

Chaffee Common Ground – Citizens Advisory Committee (CCG-CAC)

Minutes from Meeting on Wednesday April 24, 2024

Meeting Called to order at 1:02 p.m.

CCG-CAC Members present: (all attended virtually) Cindy Williams - Chair, Michael Hannigan – Vice-chair, Sydney Schnurr, Ben Lenth, Jim LaRue, Michael Fischer, Paul Muelle and Greg Felt - BOCC liaison. Also present Ben Doon, Administrative Support and Kim Marquis, Outreach Coordinator.

CCG-CAC Members absent: None

Agenda review

Cindy reviewed the agenda. The main topic is a review of the initial grant evaluation scores.

Approval of consent agenda

The meeting agenda and February 21 and 26 2024 minutes were approved as presented. Motion by Syd. Second Michael Hannigan. Vote unanimous.

Review of Grant Evaluation Scores

Cindy shared a spreadsheet with an overview of the initial ratings. Eleven full proposals were evaluated. Three proposals had high scores quite a bit above the rest. They are the National Forest Foundation's (NFF) Sawatch Range Restoration Project, the NFF's Granite Forest Restoration Project and Colorado Open Lands' Multi-Benefit Wetland Restoration Project. These were the top three rated proposals. After these three there was a second tier of projects rated just below the top three and all within a few points of each other including the Firecamp Mini-Excavator, SCC Supervisor and Chain Saw Crew Housing Project; the Kelly Ranch Ag Production Value Conservation Easement Project; Williams and Hamm Ditch Company Inlet Enhancement and Bank Stabilization Project; Chaffee Chips, the Bowen Ditch Silt and Tree Mitigation Project and the Burmac Trailhead Transformation Project. Below these projects are a third tier which include the Pridemore Ranch Irrigation Project and Central Colorado Conservancy's Hands for Lands Project, which scored the lowest.

Five mini-grant proposals were also evaluated. Kelly Ranch Fire Damaged Irrigated Pipe Replacement, McMurry Land and Livestock Solar Pump Watering System and Dog Waste Management on Methodist Mountain received unanimous "Yes" votes. The Headwater Farms Main Line Electrical Installation received one "No" vote and the Mycelium Use in Biowaste Production received 5 "Yes" and 3 "No" votes.

The total request for 2024 is \$1,053,700 and available funds is \$900,000, so \$153,700 needs to be cut.

Cindy said that although the Granite Forest Restoration Project scored very well, there are two other grants that could be used to fund that project. One is a COSWAP grant (Colorado Strategic Wildfire

Action Program) and the other is a RESTORE grant (Restoration and Stewardship of Outdoor Resources and Environment). She said forest treatment projects are probably the easiest types of projects to fund elsewhere. Cindy talked with the applicant about trimming the Common Ground request and finding other funds for the project and they were ok with that. COSWAP reached out to Chaffee County and offered the county to apply for a \$500,000 grant to support local forest treatment work.

Ben L said the scores change as we discuss each proposal and he'd like to talk about all the applications to see what happens with the rankings. Greg agreed.

Mini-grants

Mycelium Use in Biowaste Reduction - Forest Health

5 yes votes and 3 no votes.

Paul Muelle was a no vote. He said there is a lot of information already out there about this. A few universities have done studies. Work on this is being done in Boulder right now. He doesn't think an applied research project like this would only take one year. The project doesn't seem sustainable or scalable to him. Michael H agreed with Paul and feels it is an experimental project and not very scalable. Cindy agreed and said from the perspective of the Forest Health Council there is a lot of slash being produced but a lot is being masticated and scattered and also taken to the landfill. She questioned how much of this is actually needed. Using mycelium to scale doesn't seem practical and it is not something she hears the Community Wildfire Protection Plan or Forest Health Council people calling for. Greg voted yes, but suggested only funding half of the request. He feels it doesn't really mesh that well with what is being done, but there have been some people raising issues with the way things are being done with the Forest Health Council and it seems like a way to incorporate other perspectives. Syd said it seems like a small amount to invest in something that down the road could be really helpful. Mike Fischer agreed and thinks it could be a small expense for a big pay-off, a good investment in experimentation. Ben L said a key question for him is if slash piles are problem in the county. Other places in the state do have build-up of slash piles and accelerating decomposition could be really helpful. The alternative is burning which presents a fire risk, so if this could reduce burning of slash piles that seems like an advantage. Syd said there are still slash piles left over from last year where she lives. Paul said he'd be more comfortable if it was a three-year study, he's not sure after just one year what will be seen from this.

Cindy said the group is pretty mixed on this proposal and wonders if there is a middle ground where partial funding might do. Syd asked if applicant can do what's proposed with only \$2k. Jim likes the idea of the project, but since it is experimental, he is on the fence and not sure what they could do with half of the proposed funding. Mike Fischer likes the idea of asking them if they can do something useful with \$2,500 and see if it is a viable option for them. Ben D will reach out to the applicant to see if a partial funding award is feasible for them and if a year of research is enough time for the experiments. A decision about funding will be made at the next meeting on April 30th. Ben D will also reach out to the Forest Health subject matter experts to ask if they believe this proposal is something viable and needed.

Main Line Electrical Installation at Headwater Farms – Ag

7 yes votes and 1 no vote.

Cindy asked if this proposal fits the capital policy. Ag lands need to be protected in some way before Common Ground can invest in infrastructure. Ben D said the applicant submitted a pre-application for an Ag Enhancement grant and he asked the applicant to look at a mini-grant since Headwater Farms operates on leased land and the property is not protected under a conservation easement, nor enrolled in the Community Conservation Connection program. Ben D didn't think ag properties needed to have the same level of protection for a mini-grant. Michael said this grant is not much money and would make a huge difference for the farm. Jim agreed and said it is not much money to put in an electrical line. Syd said the farm feeds a lot of people in BV and it is not a bad investment. Michael H said the investment increases the probability that the farm will be here for longer. Group consensus to recommend full funding.

Full Proposals

Hands for Lands, Central Colorado Conservancy – Ag Program.

This proposal had the lowest score. Scores can be changed while the conversation is happening. Scores ranged from a high of 73% to a low of 31%. The average score is 55%. When individual questions have a large discrepancy of scores, the group will discuss why an individual scored it the way he/she did.

Syd had the low score and she had a hard time evaluating this proposal because the writer didn't answer the questions that were tied to the rubric. She asked if the rest of the group can help her understand how they came up with their scores, then she can change hers. The proposal didn't speak to how many ag acres are affected by the program. Syd said if we are guessing for the applicant how many acres are involved in the proposal then we are doing the work for them. Cindy said if we have good intel, we can use that to support scoring and not just favor folks that are good at writing grants. Syd said the proposal didn't have a list of places where work would be done this year and she said the proposal states that acres will be quantified at the end of the year and prior to that it is all hypothetical. Cindy said the proposal probably impacts about 1,000 acres indirectly.

The lack of information on acres also makes it difficult to score the forest health question. There are some assumed low-end indirect benefits on fire by keeping lands irrigated.

Michael H found the whole proposal hard to score. The proposal requests funds for a new position, Stewardship Coordinator, and supports Hands for Lands work days. Cindy said it seemed expensive for a handful of ditch clean-ups. Group consensus to leave the proposal where it sits at the bottom of the stack.

Pridemore Ranch Irrigation Enhancement and Virtual Fencing Project – Ag Enhancement.

Low score is 48%. High score is 73% and average score is 63%.

Greg asked if they will use virtual fencing on public lands or if they only graze their own lands. This could impact his score on recreation impacts. Virtual fencing has been an effective tool for keeping recreationist and cattle apart. Jim said he believes they will use the virtual fence on their USFS and BLM permits, however, their permits are not in Chaffee County, but in Saguache County on the other side of Poncha Pass. He asked if we can fund it if it is being used outside the county. Cindy said a previous grant to Central Colorado Conservancy funded towers and a first round of the collars for a virtual fencing pilot project grant. The program has caught on and has become popular so now some individual ag operators want to come-in on the project that weren't part of the pilot. Ben D will ask the applicant where they will deploy their VENCE collars. Jim suggested having applicants split proposals like this into two applications in the future. One for the irrigation portion of the project and one for the VENCE collars. It is difficult to match-up the rubric answers with two very different projects. Cindy said to keep in mind that these applications are a pretty heavy lift.

Ben L gave the proposal a zero score for protecting wildlife habitat because the ranch is already protected with a conservation easement. We're only talking about a change in irrigation methods. The habitat is already protected.

Jim said the project takes away ground water recharge by putting in a sprinkler, so he scored the water question low.

Ben L said he scored a zero for scenic views because the land is already protected with a conservation easement.

The urgency question can be interpreted in two ways. Due to the easement, there is no imminent threat to the water rights themselves, but with NRCS funding the project is already underway so there is an urgency of opportunity.

Ben L pointed out that there is nothing in the budget for the virtual fencing component.

Burmac Trailhead Transformation – Recreation Impacts Management.

Low score is 62%. High score is 74% and average score is 66%.

The proposal is for 50% of the cost of a restroom facility.

The application states that the project area is in low quality habitat.

Restrooms are needed throughout the county, but other organizations like GOCO do not want to fund them. There are 27 porta-potties deployed across the county right now. Michael H said it won't score super high, but it is an important project.

Bowen Ditch Silt and Tree Mitigation to Offset Breaching and Improve Future Maintenance – Ag Enhancement.

Low score is 60%. High score is 78% and average score is 66%.

Does having a ditch running directly or immediately impact wildfire or not. Maybe a little if the meadows are green rather than dry, brown and dead.

Ben L said the project helps make the ditch more functional, but the habitat is still there. Cindy said the ditch serves lands with elk and pronghorn and if it dried up, it would be bad for the wildlife in the area. Michael H said it is good winter habitat too.

Greg said it is a lower priority ditch and only really flows during run-off season, so it can be hard to argue for a top score on the water question for this one.

Chaffee Chips 2024 – Forest Health

Low score is 49%. High score is 81% and average score is 67%.

Cindy said it impacts between 100-249 acres directly and she gave it a two-point bonus for being adjacent to more than 100 homes and another bonus point for being adjacent to powerlines and infrastructure for a total of 7 points. Greg scored it the same way. Syd said those numbers are not in the application anywhere. Kim wrote the proposal and said that each homeowner that agrees to participate counts as half an acre. There have been 750 homeowners total participating over the course of the program. The application is for one-year of funding and they don't know how many will participate in 2024. Her guess is between 200 and 300 homes will participate.

Cindy said she scored the ag sustainability question with 150 acres of direct impact for 5 points and 2 bonus points for a multi-agency cross-jurisdictional cooperative project.

Source water protection area discussion was not in the proposal, but Greg is aware that the project area is located in one. Quite a few of the neighborhoods are in those identified areas.

Ben L said scenic views are assumed impacts with wildfire and forestry in general is not particularly scenic. The work is also in close proximity to people's homes and not the wide-open landscape.

For scale and connectivity Greg gave it two bonus points for cross jurisdictional collaboration which has been huge between the Forest Health Council working on this plus the project itself with involvement from the state forest service, the fire protection district, the landfill, Envision and the HOAs. It's been a phenomenal thing and he's a proponent of the program and thinks its fantastic. One of the things he loves about it is the way it strengthens communities. Syd said she gave it the two bonus points for cross jurisdictional collaboration, but information about the treatment areas and connection to past or future treatment areas was not in the application.

For Duration of Impact Greg believes that the investment the neighborhood has made as a group signals likelihood that they will continue to maintain once they've made all this progress. It creates an ethic within that neighborhood.

Ben L said that he would love to see some landowner match. This work enhances private land values and it effectively subsidizes homes in the wildland/urban interface at the cost to taxpayers. He thinks a lot of landowners can afford to have some skin in the game.

Greg said the landfill is incurring cost in terms of keeping the grinder going. There will be meetings soon to see what would be a reasonable homeowner contribution to be a part of the program. We wouldn't have to ask that much of individual homeowners. They could help cover those costs and reduce the load on tax revenue generally, while also being well incentivized to do what they are doing.

Syd's has concerns that some of these HOAs and neighborhoods are much wealthier than others and we need to be careful we don't disincentivize people to do this work because of the cost.

Williams and Hamm Ditch Company Inlet Enhancement and Continued Bank Stabilization – Ag Enhancement

Low score is 59%. High score is 80% and average score is 68%.

Jim said where the ditch comes out of the river is kind of a mess and the work would help reduce recreation/ag conflicts. Greg agreed that there are issues with the wing-dam diversion on the river and the work needed to keep it going does create an intersection with recreational boating and he likes to see improvements to those types of situations. Because the ditch serves lands close to the river there is a lot of delayed return flow that comes-in later in the irrigation season which helps water quality and quantity.

For scale and connectivity of impact 856 acres are protected and served by the ditch.

Kelly Ranch Ag Production Value Conservation Easement – Ag Program

Low score is 52%. High score is 88% and average score is 70%.

Ben L said the proposal is an amendment to an existing easement that only adds a provision about resale at agricultural value. With the use of water, protection of land, and other values, nothing changes with this amendment. Cindy said there is nothing in the existing easement that says the property has to be in agricultural production. It could be sold and taken out of productive ag. The easement can help it pass to the next generation of ag operators. Ben L said it supports the social goals of keeping producers on the land, but it seems tricky to enforce. There are no requirements for production even with this.

Cindy said the irrigated ag property has a threatened and endangered plant on it in the wetlands and sensitive habitat. If it can be tilted just a bit to keep the ditched running, it could make a pretty big difference. Ben L said the existing easement requires the water rights to be used, not abandoned and the habitat to be protected. He said this amendment doesn't guarantee the outcome of keeping the land in

productive ag use. The onus is on the seller to find a buyer that will do that. This will reduce the value, but the land trust still can't guarantee that it will remain in productive use just because the water runs.

Firecamp mini-excavator, SCC supervisor and chainsaw crew housing – Forest Health

Low score is 55%. High score is 82% and average score is 72%.

Michael H said there wasn't much in the proposal about the types of acres being treated and its relation to wildlife habitat. It was very generic and very unspecific. Syd said it didn't answer the questions. Jim said that like some of the other ones, they don't know what acres they will have enrolled until the program is ready to start.

Cindy said the Colorado Firecamp work has come out of the Forest Health Council's work. The focus is on the smaller acre stuff that is hard for the Colorado State Forest Service to treat. The work is focused on highest and high-quality habitat.

Ben L asked about the housing fit for Common Ground funds. Cindy said they are looking to rent rooms or apartments for the SCC crews to have them here year-round since they can't camp in the winter. One of the primary barriers to getting work done is the inability to house crews. There is a lot of funding out there for treatments, but not housing. This is a unique thing that Common Ground could nudge along that would be hard to fund elsewhere.

Syd said she didn't see anything in the application about how the new SCC supervisor position could be sustained after Common Ground funding runs out. Ben D will ask the applicant what the plan is to sustain the position.

Other Business

None.

Next Steps

Next meeting is April 30th to discuss funding recommendations.

Public Comment

None.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned at 3:15 p.m.