

National Association of Counties, 2021 Western Interstate Region: Board of Directors Meeting
May 26-28, 2021 @ the Bitterroot River Inn, Hamilton, Montana

Wed. May 25- Judy and I drove to Anchorage, parked @ the terminal.

Thu. May 26- Judy & I caught the 1:00 a.m. Delta flight to Salt Lake City. And the 9:45 a.m. flight to Missoula, MT. We rented an Avis car and drove to Hamilton.

6:00-7:30 was a meet & greet session @ the hotel conference room, bar & outside area. I met WIR President Greg Chilcott of Ravalli County, Montana and Jonathan Shuffield, the WIR executive director as well as many other WIR board members or associates. There were about 25 people present. I was the only Alaskan there.

8:00 p.m. We drove about 25 miles to a ranch/home near Darby, MT., where a dinner was held for this WIR meeting. The home was on the bank of the Bitterroot River, which is a clear water (not glacier) river of maybe 100-foot width. Fields were green, the house and garage sat maybe 50 foot above the river. Delicious barbecue dinner of beef, chicken, sausage, etc. was in the garage. Quite a few wives came, probably 25-30 people present. Among the things I learned today is that most counties have only 3 or 5 elected "commissioners." They are the equivalent to our assembly members. Most individuals campaigning for commissioner must declare their party (Republican or Democrat, etc.). County Commissioner seems to be pretty much a full-time job. From what I learned, most counties have police powers. Counties have lawyers called "prosecuting attorneys." Commissioners are not allowed to disagree with prosecuting attorneys. In Washington a commissioner responded to a constituent who lost their home to foreclosure, I assume. The commissioner tried to use a county code for homeless people to help the individual. Prosecuting attorney said he couldn't and the commissioner was forced to resign, if I understand it right. Voters reelected the commissioner at the next election.

Thu. May 27- Continental breakfast @ 7:30 a.m.

9:00 WIR Board of Directors meeting began.

9:15 a zoom presentation from Leanne Marten, Region 1 Forester with the U.S. Forest Service. Region 1 is N Dakota, a bit of northwest S Dakota, Montana and northern Idaho. Alaska is Region 10. Region 1 is aka the "Northern Region." Marten said, "The Forest Service plays a critical role in habitat related to climate change. Conservation versus preservation is not an either/or issue. Multiple use is good.."

A question & answer session followed. Joel Bousman from Sublette County, Wyoming liked multiple use. He mentioned how there use to be a 5-year-forest plan and he encouraged Marten to move to a 20-year plan because forest sales didn't interest buyers unless the commitment was much longer. The cost of setting up a mill is huge on account of they immediately attract lawsuits from environmentalists. Marten said "We are on the same page concerning shared stewardship and the initial objections. Several board members reiterated their position on the need for mills and manufacturing. Also need these things for the many areas which have burned and to reduce risk of future fires.

John Peters pointed out that "dispersed camping" a requirement of dealing with covid, was a challenge due to lack of facilities and the need to mitigate potential fires. Marten responded by agreeing this is a challenge. "We are struggling to meet the needs of this use, " she said. "We can't do it alone, never could." A discussion of "packing-in, packing-out" ensued.

9:45 a zoom presentation by Nada Culver, Deputy Director for Policy and Programs, for the Bureau of Land Management. She mentioned climate change. And Executive Order 1008. Currently there are over 8,000 permits to drill on BLM lands.

John Espy asked about treatment of local grasses? Culver said "We would all like that."

Keith Baker "It's good you are differentiating between protection and production. That's an approach we had years ago and have lost." He encouraged Culver to keep multi-use production.

10:15 a zoom presentation by Amanda Kaster, Director for the Montana Dept of Natural Resources and

Conservation. She said: we have 4 divisions: Forestry (includes firefighting), Oil & Gas, Trust Lands, and Water. Forest management is a top priority. They want to bring federal forests under management. There are 9 million federal acres in Montana, but only one million is available to “treat” for fire prevention. There weren’t any questions.

Jonatahan Shuffield presented the budget.

Afterward discussion turned to the American Rescue Plan. The deadline to comment is July 9.

PILT is the same as it has been.

A couple board members spoke on “the 30x30 Plan.” They passed out info about it.

NACo upcoming events: Conference in July.

President Greg Chilcott spoke. NACo sent a letter to the President on May 13.

Weber said with eastern states having so little public land, won’t that shift more burden to western states.

President Greg: We all share large public lands in our states. That’s why WIR was formed [in 1932?]

Lunch break.

Afternoon session.

1:00 a zoom presentation by Mike Zupko, Executive Director, Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC). He was in Elko, NV. WFLC is an intergovernmental committee of federal, state, tribal and local officials convened by the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Defense and Homeland Security dedicated to consistent implementation of wildland fire policies, goals and management activities. This is a new group, established in April 2021. The Council brings together wildland firefighting organizations to implement the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan, a component of the National Fire Plan. WFLC meets regularly to monitor progress of the Ten-Year Strategy, to discuss current issues, and to resolve differences among wildland firefighting agencies. The WFLC is still ramping up their wildfire program. Plans are for Army and Navy involvement. His group has, I think he said 19 members: 9 feds and 10 political appointments. Only one political appointee is currently in place.

America Burning came out in 1973. It was updated in 1988 and about 2005. Another update is coming.

Covid and the economy are driving issues. Climate is another prominent issue. Zupko mentioned Forest Resilient Strategy, environmental justice, tribal engagement, and shared stewardship. 50 million forest acres are at high risk. Data collection and management are important aspects.

1:30 a zoom presentation by Christopher McLean, Acting Administrator, Rural Utilities Service. They started in 2000 to work with broadband. In the 2018 farm bill the feds let them make loan agreements. Interest rates are Treasury + 1/8, which is a super low rate. In 2020 the feds funded more electric lines for internet use than for REA electricity. The internet flows over electric lines in sort of a multiple use concept.

2:00 an in-person presentation by Julie Foster, Executive Director of Ravalli County Economic Development Authority. Also presenting was Laura Garber, the owner of Homestead Organics. The University of MT had a class on “How to Start a Farm.” Laura took the class and then wondered if or how she could use farms as a classroom. Food is central to all of us and it can bring people together.

Julie and Laura worked together to create a different school lunch program that is easy to add local farm products to. They stressed “how to get out of silos of understanding.” In one school kids had 15 minutes for lunch and recess. So they threw their food in the trash and went to play.

Hmmm, my memory of school is different. We never had less than half an hour.

The women passed out a large spread sheet of all the foods grown in MT. Their goal was to get nutritionists to choose from it. Current school lunches are \$3.50, but over half of that is spent on labor. Schools in the US serve over 29.6 million lunches every day. A McDonald’s Happy Meal is \$3.76. Kale costs \$1.24 with free labor. Meals on Wheels costs \$7.39. It’s all about the money. \$14.2 billion federal dollars are being spent on school lunches. \$1.6 billion (or 3.5%) of that is in Montana. Yet Montana farmers are only getting a small portion of that. People have been working on this a long time and the problems can’t be solved overnight. School lunch planning needs

to work from seed to swallow.

The board member from Hawaii commented. They made a local-produced school lunch program and the cost per serving went up. But more food was eaten and less thrown out. So the cost went down by that analysis. John Richards of Hawaii suggested getting the government to approve game food for use. Hawaii has lots of feral pigs and other wild pest animals.

Patrice from Maricopa County, AZ said they've been working on a similar project.

2:45 an in-person presentation by Eric Bryson, executive director of the Montana Association of Counties. He told us MT holds their legislative session every-other year. He stressed forging relationships with legislators. Montana is funded by property taxes.

A gent who worked with Bryson, by the name of Devlin, (also from MT) spoke. He had led the group when Bryson got covid (twice). He said Congress started manipulating the PILT formula by adding limits. In that way Congress shifted money away from California, Oregon and Washington. SRS was invented, which manipulated the PILT formula. Public health funding got gutted. These gents were barely able to stop the Montana legislature from allowing people to carry guns while visiting loved ones in jail. "We were finally able to get them to realize this might not be a good idea," Bryson said.

Bryson said they worked to get county-wide Rural Improvement Districts for roads. Then when prior year deductions come they would be offset. This had something to do with the PILT changes. In Garfield County the money all goes in the grant district. They shifted from the B side of the formula to the A side. The county gent who came up with this idea said it was simple and eventually got other counties to agree. From what I understood, whatever this change was, it is working.

Bryson said, "I finished the session angry and frustrated. A friendly legislator put in a bill that kicked NACo out (banned from lobbying). NACo county commissioners showed up [via zoom, I think] & weren't allowed to speak. It was successful, I think."

One WIR member said, "County Commissioners should not be considered lobbyists."

Bryson said, "We had an arrogant, bully pulpit legislature this year. The legislature has always used NACo staff for research. But when those researchers presented the truth, the Legislature didn't like it. The Legislature was mad that the commissioners didn't make it to Helena."

3:15 the group had a "round table" discussion where each member gave a highlight of some issue that occurred in their county. When my turn came I declined to speak on any particular issue. Bob Stevenson from Maricopa County said, "The election was fair." [This was a sentiment I heard several times and jokes were made about the issue. WIR seemed to me to have a heavy Republican leaning because these counties are made up almost exclusively by rural areas.]

Another county member said "Public lands are being loved to death."

A county commissioner said Idaho is the fastest growing state.

Miles Menetrey from Mariposa County, California said "Yosemite is right up the street. There has been a 300% increase in the cost of building material."

John Richards, Hawaii, said "Same people who elect county commissioners elect state legislators. We both work for the same people." He went on to say, "We want to do a better job handling tourism."

The group elected Commissioner Mark Whitney as the new president. He's from Beaver County, Utah. And a new 1st vice-president, Dan Joyce, a judge from Malheur County, Oregon. These 2 officers moved up one position from last year's office positions.

3 individuals ran for 2nd vp. This is the first time there has been competition for any office in recent memory. Each candidate spoke for 2 minutes. Each State has 5 votes and I was Alaska's sole representative. I knew very little about the candidates, though I thought Commissioner Kathy Chandler Henry, from Eagle County, Colorado gave the best speech. Commissioner Wes McCart, Stevens County, Washington and Commissioner John Espy, Carbon County, Wyoming were the other candidates. My personal preference for Kathy Chandler Henry ran against what I think may be a more typical Alaskan view. Votes were cast verbally, in alphabetical order so I had

the honor of going first. I cast only 3 of our 5 votes, one for each. John Espy won by one vote.

The group was invited to dinner at a steak house in Victor, MT, maybe 20 miles away. The Montana Association of Counties paid for the dinner. It began after 6:00 pm.

Friday May 28 @ 8:00 a bus tour was given. We first went to the Hamilton Airport. A project has moved the whole airport over about 400 feet because they were in violation of FAA rules with the airport too close to the support facilities. They also lengthened the runway from maybe 4,200 feet to 5,200 feet, cutting a hill out to accomplish this. The contractor got many pieces of equipment in place and did the work in maybe a month. President Greg Chilcott and other locals were amazed. The hill and ground in general seems to have a lot of small, white rocks that pack real good. They plan to lay asphalt soon.

After which we drove maybe 20 miles south to see the damage caused by the 2016 Roaring Lion Fire. Our tour guide was Matt Anderson, who is with the forest service, I think. The fire destroyed 50-some homes and another 50 other buildings. The fire was caused by a campfire that got out of control. It happened in July when the forest was very dry and burned quick. Three other forest rangers or maybe Parks guys were there. Also a local property owner. One Forest guy told how they had "treated" areas around homes in various fire prevention ways. This guy examined the data to try to find out what worked and what didn't. Generally, what works is to eliminate tall trees near homes. That way the fire "falls down" near the home and can be suppressed. Also, wood shake roofs are a no-no. Brooms leaning against a house are dangerous. Basically, it's best to have homes that can't be easily ignited. All the time we were outside and a wind was nasty cold. There was snow in the mountains. Montana is experiencing a cold spring. The Fire was named after Roaring Lion Road. Methinks the road was named after the wind.

We then drove back past the hotel maybe 20 miles north, toward Missoula, to a national forest that was burned. This fire claimed the life of a firefighter, according to one of the forest service guys. The forest service "treats" the forest by getting rid of small trees and burning brush, in place.

Several times new President Mark Whitney mentioned that mills will not come in. They are expensive to set up and just as quick as they make applications, forest protection groups file lawsuits. Kinda weird. Millions of acres are burning every year and it seems to me like logging mature forests would be preferable to having them burn.

I talked to our tour guide, Matt Anderson. He has lived on the Kenai Peninsula.

"What brought you to the Kenai," I asked.

"I met Luke Spuill when we both wrestled for Iowa State," he said.

"Gary Spruill is my neighbor!" I told him.

Matt came and was hired to guide for Tim Berg. That didn't work out too good. He next setnetted for Lloyd Collins on K-Beach. That didn't work out too good either. Collins got in trouble for lots of stuff and stiffed Matt. He also ran the Iditarod one year.

We drove back to Missoula, but had to take separate flights to Anchorage. I arrived @ midnight on the 28-29th but Judy's flight was delayed. I slept in the airport and she arrived @ 2:15 p.m. on Saturday the 29th. We drove back and arrived home about 6 pm, Saturday, May 29.

Submitted respectfully

Brent Johnson