\$2000 dollar grant available to support fire adapted community work.

Elkhorn

- Wants to thank the representative of the WF service area board for joining the group (DC Haas).
- Thank you so much for having a virtual option because I can stay caught up with our group.
- Elkhorn 16th year as firewise community. Thanks to Ernie N. for the recent help with their risk assessment.

Scott Countryman

- Jan 19th real estate agent home inspection fire mitigation training planned.
- February date TBD to train building inspectors requires which requires a room to get 20 people and currently looking for a free space to facilitate this training.

FNF

- Working with the DNRC to highlight our Jackknife Good Neighbor Authority project.
- Roundstar project in the vicinity of Star Meadow moving forward with an anticipated decision being signed soon.
- The forest did not do much broadcast burning however completed a lot of pile burning.