

2025 Winter WRTAC Meeting Notes

January 22, 2025, 10:00 am (MST)
Avista Noxon Multipurpose Room

WRTAC representative attendees:

Avista – Eric Oldenburg
Cabinet Resource Group – Kim Matthew
Idaho Department of Environmental Quality – Chantilly Higbee
Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) – Ken Bouwens
Lake Pend Oreille Idaho Club – David Gillespie (Conference line)
Kalispel Tribe – Joe Maroney (Conference line) departed 10:58 am
Montana Department of Environmental Quality – Keenan Storrar (Conference line)
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) – Jason Blakney
Noxon-Cabinet Shoreline Coalition – Rick Reich (Alternate) departed 1:48 pm
Panhandle Chapter Trout Unlimited – Bill Love
U.S. Forest Service (Cabinet) – Chris Rossel
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) – Carter Fredenberg

Other attendees:

Avista – Monica Ott, Shana Bernall, Lisa Johnson, Sean Moran, Ben Birdsall, Davina Brown, Will Bass, and Paul Kusnierz (Conference line)
Cabinet Resource Group – Colleen Hinds
Avista Grant Writer – Susan Drumheller (Conference line)
Lower Clark Fork Watershed Group – Sarah Poiesz
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks – Travis Rehm and Mike Hensler (Conference line)
NorthWestern – Jon Hanson and Andrew Welch (Conference line)

Welcome and introductions:

Eric Oldenburg welcomed those in attendance and discussed the purpose and agenda of the meeting. The purpose is to review the draft 2025 aquatic Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs) and provide recommendations to the Management Committee (MC). As such, the emphasis will be to discuss those projects that are new, need to be ranked, or carryover projects with meaningful changes proposed.

Other business:

Fall meeting date:

- Tuesday, August 26, 2025 was selected for the fall WRTAC meeting.

Consent Mails:

- Appendix B–Land Use of Lower Bull River Site Request.

Grant writer update:

- Susan Drumheller provided an update on grants.

Update on petition to ban motorized boats in the Bull River:

- Jim Nash reached out to Avista to write letter of support MFWP Commission.
- Comment deadline is set for Jan 28th.
- LCFWG and Avista plan to submit letters.

Budget Table:

- Eric Oldenburg provided an update on the 2025 budget table.

Review of draft 2025 Annual Implementation Plans:

Appendix A: Idaho Tributary Habitat Acquisition and Fishery Enhancement Program

- Ken Bouwens provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix A for 2025. Specific projects for which there was meaningful discussion are noted below.
- Habitat Restoration and Acquired Property Maintenance and Monitoring Allocation
 - Ken updated the group on proposed 2025 activities under this project plan: weed control, paying property taxes, law enforcement monitoring, and Twin Creek debris (old power poles, etc.) removal.
- Idaho Field Station
 - The project covers ongoing operation and maintenance. Starlink internet should be installed soon.
- Rattle Creek Habitat Enhancement Project Monitoring
 - The construction phase of this project is complete and 170 trees were strategically felled into the stream.
 - Year one of post project monitoring will start following 2025 spring runoff.
- Grouse Creek Stream Channel Restoration Project
 - Construction is scheduled to occur this year.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix A Project Plans as written.

Appendix B: Montana Tributary Habitat Acquisition and Recreational Fishery Enhancement Program

- Travis Rehm provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix B for 2025. Specific projects for which there was meaningful discussion are noted below.
- Stream Gage Monitoring
 - The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) will no longer have the ability to implement the work due to staffing constraints.
 - Avista, MFWP, and the USFS will meet to develop a new plan to get the work accomplished. If that is completed in time, the project plan will be sent to the MC for review as part of the normal approval process. If that effort takes longer than

anticipated, it will be submitted as a consent mail for MC consideration. The thought is to look for a private sector consultant or potentially MDNRC will be interested in supporting part of the effort.

- The group will also discuss the value of continuing monitoring in Rock Creek and Trout Creek.
- The group also discussed getting the Idaho PIT-monitoring stations surveyed and developing gage height-discharge curves for those streams.
- Habitat Restoration, Property Acquisition, and Conservation Easement Contingency Allocation
 - Travis provided an update on a potential conservation easement opportunity in the McKay and Prospect Creek Drainages. Due diligence toward this easement will be pursued and the project will potentially be sent out for MC consideration through a future consent mail.
- St Paul Trailhead Improvement Project
 - Just funded survey and design and implementation to start this summer.
- Lower Clark Fork Bull Trout Life History Evaluation (*new*)
 - Travis provided the history and goal for this research including the previous two similar studies that were conducted in the East Fork Bull River and Graves Creek and that this effort would be new in the Vermilion River.
 - This is proposed as a cost share among the CFSAs, BPA, and MFWP.
 - The WRTAC ratified the proposed ranking criteria scores.
- Monitoring Effectiveness of the Vermilion River Restoration (*new*)
 - Travis provided the background and need for this monitoring associated with the Vermilion River restoration projects.
 - The WRTAC modified ranking criterion F from “3” ($\geq 50\%$ cost share) to “0” (entirely CFSAs funded).
 - Travis and Sarah Poiesz also provided updates regarding the Grouse Reach restoration project noting the decommissioning of part of the road and conversion into a trail.
- Mountain Lake Fisheries Monitoring Project
 - An extension to the Comprehensive Project Report due date is being proposed.
- Cabinet Gorge Reservoir Bathymetry Update (*new*)
 - This project will be similar to the Noxon Reservoir bathymetry update in that new survey data will be collected and a new bathymetric map produced. Thereafter, we will work with stakeholders to refresh the messaging for the hard copy maps as well as release the maps digitally.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix B Project Plans as written with the aforementioned modifications.

Appendix C: Fish Passage/Native Salmonid Restoration Plan

- Shana Bernall provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix C for 2025. Specific projects for which there was meaningful discussion are noted below.
- Upstream Fish Passage Program
 - Beginning August 15 of each year, all Bull Trout captured in the Cabinet Gorge Fish Passage Facility (CGFPF) or hatchery ladder trap will be transported upstream including Bull Trout genetically assigned to Idaho tributaries. Bull Trout genetically assigned to Idaho tributaries will be transported and released into the East Fork Bull River.
 - All Westslope Cutthroat Trout captured in the CGFPF in the spring will be transported upstream to Bull River Bay. The previous size limit for transport was 340 mm, but there will not be a size limit this year.
 - Task was added to continue evaluating the structural integrity, safety and fish capture performance of the Hatchery Ladder Trap and potentially make modifications if deemed appropriate. The Hatchery Ladder Trap continues to capture a notable number of Bull Trout, so we want to do what we can to continue to improve operation of this facility.
 - Will and Shana are working on a draft of the CGFPF M&E Plan Update. A CGFPF subgroup meeting is scheduled for the end of the month to kick off discussions on preliminary results and how to operate the CGFPF in 2025.
- Native Salmonid Restoration Plan Five-Year Plan
 - Sean Moran is working with Stakeholders to update the last 5-year plan with the inclusion of all aquatic PM&E measures (i.e., adding plan sections for CFSAs appendices D, E, F1-4 to the existing 5-yr plan that covered appendices A, B, C, and F5). The incorporation of the additional PM&E measures has required additional time to draft the new plan, which has resulted in a shift from MC approval timing from this spring to the fall.
- Tributary Trapping and Downstream Juvenile Bull Trout Transport Program
 - The new fish handling trailer should arrive next week, and Eric will be working with fleet to outfit the trailer.
- Cabinet Gorge Fish Passage Facility Minor Modifications
 - The CGFPF subgroup recently approved funds to purchase three new underwater cameras and improve the functionality of the underwater camera system. This is an additional \$47,200 that is not described in the project plan that the WRTAC received. Shana will update the budget table and carryover amounts in this project plan prior to sending out to the MC.
 - In the near future, we will be asking the CGFPF subgroup to approve funds for several other projects including 1) construction of an air bubbler system to get fish out of the vee trap area prior to fish lifts and 2) improvements to the stop log/vee trap lifting system.
 - The CGFPF subgroup is also contemplating constructing a water chiller system at the CGFPF that would enable the chilling of up to 20 gpm of water by 10 degrees F. The cold water would be released near the vee trap to attract Bull Trout into the final capture pool during periods when river water temperatures are high. We plan

to discuss this further at the CGFPF subgroup meeting scheduled for the end of January and will likely have the option to implement this modification this year if the CGFPF subgroup approves the funds and we can get a contractor.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix C Project Plans as written with the aforementioned budget modification.

Appendix D: Bull Trout Protection and Public Education Project

- Sean Moran provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix D for 2025. Specific projects for which there was meaningful discussion are noted below.
- Idaho Bull Trout Protection and Education Officer Support
 - There was a change in IDFG staff for the warden position, Dustin Masin took another position and Dakota Smith is the new warden.
- Trout Unlimited Outreach Coordination
 - An addition to the 2025 Plan is for Amy Anderson to investigate and coordinate reinstituting the Kootenai County Water Festival in 2025 for 2026 implementation.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix D Project Plans as written.

Appendix E: Watershed Councils Program

- Sean Moran provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix E for 2025.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix E Project Plans as written.

Appendix F1: Clark Fork River Water Quality Monitoring Program

- Paul Kusnierz provided a summary of the proposed Appendix F1 project for 2025.
- Water Quality Monitoring
 - Continuing project with no meaningful changes proposed.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix F1 Project Plans as written.

Appendix F2: Monitoring of Noxon Reservoir Stratification and Mobilization of Sediment Nutrients/Metals

- The Appendix F2 obligation has been fully met and the PM&E measure is being closed. This is reflected in the 2024 Annual Report which represents the final time Avista will report on Appendix F2.

Appendix F3: Aquatic Organism Tissue Analysis

- Paul Kusnierz provided a summary of Appendix F3 activities proposed for 2025.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix F3 Project Plan as written.

Appendix F4: Water Quality Protection and Monitoring Plan for Maintenance, Construction, and Emergency Activities

- Paul Kusnierz provided a summary of Appendix F4 for 2024 and noted that there was presently nothing on his radar that would require him to enact the Water Quality Protection and Monitoring Plan.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve Appendix F4 as written.

Appendix F5: Dissolved Gas Supersaturation Control, Mitigation, and Monitoring

- Paul Kusnierz and Ken Bouwens provided a summary of all the projects proposed within Appendix F5 for 2025. Specific projects for which there was meaningful discussion are noted below.
- Analysis of Gas Bubble Disease Monitoring Data
 - Paul explained the addition of new sampling work that is being proposed for 2025. The sampling will consist of capturing and identifying gas bubble disease on fish in areas of the lower Clark Fork River that are both deep and shallow. In addition, some fish will be PIT tagged to facilitate tracking the occurrence of gas bubble disease within and across years.
- Idaho Protection and Education Officer Support
 - Dakota Smith is transitioning into his new role taking over for Dustin Mason.
- Lake Pend Oreille Nearshore Index Netting
 - Ken reminded the group this is not a new project but one that occurs once every three years.

The WRTAC recommended the MC approve the Appendix F5 Project Plans as written.

Appendix T: Project Operations Package

- Eric Oldenburg provided a summary of the projects proposed within Appendix T for 2025.

The WRTAC recommends that the MC approve the Appendix T Project Plan as written.

The meeting adjourned at 2:54 pm (MST).