

Meeting Summary

Natural Resource Information System Advisory Committee August 18, 2005

Attendees:

Bonnie Lovelace, Chair, Montana Department of Environmental Quality; Dan Sullivan, Montana Department of Agriculture; Mark Baumler, Montana Historical Society; Mike Boyer, Montana Department of Administration; Skip Kowalski, US Forest Service; John Tubbs, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Ron Moody, Montana Library Commission; Darlene Staffeldt, Montana State Librarian; Stan Sternberg, Montana Department of Transportation; Deb Wambach, Montana Department of Transportation; Theresa Hanley, US Bureau of Land Management; Donald Allen, Montana State Library Commission; Janet Hess-Herbert, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Scott Mincemoyer, Montana Natural Heritage Program; Jim Hill, Montana State Library; Dan Dwyer, University of Montana; Allan Cox, Montana Natural Heritage Program; Sibyl Govan, Montana State Library; Bryce Maxell, Montana Natural Heritage Program; Todd Everts, Montana Environmental Quality Council.

NHP Future Administration

Sue Crispin presented progress on an extensive assessment, carried out to get partner/stakeholder input on key outcomes and concerns with potential transfer of the NHP. Input reflected a strong desire to minimizing change in services and disruption to staff. Options were evaluated against Guiding Principles developed with partner input. Preliminary findings of the assessment point to a “best fit” option of keeping the program in MSL, maintaining it under contract, and potentially transferring that contract to UM. TNC has begun more detailed discussions focusing on HR and finance issues with UM, to evaluate this option in more detail. The UM Vice Provost for Research and Development, Dan Dwyer, was present and expressed the University’s high-level interest and support for potentially assuming administration of the NHP.

There were a number of questions, good discussion and general support among partner agencies for continued exploratory discussions with UM. Formal approval to transfer the contract for core NHP services would come from the MSL Commission. The move would also require legal transfers between TNC and UM. Ron Moody, MSL Commissioner, stated his desire to ensure that the option of incorporating the program into MSL be fully explored. Jim Hill stated that the personnel issues involved and the fact that the program as it now exists extends beyond that covered by the MSL contract serve to complicate that option, likely to the extent that legislation would be necessary to ensure a smooth transfer. The two MSL commissioners present at the meeting will be further considering the options and any recommendations will be brought before the Commission for future action.

NHP Coordinating Committee

Jim Hill and Sue Crispin presented a proposal to establish a Natural Heritage Program Coordinating Committee separate from, but with membership overlapping that of the NRIS Advisory Committee. Through this committee, state agencies and other NHP funders and stakeholders (e.g., federal agencies such as BLM and USFS) could come together on an equal membership basis to provide input on NHP plans and priorities. The Coordinating Committee, as the name suggests, would be intended to promote coordination among partners

in working with the NHP on collecting and managing biological data in Montana. The Committee was also identified as one of the most effective means for NHP partners to ensure that the Program continues to serve their needs under any change in future administration.

There was good discussion, several questions and suggestions, and overall support for creating this Committee. Lead responsibility will lie with the NHP and will be included in the Statement of Work for the NHP contract by the State Library.

NHP Statement of Work

Sue Crispin described the planning structure for the Natural Heritage Program: a 5-year strategic plan and the Statement of Work for the biennial contract, which serves effectively as a 2-year work plan – both currently under development. Sue pointed out that funding from the core contract (which at \$300,000/year is less now than in 01-02), is no longer adequate to fully support the staff positions considered essential for core functions and services. These positions are partially maintained with “supplementary” funding from federal, state and private sources, currently totaling around \$100,000/year. Contracts for field work and related work beyond core provide the means to support full positions. An additional \$200,000 would be needed to fully support the staff positions currently defined as essential to core functions and services.

Questions and discussion about the Statement of Work focused primarily on how much can realistically be accomplished with current core funding and how to work with partners to increase core funding. Discussions are underway with USFWS and USFS on support for NHP core functions. The importance of coordination with FWP to prevent duplication of effort and to take advantage of the expertise within each program was also emphasized.

Participants were asked to submit any comments on the draft SOW within 2 weeks so that MSL and TNC can finalize the contract for the current biennium (already underway) as soon as possible.

NRIS Core Funding Agreements

Jim Hill summarized comments that he had received regarding the proposed core funding agreements covering legislatively authorized pass-through funding from selected state agencies and the university system. Additional suggestions for improvements to the description of core services were made, and it was suggested that the formula for determining the level of funding from each agency be evaluated during the biennium for input to the EPP process. NAC members will be given the opportunity to comment on a revised draft agreement that incorporates the suggested changes.

Election of NAC Chair

John Tubbs was elected as NAC chair for the 06/07 biennium, succeeding Bonnie Lovelace. John was nominated by Jim Hill in consideration of his experience with NRIS, the importance of GIS and NRIS to the agency he represents, and his knowledge of RIT, a primary funding source for NRIS. Bonnie Lovelace was recognized for her many years of service as NAC chair. There was general agreement that NAC should meet on a scheduled basis for the coming biennium, and John committed to holding routine meetings.