

Board of Okanogan County Commissioners  
Tuesday, Nov 7, 2023 PM

JN—Jon Neal, BOCC, District 3  
AH—Andy Hover, BOCC, Vice-Chair, District 1  
CB—Chris Branch, BOCC, Chair, District 2  
LJ—Lanie Johns, Clerk of the Board  
BH—Brock Hoenes, Director WDFW, Region 2  
BT—Brandon Troyer, Wildlife Area Manager, WDFW  
SK—Scott Fitkin, Wildlife Biologist WDFW  
CH—Cari Hall, Okanogan County Auditor  
PJ—Pam Johnson, Okanogan County Treasurer

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*Summary of significant discussions:*

- Three people from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) update the commissioners on their plan to close parts of the Methow Wildlife Areas from Dec. 15 to Mar. 31 to help improve mule deer habitat.
- The commissioners learn from Pam Johnson, County Treasurer that the Aeneas Lake Irrigation District has amassed approximately \$300,000 in debt. The irrigation district commissioners will meet with the county commissioners on Nov. 20 to discuss remedies to the situation.
- The commissioners would like to speak with Barbara Walters, Executive Director of the North Central Washington Libraries, about bookmobile service is the county. She didn't talk about cuts to the service when she spoke to them on Oct. 16.

**3:14:30**—Discussion of the Methow Wildlife Area Winter Closures.

BH—I'm Brock Hoenes, Director of WDFW Region 2. I've got Wildlife Area Manager Brandon Troyer and Wildlife Biologist Scott Fitkin. They'll give the BOCC a presentation about our proposed closure of some areas. We had a public meeting about this, but AH was unable to attend, so he asked us if we could do this presentation for the board.

BH—This doesn't require rule making, but we tried to get public input.

SF—Here's an overview: Our proposal is to close parts of the Methow Wildlife Areas from December 15 through March 31. The proposal originally ended on April 15, but we shortened it due to internal discussion.

SF—One key point—We're not designated any groomed recreation route—groomed for snowmobiles, skiers, snowshoers, etc. because those routes aren't in critical mule deer winter range. We're concerned

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with critical mule deer winter or early spring range and that's on parcels we purchased primarily for that purpose. We recognized this would create some angst because recreation is so important to this community, so we kept a portion of each wildlife unit open so residents would all have some area near them open for recreation. There will be roads—aka designated open routes—because those roads aren't under our management.

SF—We're looking at closing portions of five units in the Methow Wildlife Area. The closures encompass about 65% of the wildlife area, but they're only about 2.2% of the total public land in the Methow watershed and we're only closing them for about 30% of the year.

SF—Here's a unit-by-unit summary:

1. Texas Creek near Carleton—close the land west of Hwy 153 south facing slopes. Leave the east side open. Fewer deer there and also mixed land use to harder to enforce the closure.
2. Golden Doe—between Twisp and Carleton. One of the highest densities of mule deer in the winter. Purchased almost exclusively for habitat. Proposing to close almost everything west of the Twisp-Carleton Road. Keep the stuff down by the river open. Good waterfowl hunting there and the deer don't use it much.
3. West of Twisp—Big Buck Unit. A lot of it burned. Proposing to close the eastern half and leave the western half open. The eastern half has the best range because it didn't burn. Not much bitter brush on the west half, plus it's a popular cross-county ski area. It's got a road that's the boundary line of the closure.
4. The original Methow Wildlife Area—purchased almost exclusively for mule deer range. Leaving open Lloyd Ranch next to Pearrygin Lake State Park. It's got a fat bike route that's popular. And there's little shrub cover on Lloyd Ranch.
5. The Methow Unit South. I've surveyed deer since 1996 and the highest density of wintering deer I've seen is in the Fraser Creek area in this unit. Moving west up towards Pipestone Canyon had high densities, too. But all that area burned in the Carleton Complex fires. It's starting to rebound. I started seeing in the last 10 years I don't see the deer I'd expect but I do see more people on it. Hoping to see more deer use here. There are three county roads remaining open. In the Bowen Mountain area, near the Wildlife Area Office just off Bear Creek Road, we're going to leave that open. It's popular with hikers and snowshoers, backcountry skiers. And I've never seen a lot of deer there over the years.

AH—So you're proposing to close all around the gun range?

SF—Yes.

6. The Rendezvous. This is the most challenging. Some years the snow loads aren't conducive to deer. Close the southern half and leave the northern half open. That closes Lewis Butte and Riser Lake Loop. Anecdotally, it's not uncommon to see deer in the southern half but not many in the north. We'll monitor this to see how deer respond to the closure.

AH—That's the trailhead parking for the ski trail there on the map?

?—No, that's parking for trucks with horse trailers.

Brock—That's a lot of boundary to get marked. What's our plan for that?

BT—We've got a design for signs. They're easy to order. It takes some labor to get them up and we've got a contract with WCC. We don't want signs to be an eyesore, but enough so people know where the closure is. We'll also do outreach, and have maps, especially for Lewis Butte and Riser Lake.

SF—That's a pretty good overview of the closure area.

AH—There are no groomed trails within these units?

?—Except for the fat tire bike route at the State Park. That's not habitat.

AH—If we could work with the park, would there be any interest in closing part of that trail up on the top?

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SF—We know there's some deer in there, but the acreage is small. Can I live with that? Yeah. Mule Deer are under increasing stress from a variety of sources. That includes human disturbance. Not just recreational disturbance, but humans disturbing deer. People walking their dogs for example. People with dogs in their yards. It's coming to a head now because deer are getting hit from more angles. Fires, more drought, higher temperatures, road kill has got to be up due to more traffic, habitat loss. We've done a lot in the Methow to protect it in perpetuity, but there's still some loss. There's so much more recreation all year long. As soon as the snow melts, people want to get out and that's when deer are the most vulnerable. It's a critical time for deer. That's why the closures are set up through March.

SF—Groomed ski trails don't seem to affect deer much, but the use has increased 300% in about the last 10 years and that's indicative of broader use.

SF—Winter range is limited and some places it's the limited thing for mule deer productivity. The deer can't just move. The winter disturbance affect deer demographics—productivity and recruitment. Disturbance affects their energy level. So there's a greater chance of fawns dying from starvation, or does reabsorbing embryos or having fewer twins or a later fawning date. The later a fawn born, the smaller it is when the next winter come and that decreases its chance of survival. The disturbances reduce the productivity—the number of fawns produced by does, and the recruitment—the number of fawns that survive to the next spring. This can lead to a population decline.

SF—Other criticism—Why is it all about deer? We do other animals, too, but deer are an important species. Mule deer are important to the ecosystem. They're a food source for carnivores and scavengers. They're the most numerous highly valued hunting species in the valley. They're also most popular watchable wildlife species.

SF—What's the science behind this? There's a large body of literature about human disturbance and impact on deer.

AH—What about collars? Are we doing predator/prey studies or where the deer migrate?

SF—Both. Some deer migrate all the way from Carleton into Canada. Also annual mortality rates for does. They'll help some with information for the closure. Also some collars are from the Department of Transportation.

AH—That's why I see collars on deer walking around my road!

SF—Some local data—Productivity rate is fawn/doe ratio. The trend is down. It's hard to do a census for deer, or even estimate with modeling. Hard to get a number I have faith in it. So we use other methods to monitor population trend. General season buck harvest shows population is trending down, but the number bounces around. 2015 was the biggest harvest.

BT—This wasn't isolated to Okanogan County. 2015 was high in eastern Washington and Idaho in general. There was a weird combination of weather events.

SF—In recent history, deer numbers peaked in the early 2000s.

SF—Another question people ask—What else are you doing to improve the mule deer? We're doing quite a bit. I want to suspend antlerless mule deer hunting. It affects archery season and disabled hunter season.

AH—From Sept 1 to Nov 20, people hunt deer one way or the other. Can you break it up some how?

SF—Yes and no. Given all the user groups, you can't shorten the season unless there's overlap and people don't like overlap.

AH—What about east side/west side tags? Or mule deer/white tail tags? Wyoming has different rules.

SF—We've talked about that. It's less about biology than sociology—how people want to hunt.

AH—Brock said people just want to hunt. But the guys I know are pissed about the general season and we don't have the genetics now that we used to have.

BH—I can tell you there's more energy behind the conversation about doing things differently than I've ever heard. When I talk to hunter groups, I tell them they need to get organized. It's more likely to

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change if there's an organized hunter voice. The general public voice is driving the conversation—85% of the people we survey say—don't take my season. It's hard for us to say propose a change.

AH—I hear rumblings about the Game Commission. They don't follow the science. A lot of people here value wildlife and we have to manage them. Not just for hunting.

SF—For people from the west side, they really like to just see the deer.

SF—Quickly—other stuff we're doing—changing hunting season, monitor demographics, restoration and protection of habitat, advising land owners, trying to get recreation into wildlife management.

SF—Brandon will take over now. He'll share the data he got from the user surveys he took.

BT—There's no smoking gun we found in the surveys. Opinions were split about 50-50 for several topics.

BT—Lots of comments. Lots of ways to recreate during the closure time. X-C skiing, hiking, walking, watching, photography, even paragliding. One guy said he did snowmobiling which we don't allow of WDFW land so I admire his honesty.

BT—How people value wildlife area—55% value. If you exclude the hunters and combine it with skiing, biking, etc. you get 46%. It's closely correlated to people who supported the closure vs those who didn't. We manage hunting with seasons, so why not other forms of recreation?

AH—The people who recreate but don't hunt—the hunting tags go a long way to pay for that land.

BT—The people who support the closure, 90% of the commenters said they support the deer and understand humans have a negative impact. Of the people who don't support the closure—by far the most common comment was centered about snowshoeing, skiing and a belief that human presence doesn't disturb deer. The next most common answer was—insufficient data. But there's mountains of data behind this. Others said—just get rid of hunting. But we've got a legislative mandate to provide hunting.

AH—How do they think the land was bought.

JN—Just get rid of hunting??

BT—How do people feel about the dates? Right down the middle again. Most angst about the April closure. So we shaved off that part. If there's a long winter, we can do an emergency closure if we think we have to. That tool exists.

SF—Just for reference, in my tenure here, the only time I would have wanted to delay the April 1 opening was 1997. My daughter was hunting Easter Eggs in the snow that year.

BT—Lots of other places have similar closures in the same range. We're consistent. Around Jackson Hole they're got a huge recreation economy and their herds are dwindling, so they've got closures.

They take it seriously. It's a fine of \$5,000 or 6 months in jail.

CB—There's a lot of places for recreation.

AH—I've been pushing closures for a long time. Looking at your proposal, I'm happy that you've been selective in what you're closing.

**4:14:20**—CB—This may be disruptive, but I'm opening up a public hearing right now.

CB—This is a hearing to authorize a supplemental appropriation for Title III for \$390,710. Any public comments? (There are none.) Resolution 155-2023 to authorize the appropriation is passed.

SF—We were strategic in the way we did this. Trails weren't the issue. It's human presence. Most of the best habitat for deer doesn't have trails anyway and it's off-trail use that bothers deer the most, especially with dogs in the mix. The situation isn't dire now, but if the trend continues, we'll need to do something more drastic down the road.

AH—How can we commissioners get a bigger voice?

BH—I think we see a lot of that organically, through partnerships, NGOs. You can get local input but you can't exclude the west side. They're updating the Methow Area Recreation Plan and we'll have an

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advisory committee. That'll have locals on it. If it's a decision the Game Commission makes, it's got to be state-wide.

Discussion of deer baiting and other topics.

CB—Thanks for the presentation and the information about the surveys.

BH—I need to thank the staff for all the effort they put in to it.

AH—One more thing. Can you email us your plan to measure your success of the closures?

SF—We'll send something, but it's not a research project looking at deer behavior. Remember, during Covid wildlife moved into areas where they hadn't been for a long time.

AH—We'll need to tell people if it's working or not.

They leave.

**4:29:15**—Discussion of a draft of the county's Asset Policy.

Cari Hall, (County Auditor), Pam Johnson (County Treasurer) and the commissioners discuss the county's policy to manage its assets so that the county will be able pass an audit by the state.

**5:54:35**—PJ—Can I bring up another topic? I need a few minutes to update you about the Aeneas Lake Irrigation District. I spoke with Pete Sullivan, our rep with Washington Federal Bank to see if they can get a loan, and the answer is no. They're not showing fiscal responsibility. He had a conversation with her (?) and it's them not showing that we have this amount of debt and they're going to increase our rates by this amount to cover the debts.

AH—When they come in, I'll want to know how much water are they supplying to how many users. The amount they have to charge is outrageous. How can anybody afford that?

PJ—I understand why they don't want to raise it more, but they've got a real cavalier attitude. They got audited and it wasn't a good audit.

AH—What if a junior taxing district goes defunct?

PJ—We still receive the assessments and try to pay down as much as we can. We have a meeting scheduled on Nov. 20. She doesn't understand what they need to do or why they're coming here.

AH—They're coming here so we can see if we'll keep them on registered warrant or not. If they can't prove they can sustain it, but they can't just keep doing something for the sake of doing it.

CH—They're up to \$300,000 of registered warrants.

AH—OW! Those bills are power bills?

PJ—Mostly.

CH—I can make a list of bills that you've paid and what needs to be paid.

PJ—We're still paying because I haven't had any direction not to.

CB—They're still incurring debt?

PJ—They've got some money coming in now, but there still are some bills. I'm hoping to pay down at least half of that.

AH—Do you want our direction not to pay?

PJ—I have the authority as Treasurer not to pay, but I'd like some buy-in from you. Also, I want to make sure you're aware of the situation when they start coming to you.

AH—I appreciate that. I don't think they should incur any more debt with us. If they don't get all the debt paid down, what will they do in the spring.

PJ—They've been incurring debt of about \$150,000 a year for the last two years. Leah (McCormick, former Treasure) gave them a lot of things to do before the next season.

CB—Is this the way they can pay us back—they'd have to cease service so they stop having any expenses but continue to collect the assessment? The people who will come in will say they cut me off, but

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continue to collect. We can tell them they elected the Irrigation Board. Cutting the service will be a serious situation.

AH—Or double their rates. How many acres do they water at \$300/acre?

PJ—1,161 acres.

AH—So they get \$300,000/year and they're spending \$450,000? I propose we cut them off right now. PJ should send a letter to all of the ratepayers saying the irrigation district has incurred debt with the county and we're not going to cover it anymore. When the time comes to turn the pumps on, you might not be able to. You should get together and figure out what to do.

CH—That's why we we're going to have the meeting on Nov 20. I'll send a list of everything they've paid this year.

PJ—If they come to the table and say we're going to raise the rates to cover the amount of the loss..

AH—They're going to have to figure out some other business plan.

CH—That's the intent of the meeting.

CB—It doesn't sound like they know what to do.

PJ—And they're an assessment district where they can set the rates themselves.

AH—Maybe get someone to help them to get a solar panel to help with the electricity they're paying for.

PJ—I just wanted to let you know. Their costs will drop back down in the winter.

CB—I pay \$80/month for sewer because the city let the sewer system collapse, but I voted for the same people again because they're all there was.

CH—We don't know what the commissioners know and don't know about how it works.

CB—We had the same experience with a fire district that didn't know how to do an annex. We helped them.

CH and PJ leave

**6:10:25**—CB—Motion to approve the consent agenda. Motion passes 3-0.

AH—I move to approve vouchers for \$1,498,031.54. Motion passes 3-0.

JN makes minor corrections to the minutes. Makes a motion to approve the minutes. Motion passes 3-0

AH—Moves to reconsider the consent agenda. The paper work for the second item is not correct.

Motion passes 3-0.

AH—I move to approve the consent agenda minus item #2. Motion passes.

**6:22:15**—LJ—Other items that came to me today.

The Lodging Tax allocation. \$1,101,098 for new HVAC & finish the splash pad. Motion to approve passes 3-0

Employment agreement between Okanogan County and Charles Ford (?) Motion to approve passes 3-0.

Acceptance of Okanogan County grant Office of Public Defense for \$48,919.—Motion to approve passes 3-0.

Resolution 148-2023 for compensation for Maurice Goodall for duties.

**6:29:35**—JN—Before we adjourn, I'd like to have a quick discussion about the bookmobile. Supposedly they're doing it because of user... They've got a document that the South Region gives out 14,000 books per year. North Region is 22,000+.

AH—So they're not cutting it because of usage.

JN—I'm trying to get some documentation.

AH—We need to get ahold of the NCW Libraries and say we don't want this to happen. We're way more rural.

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JN—They've got two stops in the South Region over 7 miles from a library. Most are within 3 miles. And they've got public transportation there.

LJ—The reason they're discontinuing the bookmobile here is because?

JN—Their excuse is that it's because of usage.

CB—Usage decision is based on usage of other areas.

CB—Ask them to come and talk to us.

JN—I just talked to Brian Dansel , Ferry County Commissioner. I'm getting all this second hand. Barbara Walters said nothing about the bookmobile so Brian Dansal asked her about it.

CB—They need to make this argument in-person. One of us should call and ask her specifically. Tell her we'd like to talk about that.

JN—I'll do that.

AH—Let her know the other two want her in here and answers.

CB—We've got a reasonable argument.

CB—Anything else?

LJ—Housing coalition is coming soon. They invited the board to a retreat Nov. 17 & 18 at Sun Mountain Lodge. They'd like to know if anyone will go.

LJ—Shelley Keitzman is trying to arrange a meeting with OPD Nov 30 or Dec. 1 and needs to have a commissioner there.

AH—I'll go. Taxpayers are paying for public defenders.

JN—If you get a public defender and you're found guilty, you don't pay.

CB—Adjourn at 4:52.