



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes

March 16th, 2022 – 7:00 pm at the Divide Grange
Zoom option also provided

In Attendance

In-person: Pedro Marques, BHWC; Tana Nulph, BHWC; Ben LaPorte, BHWC; Tom Bowler, Resident; Betty Bowler, Resident; Jim Hagenbarth, Rancher/BHWC; Paul Cleary, Resident/BHWC; Sandy Cleary, Resident; JM Peck, Rancher; Jeff Dunn, WGM Group; and Jim Olsen, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Zoom: Jim Cox, Western Rivers Conservancy; Nelson Mathews, Western Rivers Conservancy; Allegra (no last name given); Brian Wheeler, BHRF/BHWC; Chris Edgington, Montana Trout Unlimited; Emily Downing, IWJV; Katie Bonogofsky, USFS; Sarah Ashworth, BHRF; Tyler Kamp; Zach Owen, Beaverhead Watershed Committee; and Marley Held.

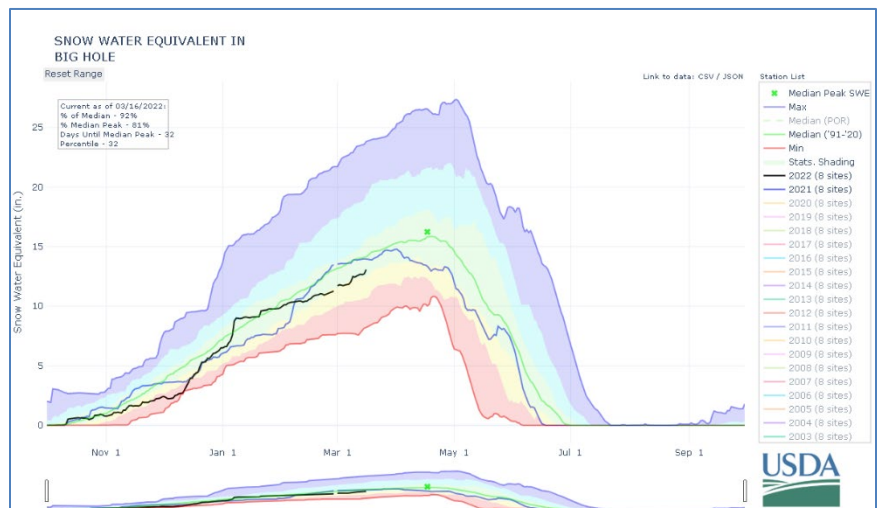
Meeting Minutes

BHWC monthly meetings are now held at the Divide Grange with a virtual (Zoom) option provided thanks to Southern Montana Telephone Company, who donated the internet service. Meeting minutes and recordings are available at <https://bhwc.org/monthly-meetings/> (scroll down for meeting minutes archive). Printed copies are available during in-person meetings. Contact Tana Nulph, BHWC Associate Director, at tnulph@bhwc.org or (406) 267-3421 to suggest additions or corrections.

Reports

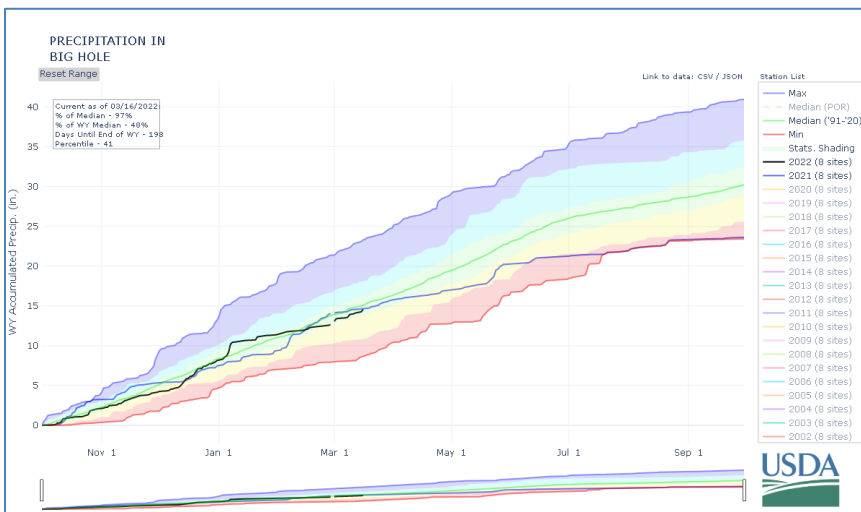
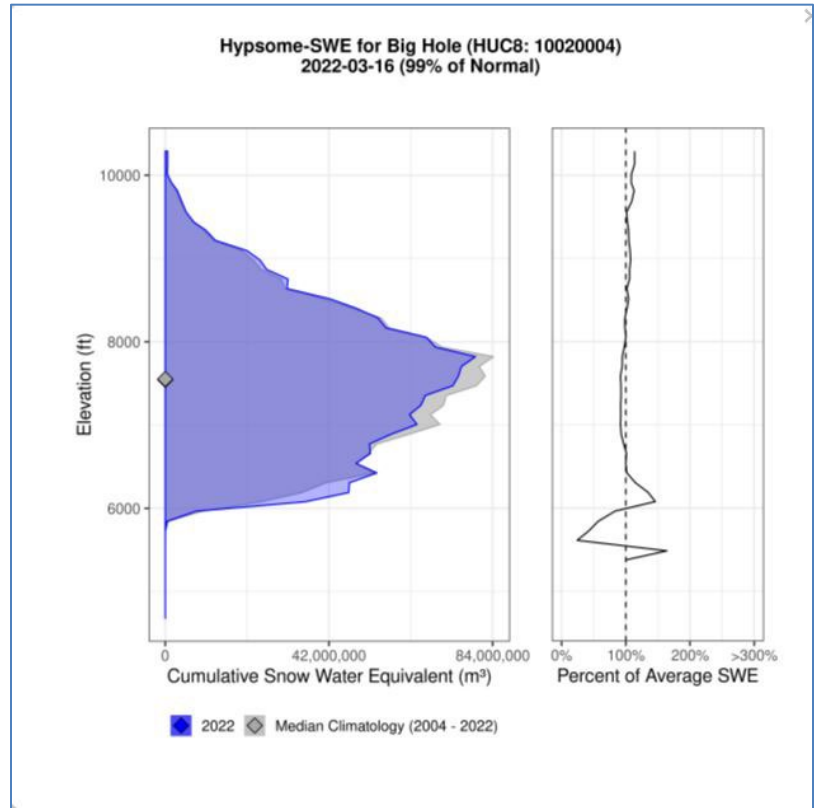
Streamflow/Snowpack Report as of March 16, 2022 – Matt Norberg, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

- **Streamflows:** The lower river stream gages are online and reporting data. Upper River gages will start reporting data on April 1, 2022.
- **Precipitation/Snowpack:** The NRCS is reporting that precipitation for the Big Hole Basin is currently 97% of median conditions. We are almost halfway through WY 2022. Snow Water Equivalent is currently 92% of 1991-2020 median conditions.



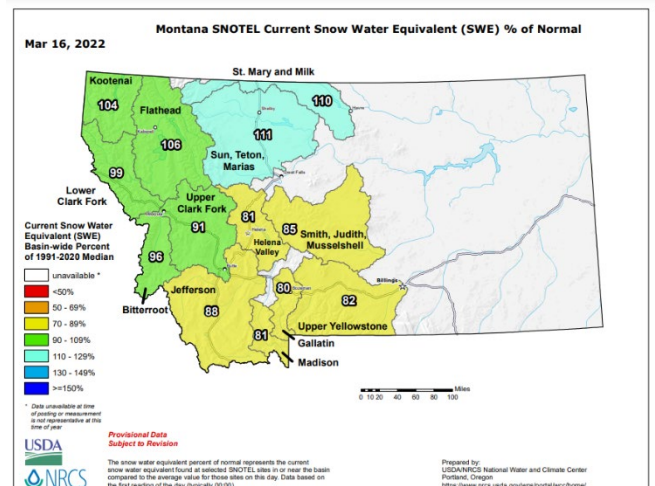
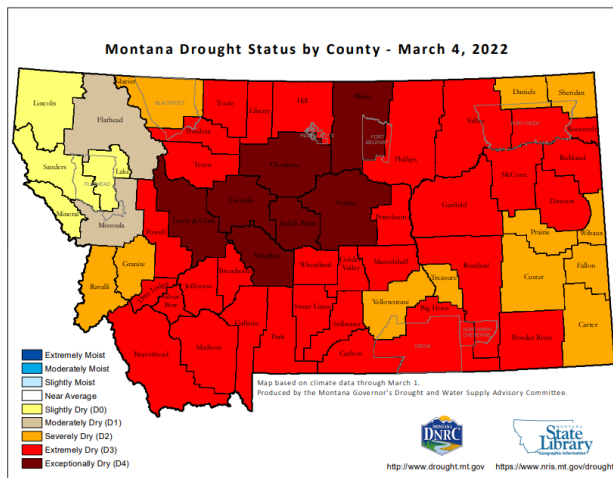
We are below where we were last year in terms of snowpack and almost identical in terms of total precipitation. We still have approximately one month until the median snowpack peak (April 17 +/-). Satellite imagery is showing a better snowpack picture with 99% of normal conditions from 2004-current. Modeled snowpack indicates a normal snowpack at the higher elevations but a diminished mid elevation coverage (7000-8500 ft). Darkhorse SNOTEL is currently reporting 24.4 inches SWE and is 91% of median conditions. Calvert Creek SNOTEL (6430 ft) is currently reporting 92% of median conditions and 6.8 inches of SWE which is below last year's SWE value of 7.7 inches.

- **8-14-day Outlook:** The 8-14 day outlook predicts average temperatures

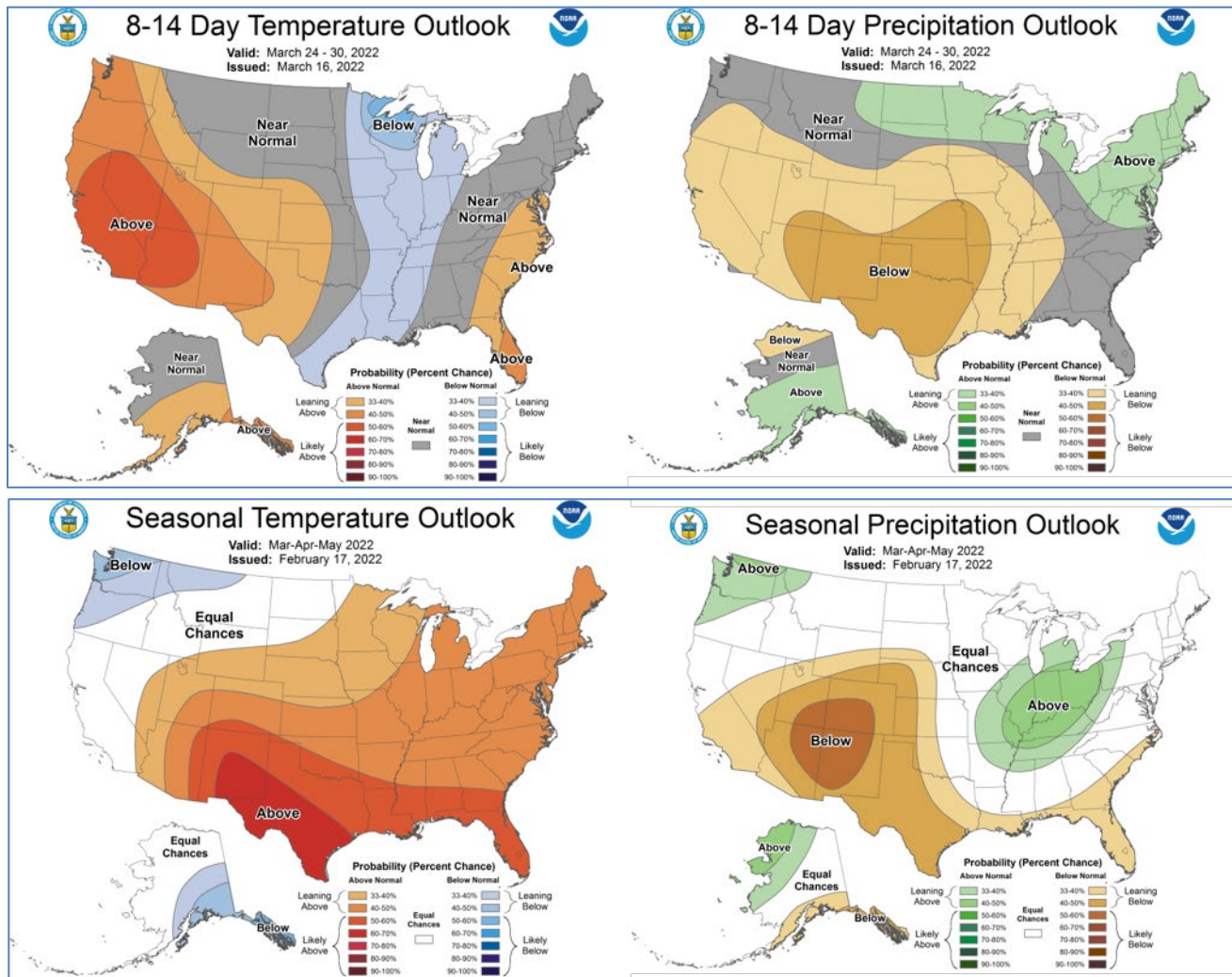


and near normal precipitation.

- **3-month Outlook:** The March, April, and May outlook predict equal chances of normal temperatures and equal chances of normal precipitation. However, as we transition into the summer months the outlook is for warmer than normal and drier than normal conditions.
- **(From NOAA): ENSO Alert System Status: La Niña Advisory**
 - **Synopsis:** La Niña is favored to continue into the Northern Hemisphere



summer (53% chance during June-August 2022), with a 40-50% chance of La Niña or ENSO-neutral thereafter.



Director's Report –Pedro Marques, Executive Director

- Pre-loading the Project Pipeline:
 - More opportunity for irrigation funding
 - Submitted \$500,000 ARPA application, should hear back in a month or so
 - DNRC collecting applications, sending them to ARPA review committee, made up of legislators – they will rank the projects
 - Pot of money about \$10 Million, max ask \$500,000
 - This grant would cover about ½ of our current irrigation infrastructure needs in the Big Hole watershed
 - Open to more projects – the more interest/potential projects we get, the more attractive our ask if we go to a different program, like the NRCS
 - Happy to help landowners secure EQIP funding – we'll handle the bureaucracy and paperwork for you – just reach out to us!
 - Responding to BLM Request for Qualifications
 - Watershed Restoration Plan update underway
 - Local input needed. Known impairment issues or priority drainages to focus attention. ID'ing projects/priorities for next 2-3 years and beyond.

- Having these projects teed up for the future keeps our gears moving, keeps us rolling – this is really important.
- Communications:
 - Consistency in message – Beaverhead, Jefferson
 - Acid Mine Drainage bioabsorbent filter project
 - [30x30 public comment sent](#)
 - [Shared State podcast: Water is for Fighting](#), aired on MTPR March 14th
 - Stories for Action [Life in the Land podcast: Big Hole Valley Rancher, Jim Hagenbarth](#)
 - Life in the Land Big Hole Film Festival – <https://wildlifefilms.org/films>
 - FAS infographic in design
 - Regional drought meeting March 24th
 - Stream gage funding report to WPIC
- Discussion:
 - *Meeting in Dillon with NRCS asking producers what they need. Probably 8 or 9 that showed up. Discussed difficulty of working through EQIP. Jim in EQIP project down in Idaho and they've been really helpful, getting a lot done really fast. Seems like things have changed, for the better, in terms of implementing EQIP.*



Steering Committee Report – Jim Hagenbarth, Vice-Chair

- Meeting end of March or early April.
- Pedro keeping group advised in regards to comments being made on behalf of BHWC and everything BHWC is doing – steering committee appreciates the communication and transparency very much.

Wildlife Report – Tana Nulph, Associate Director

- Carcass Removal – Spring 2022: BHWC will offer carcass removal March-May, 2022. For more information, text “carcass” to 26989, [click here](#), or call John Costa, Wildlife Program Tech. at 209-628-2225.
- Sage Grouse update from Vanna Boccadori, FWP Wildlife Biologist/WMA Manager:
 - Planning on getting the rest of the GPS units out this spring.
 - There are 18.
 - Goal is to get at least 12 of those on hens and the rest on males.
 - Have not collared males before but now that there's got some good hen data FWP is asking the question about how many leks males tend to visit during the spring mating season.
 - MFWP has contracted with a sage grouse geneticist to analyze data since 2018, including the genetics. Plan on having a report that summarizes all this to come out by September.
 - Expanding project scope to include work being done on sage grouse in the Centennial and possibly ID in the Dubois area.

Livestock Carcass Removal & Composting

PICK-UP: 209-628-2225 INFO: 406-267-3421



BIG HOLE WATERSHED COMMITTEE
Protecting our future, one watershed at a time.

REDUCE PREDATOR CONFLICT

COMPOST YOUR CARCASSES

Service free to Big Hole Valley Ranchers March-May; donations accepted.

More info: bhwc.org or text 'carcass' to 26989



Partners & Funders: Livestock Loss Board, MDT, NFWF, NRCS, WLA, People and Carnivores, USFWS, HoTR, MDEQ, Vital Ground Foundation, and local ranchers.

- Using the sage grouse data, in addition to the collared pronghorn data plus collared mule deer and elk data that is being shared by ID Fish and Game (on animals that move into MT to summer) to form the scientific basis for conservation projects – habitat, fencing, Conservation Easement. We’ve expanded our partnership so it now includes BHWC, FWP-Partners, BLM, FS, FWP, DNRC, TNC, NWF and landowners willing to work with us with these projects where they occur on private land.

Restoration Report – Ben LaPorte, Program Manager

- Project planning
 - NRDP Anaconda Uplands
 - Compliance monitoring
 - Subcontracting procurement
 - Upper Oregon Creek
 - Finalized monitoring and implementation plans (DEQ)
 - Upper French Gulch
 - Nearing final designs
- Historical imagery – Rangeland Analysis Platform (<https://rangelands.app/historical-imagery/>) – allows you to compare historical conifer cover to current day, among other things

New Business

- None

Meeting Topic: “Sometimes to Save a River, You Have to Buy It”

Presented by: Nelson Mathews and Jim Cox, Western Rivers Conservancy



Western Rivers Conservancy: Our Mission

- Motto: “Sometimes to Save a River, You Have to Buy It” – WRC purchases land along rivers in order to protect those rivers.
 - Works with any entity that owns land along the river that is worth conserving.
- Western Rivers Conservancy protects outstanding river ecosystems in the western United States.
 1. Acquire land to conserve critical habitat.
 2. Provide for compatible public use and enjoyment.
 3. Cooperate with other agencies and organizations to secure the health of whole ecosystems.
- Not long-term land stewards. Goal is always to convey land to long-term stewards with protections in place.
- Current projects: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington
- Project prioritization:
 - Intact river ecosystems

- Meaningful scale and assemblages – sometimes conserve miles and miles of river, sometimes something small that connects public land or vital habitat
- Cold water refuges – critical for native trout, steelhead, other salmonids
- Great fishing streams recreation and access
- 2002: completed Three Dollar Bridge project on Madison River – purchased 4,400 acres of former Candlestick Ranch, conserved 3 miles of river, enhanced public access
- Wise River project – 200 acres
 - Eagle Rock Ranch, previously owned by the Buckners
 - Interested in this property because 11 cfs was being diverted out of Wise River for irrigation. Landowner will keep a small portion for his remaining 39 acres, but the rest will eventually be put back in-stream once the land is conveyed to the USFS.
 - Arctic grayling impetus for WRC to conserve the Wise/Big Hole Rivers
 - Landowner currently leasing land and still running cattle there
- Other property – still under contract
 - ~317 acres at the confluence of Cox and Old Tim Creeks, feed into Warm Springs Creek – major Big Hole River tributary
 - ~10 miles South of Wisdom
 - Should acquire it this summer
- Other projects:
 - Yakima River, WA – present – 812 acres
 - Upper Rio Grande, CO – 2016-present – 18,620 acres
 - San Luis Hills, CO (State Wildlife Area) – 2016-2018 – 17,019 acres
 - Rio de Los Pinos, CO – 2016-present – 638 acres
 - Rio Grande, Freemon's, CO – 2017-2018 – 91 acres
 - La Jara Creek, Conejos River, CO – present – 45,650 acres
 - Salmon River Tributaries, ID – 2016-present – 984 acres
 - Cape Horn Ranch, Middle Fork Salmon River, ID – 2018-2019 – 159 acres
 - Blue Creek and Klamath River, CA – 2008-present – 47,097 acres
 - John Day River, OR – 2011-present – 41,957 acres
 - Cottonwood Canyon State Park, John Day River, OR – 2011-2019 – 16,132 acres
- “When we buy a river, it belongs to everyone.”
- More information: <https://www.westernrivers.org>
- Discussion:
 - Where do you get your funding for these projects?
 - One source is through grants like the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Another source is through 3-4 large foundations that give us Program Related Investments (PRIs). We have a 20-year history with them so we can easily secure these loans – often below-market or even interest-free. The loans are paid back when the property is sold to long-term stewards (often agencies).
 - Jim is director of donor relations – brings in funding to help with appraisals, environmental assessments, legal fees, etc.
 - Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentation. It was very interesting. Our family has been on the Big Hole River since 1870 and people love it, and we had done things wrong, there wouldn't be any reason for them to come here. I'm concerned a little bit about the tragedy of the commons – generally, the Forest Service, BLM, National Park Service have had a really difficult time managing people who want to come out and see what we have out here. Our Watershed Committee has had a recreation plan that sort of puts a limit on that, but that is very difficult to

come by and took a lot of collaboration by everyone. I would hope that you folks, with what you're doing with your conservation easements as you hand land over to the federal government, would address that issue on tragedy of the commons.

- *In Montana, specifically in Beaverhead County, the taxpayers fund the roads off the highway that access most of the public land (also rural schools). So, we're quite sensitive about losing the tax base. The fact that it goes into BLM and the Forest Service – they've been very delinquent in rural school funding and PILT funds to make up for the federal ownership of the land we have in the county, and it's making it very difficult for us to provide services to the people that come and enjoy the county we have.*
- *A lot of the pictures that you showed show riparian areas. In a lot of the riparian areas around here where you don't have any grazing, they use prescribed burning to keep the grass from becoming decadent to make is useful for wildlife. Do you use prescribed fire in managing the lands that you do to enhance the diversity of the forage there and the age classes of the species?*
 - *The concerns you raised are common, and they are understood. Part of our goal is to try to conserve properties, and sometimes the stewards we work with have challenges (and you pointed out a few). But I've also seen some great things that have happened, and I think the collaborative work you're doing there can help address those things.*
 - *As to prescribed fires, I'm not aware of us doing burning during our ownership. A lot of our ownerships, we keep in grazing during the period we're owning it. We usually keep the rancher on and work with them; in fact, we have more than a few projects right now that have active (grazing) leases on them. So that's how we usually keep the grass issues down. We may do some drift fencing and some precautions to keep cattle out of the streams or manage for that during our ownership. I'm sure we would be interested in doing it (using prescribed fire) if we could figure out how, because I know that it's a useful tool.*
- *You guys (BHWCC) are doing exactly what you should be doing. You're the community – be loud voices and be advocates for what you want. It's really important. You have your elected officials – both local and federal – so be vocal!*
- *Thanks for your presentation. Assuming you know funding is limited and there are many opportunities out there to do good work in conservation along rivers, I'm curious about your process conducting inventories, identifying potential sites, and prioritizing action scenarios where you focus?*
 - *First, we have identified "Great Rivers of the West" –priority areas where we'd like to work, but most projects come from local groups like BHWCC, agencies/biologists, landowners, or people interested in recreation. Evaluate each proposal as they come in. We're strategic to some degree, but most of our work comes from people reaching out to us and asking us to look into things.*
- *Obviously, you guys have done a great job, and it's remarkable. How were you able to develop your funding sources on such a large scale? It's really impressive.*
 - *Part of it's the relationships. We've been doing this for 33 years, conveying to state parks, federal agencies, etc. We are a known entity with a 20+ year history of working with several different foundations. These foundations have millions of dollars that can help get us into (purchase) the land. I (Jim) work with people who enjoy conservation/recreation and have seen the work we've done over the years and know we're having an impact.*

- *We also own 47,000 acres of prime timber land on the Klamath River that's not being cut down, and California has a market for carbon sequestration. So SoCalGas buys carbon offsets to help us purchase the property. So, we're doing some pretty creative conservation funding.*
 - *It was a gradual process to build up to this level.*
 - *Relationships with the lenders and being able to deliver on the work that we do is very important.*
 - *Developing relationships with communities and landowners is just as important as the financial side of things. Expertise in real estate is helpful.*
- *What happens to your carbon credits when the forest burns naturally?*
 - *Good question. There are two different markets for carbon: 1. You agree to manage your timber in a certain way to let it grow longer and cut a little bit less and you'll get money from selling credits to the carbon markets. 2. Voluntary ones where you sell to Volkswagen or REI and they buy it to try to do offsets. The carbon market has you set aside a certain percentage of your land that you don't get paid for – this is a risk pool, it's like insurance. So, over the entire market, they have enough pieces that they didn't pay for so that if your timber burns down, the carbon IS released into the air, but from a financial standpoint, your carbon credits are protected.*
 - *This seems like a very complicated process for a small group like ours to get into.*
 - *It's a fairly expensive process to get into. The appraisals are expensive. There are consultants, aka carbon developers, who can help with the process. WRC's Stewardship Director could speak more to carbon sequestration.*
- *Land is protected/preserved and there is value in that, but many projects involve taking management off the land. So, one of the questions that comes up for us a lot is, that in-stream flow that you're not pulling for irrigation in June or July may have a marginal benefit to the fish and the resource, but where that in-stream flow is really critical is late in the year. We've found through a lot of hydrological studies that flood irrigation is key for getting those return flows timed right for when they're really needed. One of the things I have concerns about when I hear about in-stream flows, is that by the time August hits, that water is long gone. Do you have any plans to play around with incorporating flood irrigation to delay the timing of the return flow for the fishery benefit? Is that something that's come up in your previous work?*
 - *The quick and dirty, honesty answer is no, we have not dealt with that before. But on the Eagle Rock Ranch, we're working with Montana Trout Unlimited, and their water experts will know a lot more about this than I (Nelson) do. We typically partner with another organization that has expertise in that area. We're just starting to dig into this.*
 - *We're glad to hear you're working with Montana TU. Pat Byorth was a major player in the development of our organization.*
- *Are you looking for more properties in the Big Hole?*
 - *Of course! As long as we're welcome and it makes sense, we are very open to doing more work on the Big Hole. And we'd love to visit and recreate (fish) there! We'd love to get to the Big Hole and meet you all in-person, too.*
 - *Please stay in touch (with BHWCC) as you make your plans. We have a pretty robust restoration program with lots of great accomplishments. If there's anything that we could support while you guys have the property – it's often more expeditious to work with private owners rather than going through the federal bureaucracy.*

Upcoming Meetings

- April 20, 2022: **Invasive Weeds in the Big Hole Watershed**
 - 7:00 pm at the Divide Grange/Zoom
- May 18, 2022: **Big Hole River Fishery Update**
 - 7:00 pm at the Divide Grange/Zoom

Adjourn