



# Pigeon River Country Advisory Council

## Meeting Minutes

Location: Corwith Township Hall, Vanderbilt, MI

Date: Thursday, January 18, 2024

A meeting of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council (P.R.C.A.C.) was held on Thursday, January 18, 2024, at Corwith Township Hall in Vanderbilt. Chair Doug Reeves called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m., then led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

### **MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Doug Reeves, Lisha Ramsdell, Mitchell Beach, Ryan Boyer, Rique Campa, Barb Curtis, Bill Loney, Ty Ratliff, Paul Rose, Greg Walz, Kyle Yohe and Matt Hall.

### **MEMBERS ABSENT:**

Don Horrocks, Bill Wood, Conan Smith, Lance Cottrell, Sandy Franz and Larry Partridge.

### **EX-OFFICIO & DEPARTMENT STAFF PRESENT:**

Mark Monroe, Tim Cwalinski, Shelby Adams, Steve Buyze, Jeff Clarke, Jacob Vallance, Kerry Heckman, Paige Perry, Shannon Lott, CO Matt Theunik, and Karen Chapman.

### **EX-OFFICIO ABSENT:**

Neal Godby.

### **OTHERS PRESENT:**

Katherine Benedict, Stewart Smith, Mindy Koch, Carol Rose, Joe Jarecki and Judi Jarecki.

### **CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS – DOUG REEVES:**

Chair Doug Reeves welcomed all to the January 2024 meeting of the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council. Doug thanked everyone for attending on a cold wintry evening.

## **AGENDA:**

*Lisha Ramsdell made the motion to accept the meeting agenda for January 18, 2024, seconded by Ryan Boyer. There being no further additions, deletions or corrections offered, the agenda was approved as presented.*

## **MINUTES:**

*Paul Rose made the motion to accept the October 19, 2023 meeting minutes as presented, seconded by Greg Walz. There being no additions, deletions or corrections offered, the minutes were approved as presented.*

## **PUBLIC COMMENT (3-minute limit):**

Chair Doug Reeves opened the floor for public comment; no public comment was offered.

## **OLD BUSINESS:**

### **CORNWALL DAM UPDATE – LISHA RAMSDELL & TIM CWALINSKI:**

Lisha reported that the Cornwall Dam project is approaching its financial goal with the additional \$750,000.00 that was allocated by the Department for the project. The engineers will be working on submitting two separate permits to EGLE (State of Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy) for the project. The first permit is for the necessary drawdown (up to 7 feet), which is planned to take place in 2024. The second permit is for the renovation of the Cornwall Dam. The project team met with a contractor at the site to review a specific process for dewatering as the old gate structure itself cannot be used since the wheel mechanism is no longer operational. What is currently being considered is removing chunks of concrete out of the riser structure through core drilling to attain up to 7 feet of drawdown.

Tim reported that DNR and Huron Pines are working with Wade-Trim out of Gaylord. Ideas were needed on how to draw the water down 7 feet, slowly (as required by EGLE) and capture that information for the permit being developed. The old wheel mechanism and slide gate are not operational, and once the slide gate is opened, there might be no way to control the flow of water, which is a necessity to drawdown by EGLE.

Lisha reported that based on best estimates, there will be approximately \$200,000.00 in extra funds needed. Although efforts are still being made to apply for various other grants, most of those options have been exhausted. For that reason, the project team is gearing up for a public donation campaign. When the former DNR director announced that a drawdown would happen, that triggered the "Save Cornwall" effort. This is a grassroots group of people who are passionate about Cornwall, and hopes are that they and others are financially motivated enough to help take this project to the finish line. Have been working with Curtis Goldsborough, a member of the public who

manages the "Save Cornwall" Facebook site, and Huron Pines to develop a public fund-raising campaign.

Shannon Lott, DNR Deputy Director shared that the department gave over half (\$750,000.00) of the DNR 2024 dam management appropriation (\$1.2 million) to support the Cornwall project and the difference must be made up with funds from public support. Other sources of funding for renovation beyond the dam appropriation include former state supplemental funds, DNR Fisheries Habitat Grant funds, and Great Lakes Fish Commission funds.

Lisha shared that Huron Pines has agreed to serve as fiscal agent for the fund-raising campaign and gave a preview of the donation website and video at [www.huronpines.org/savecornwall](http://www.huronpines.org/savecornwall).

Tim Cwalinski reminded all that the actual amount of renovation costs won't be known until the bids are received, and consideration must be given to the possibility of bids being significantly higher than all the funding currently available, again. If that is the case, or the public supplemental funding campaign is significantly short, then the project team may have no choice in the future but to reevaluate project goals. The public has to understand that in addition to paying for the renovation, funds must be available for future dam maintenance and inspections. Discussion ensued.

## **STANDING COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

### **AQUATIC RESOURCES & FISHERIES MANAGEMENT – GREG WALZ:**

Greg reported that the committee met on January 8, 2024. Most of the discussion surrounded work going on at the sinkhole lakes to mitigate erosion problems. With the help of the Otsego County Jail work crew and others brush was installed on slopes, new signage placed at Section 4 Lake, and fencing was installed at parking areas on the lakes. Mark Monroe suggested rerouting the trail down to Lost Lake to prevent further erosion at the current trail site. An idea is to move the trail to come in from the south side of the parking lot, this could be a 2024 project. Mark also mentioned funding may be available for additional erosion control measures from the Otsego County Tourism Bureau. The erosion mitigation measures are going to be an ongoing situation. Discussion regarding the possibility that grayling may be stocked in some of the sink hole lakes in the future.

Tim Cwalinski commented that he had concerns that stocking grayling would increase angler traffic on the sinkholes, causing additional erosion issues.

Greg raised the question if the Headwaters Trout Unlimited Chapter be interested in installing a temperature logger on lower Cornwall Creek, below the impoundment during the Cornwall Flooding drawdown. Just to get a baseline and see what the effects are on the stream temperatures. He doesn't anticipate the drawdown would raise the temperature much and the data could be used not only for Cornwall but in other dam removal or dam restoration efforts. Beaver management was also discussed, noting that Upper Black River Council and private trappers are working on dams and beaver issues

throughout the Pigeon River Country and beyond.

#### FOREST COVER & WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT – DOUG REEVES:

Doug reported that the committee has not met since the last council meeting.

#### RESOURCE USE & EXTRACTION – SANDY FRANZ:

Mark Monroe reported on behalf of Sandy Franz that there has not been a committee meeting since the last council meeting. Steve Buyze will give an update under his ex-officio report.

#### RECREATION & ACCESS – PAUL ROSE:

Paul reported that the committee has not met since the last council meeting. Paige Perry will give an update under the PRD ex-officio report regarding the High-Country Pathway bridge replacement where it crosses the Black River, and more.

#### EDUCATION & ENGAGEMENT – BILL WOOD:

Doug Reeves reported on behalf of Bill Wood. The committee has met several times, and discussion has taken place on what the next steps are for updating the plan. Bill will give a full report at the April council meeting.

### **SPECIAL COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

#### DISCOVERY CENTER – SANDY FRANZ:

Lisha reported for Sandy Franz. The Discovery Center Steering Committee and Education Committee have been hard at work to develop the programming for 2024. The Discovery Center will have 8 to 10 different program offerings this year. In addition, the Discovery Center, in partnership with Michigan State University Extension, will again host the Michigan Naturalist Program.

#### PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY EQUESTRIAN COMMITTEE – BARB CURTIS:

Barb reported that the committee has not met since the last council meeting. With regards to the proposed hitching post at Inspiration Point, she is coordinating with other equestrian groups to go out this spring and review sites for the post. She expects to bring a proposal for an appropriate site to the April meeting.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

### LAND ACQUISITION UPDATES – KERRY HECKMAN:

Kerry reported that a closing has just taken place on the Hoobler property, which consists of 404 acres and approximately 4800 feet of Pigeon River corridor. A Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF) grant approved in 2021 was used to purchase the property. There is a conservation easement on the property held by Headwaters Land Conservancy, which will fit in with the Concept of Management and Department management priorities. The main access to the property for the public will be to the east, off Gornick Trail.

The Black River Ranch is in the process of being acquired, which is a total of 8,850 acres. Funding was secured through a 2020 MNRTF grant and a 2022 Forest Legacy grant through the U.S. Forest Service. The acquisition project was based on an appraisal from 2019, and once funding was secured it was appraised again in 2022. The real estate market had increased at this point, resulting in a funding shortfall of 3 million dollars. Submitted another MNRTF grant for 3 million dollars in 2023, which was approved. Currently waiting for the funds to be appropriated by the Michigan Legislature. Negotiations for the acquisition are ongoing with the property owners. The property has over 14 miles of Black River and Stewart Creek frontage, and includes 3 lakes, one of which is Silver Lake at 150 acres.

Next is Doe Lake, which is adjacent to the Pigeon River Country State Forest on two sides. The property is comprised of two parcels for a total of 556 acres. The parcel to the east is 313 acres and has a conservation easement held by Little Traverse Conservancy, an easement the Department has no concerns with. The parcel to the west is 243 acres and does not have a conservation easement. A MNRTF grant was applied for and awarded in 2023, waiting for the Michigan Legislature to appropriate funds. Through the Forest Legacy program there are new opportunities for funding under the Inflation Reduction Act, and we have applied in case additional funds are needed. Recently found out that the western parcel had an offer accepted on it, but the deal did not go through. Discussed with Huron Pines the potential of securing an option on that western parcel. We were able to have the Little Traverse Conservancy secure an option on the eastern parcel.

The last one is the Sturgeon River Corridor property, which is 440 acres and has over  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile of Sturgeon River corridor. This deal had many iterations. In 2021, we were working on a grant application and working with Huron Pines to get an option on the property, but it was sold before we could get that done. Then, in fall of 2022, the new owner decided to sell. We obtained a MNRTF grant in 2022 and were waiting for the appropriation and then the property sold again. Not long after, the property became available again. The MNRTF kindly reinstated a grant that had been withdrawn. The money is locked in, title work and appraisals are in process.

If all these properties are successfully acquired, the result will be an additional 10,250 acres

added to the Pigeon River Country State Forest.

#### EMERGING ISSUES – MARK MONROE / DOUG REEVES:

Nothing on emerging issues at this time.

Doug invited Shannon Lott, DNR Deputy Director, to add any comments before moving on to the Ex-Officio reports.

Shannon commented on the priorities of the new DNR Director Scott Bowen. These priorities include increasing conservation funding for infrastructure needs and more, and renewable energy work to make DNR facilities energy efficient. She hopes to visit the Pigeon River Country with Director Bowen this summer. Shannon went on to share that Robin Clark is the newest member appointed by Governor Whitmer to the Natural Resources Commission; and is the first tribal member ever appointed to the NRC. Shannon thanked Carol Rose, who was present tonight, for her service on the NRC.

#### EX-OFFICIO REPORTS:

##### P.R.C. UNIT REPORT – MARK MONROE:

Mark introduced new staff assigned to the PRC; Katherine Benedict, new AmeriCorps member, and Joyanne Mittig, new DNR Forest Technician. Joyanne and Greg Rekowski (DNR Forester) have been out in the field completing inventory for the 2026 YOE compartments. Once all data is accumulated, staff will meet internally to review with WLD, PRD and FISH divisions, then will bring forth to the PRCAC Wildlife committee for review and discussion. Proposals will be available for public review and comment beginning on June 17, 2024. Open House will be in person, and will take place on July 17, 2024, 2pm-6pm at the PRC HQ. The final 2026 YOE Compartment review will take place on August 15, 2024 at the PRC HQ. In addition, work started on 2024 Plan of Work, which is approximately 1,660 acres this year, amount a bit higher than on average this year because of sales turned back in by purchasers due to the downturn in timber markets.

Mark went on to describe the tradition of allowing staff to name their own timber sales, which led to the “Where’s Karen Oak” timber sale and the story behind that. Mark announced that this is Karen Chapman’s last PRCAC meeting, as she is retiring effective March 29, 2024, and presented her with a beautiful Yeti mug adorned with her initials and PRC elk logo.

##### WILDLIFE REPORT – SHELBY ADAMS:

Shelby gave the December elk hunt summary (hunt period 2), there were 160 licenses available, 50 of those were any elk (bull or cows) and 110 antlerless only permits. 41 bulls were harvested, as well as 2 additional bulls that were Pure Michigan Hunters, 56 antlerless elk were harvested. Shelby presented a map showing where those animals were harvested.

The last two December hunts have had a lower hunter success rate. Some causes for this could be due to adverse weather conditions, more wounded animals, and a really high mast year may have contributed to the lower hunter success rate.

The 2024 elk survey is going forward and is already about one third completed. It was questionable if the survey could be accomplished as good snow cover is needed to count the animals, the weather finally cooperated. She reviewed population survey results from 2022.

With a grant from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a native grassland restoration project is in development for a 109-acre opening in the PRCFS, located by the campsite road and sandhill crane area, which are right in the core elk range. The project will begin by eradication of current undesirables, invasive species and soil preparation. Hopefully by 2025 the site will be ready for native grass planting and with follow-up planting (if needed) and site monitoring.

There is a new deer management initiative being kicked-off, which will consist of two groups, one in the upper peninsula and one in the lower. Seeking input from people interested in deer management that will help guide recommendations for future deer management changes. If interested, the application deadline is January 31, 2024. To apply, go to the DNR website and search "deer management initiative".

#### FISHERIES REPORT – TIM CWALINSKI:

Tim shared that Fish Division is broken up into 8 management units across the state. He is the Fisheries Unit Manager for the Northern Lake Huron Management Unit, stationed in Gaylord, which covers the Pigeon River Country. The Northern Lake Huron Management Unit coverage starts from the St. Mary River rapids down to Roscommon and over towards Oscoda. In the PRC, they continue stocking trout in sinkhole lakes, and stock Pickerel Lake, the crews getting ready for the season. If you would like a copy of the Regional Fisheries Plan, please contact Tim. Continuing to collaborate with the UBRC and Trout Unlimited to do temperature monitoring in the Pigeon and the Black.

#### RECREATION REPORT – JEFF CLARKE:

Jeff Clarke reported that activity has slowed down. Jacob Vallance, lead worker has been completing a lot of training. Still working on getting positions filled for the coming season. Jeff will continue as working out of class PRD supervisor for the time being.

Paige Perry presented a report on trail bridge replacement in the PRC. We have a contract with C2AE to design 4 bridges, 3 of which are on the High-Country Pathway, 1 is on Pickerel Creek, near the Pickerel Lake CG. Were successful in siting the bridge over the Black River, at the utility corridor. Final design is completed, and is in the process of being



permitted, although there are no funds for construction at this time. Applied for a MNRTF grant but were not approved. Applying for a MNRTF grant again in 2024, hopefully the project will be completed in the next couple of years.

Next is Pigeon River crossing at Pine Grove CG, spent a lot of time and money on finding an appropriate site. The conclusion was that the best site is where it was originally located. C2AE is working on the design of the bridge.

As for the other two bridges, the one over Tubbs Creek was shored up and repaired by volunteers. The bridge over Pickerel Creek is not viable at all, issue is high water downstream. A conceptual design was reached, it would be a small foot bridge, could possibly be completed as a volunteer project. Discussion ensued on the challenge of funding these projects, and other issues regarding trails.

#### EGLE UPDATE – STEVE BUYZE:

Steve first asked if anyone had any specific questions for him. He then proceeded to discuss the closure request for the environmental clean-up done at Charlton 4 CPF, which is currently under review. Nothing further to report at this time.

Scott Thompson reported on the status of wells that are in the process of being plugged and site restoration status. Mark shared that the site restorations are generally completed in compliance with the established PRC restoration specifications, however, there may be changes based on the landscape to ensure a beneficial and successful restoration.

#### LAW ENFORCEMENT UPDATE – MATT THEUNICK, C.O.:

Matt Theunik, C.O. reported that this was a unique hunting season, the number of deer hunters were down this year. Bird hunters were out and about. No major issues to report. There was a vehicle stuck in the mud for 3 days near Tin Bridge Rd., they were following their GPS to Osmun Road.

#### **FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS – DOUG REEVES:**

Doug noted that he and Mark would work on committee assignments, so let them know if you have a desire to serve on a specific committee.

The next meeting is scheduled for 5 p.m., Thursday, April 18, 2024.

#### **ADJOURN:**

The meeting adjourned at 7:48 p.m.



RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,  
MARK MONROE, DNR