

## **BUFFALO GREENBELT WETLANDS PROGRAM**

February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025, at Johnson County Library; 7 speakers and >50 community attendees with Q&A

PART I - meeting notes with Bureau of Land Management, Army Corps of Engineers, and Bighorn Audubon

**-Phil Gonzales—Welcome and why we are here:** His interest in wetlands began as his office was next to the wetlands as they were being developed. He is on the Trail often, and is constantly asked about the wetlands, why this and why not that. A lot of people do not realize why the Buffalo Wetlands are there, and what the management plan is associated with the building of the Tie Hack Reservoir. As long as the Tie Hack Reservoir is there, the wetlands need to be managed according to the plan. He had to read this plan more than once, working for USDA conservation district. We were asked as an agency to help with the implementation. There is a lot in that plan.

We are here to discuss why the wetlands are here, and what the management requirements are.

---

**-Casey Friese and Bart Rhodes of Bureau of Land Management —Recreation and Public Purpose Act, (R&PP) Buffalo Green Belt – city management expectations.**

While putting together this program they learned a lot about the Buffalo Greenbelt. History of land transfers was discussed.

82 R&PPs in Wyoming. One is the Buffalo Greenbelt R&PP.

Whoever manages the R&PP land, if they do not maintain the land and follow the development plan then it reverts back to the BLM. BLM usually doesn't want this to happen, they hope whoever has the land managers follow the plan.

262 acres in the Buffalo "Greenbelt R&PP", pretty much follows Clear Creek.

1981 - acquired the tract of land with an exchange with Sweetwater County.

1981- city of Buffalo applied for the R&PP with a development and maintenance plan.

1982 - city revised plan

1983 - patent was issued and belongs to the city of Buffalo.

How the 262 acres were going to be used:

110 – 120 acres devoted to Clear Creek water quality area – no new facilities can be built around the flood plain other than foot trails.

Running track is maintained by the schools. Approx. 20 acres

Natural outdoor and botany field is about 7 acres.

Softball fields almost 38 acres.

Future access roads almost 12 acres – (BLM is interested in this)

Archery fields -19 acres set aside

Jogging approx.. 2 miles

Possible school sites and roads

Does not add up to 262 acres, but just what is in the plan on how it is going to be used.

All facilities have to be maintained, along with the roads, the grounds, and the city of Buffalo has all that responsibility

## **Wetland**

Back in August of 1985 Tie Hack Reservoir Construction Act with reservoir being constructed.

Mitigating of the wetlands – talks about:

1 -6 acre ration for Forest wetlands meaning for every 1 acre removed from Forest, 6 acres needed off Forest, hence being down in the Greenbelt area

Perpetual Reversionary Clause - BLM has deemed it falls in recreation category – signed off in 1995

1995 approved

BLM does have some concerns. Once every 10 years an inspection needs to be done.

Construction debris and other debris should not be there. Hopes that the city watches it closely.

BLM needs an updated development and maintenance plan from the city for any construction equipment, gravel piles, etc. Requires a separate meeting with the city. Need a better map with finer tuning.

Hunting in the Greenbelt is permitted by the city with permit – the city needs to know who is there. Questions on archery hunting limitations close to homes with concerns expressed.

Grazing the area is not precluded and could work with the city on this but needs to be updated in the plan. Impact of cows on the trail, and fencing and oversight concerns. BLM said would need public meetings.

Question on what the enforcement mechanisms are for issues such as debris. BLM has a compliance inspection report, with documentation needed, that goes to the city. You're welcome to go to BLM but don't hesitate to go to the city first with concerns. Document with images and explanation.

Archery Range needs updating in the plan.

Roads are undefined and need updating in plan.

Question on what the botany area is. Answer: a general area was designed/intended for schools to do field studies, community science projects, and educational tours.

---

**Phil encourages the need for public participation in the County's long range plan meetings, including open spaces and green belts. And emphasizes there are responsibilities for the city to follow the wetland plans and maintenance.**

---

**-Kevin Little, Chief of Wyoming Office, Corps of Engineers – on permit and Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) mitigation for Tie Hack impact on wetlands becoming the Buffalo wetlands**

Army Corps of Engineers began for national security and commerce. Under the Secretary of the Army. Two Vital elements for a healthy country.

Clean Water Act - waters and wetlands. Under the Secretary of the Army.

Corps in the picture for this permit.

Authorized 11.1 acres of wetlands and stream for the construction of the reservoir.

Construction of damn took a considerable amount of material and work. 1993 file number. Authorized in 1996

A cooperating agency, along with USFS and BLM, on the EIS as a decision maker for the permit decision.

There are conditions on water quality, and the mitigation of wetlands. The conditions specific to these wetlands is the permittee (City of Buffalo) shall implement the wetland mitigation construction project as detailed in the plans entitled construction plans for "Buffalo Parks Wetlands".

In the decision for the permit to allow:

Part of the plan is the management plans. Make sure they get the water needed to thrive. With that requirement Buffalo Park Wetland plan needs to result in the creation of 38 acres of various type wetlands.

The plan further details how the water gets to the wetlands, and how and when the water gets there – seasonal - in the spring and in the fall. Work with the city that they are managing the plan as required.

We work with the city to make sure the 30 year old plan is being implemented.

Scheduling the water fill to make sure the wetlands areas are thriving as they were intended.

Basically a schedule when these wetlands need to be filled and promotes diversity.

We get calls every now and then that cells are not being filled.

Open to discussion with the city to update the agreement, and the city's ability to manage it.

Question: when it is willful negligence of not filling wetlands. The pattern is seen as change of management staff, when these things are not getting done as required. If it was willful, it would be non-compliance.

Corps is curious to see what the city's plan is to fill the wetlands.

Discussed drought may play a role, and water rights. However, filling the wetlands is a priority **over irrigators** to be filled in spring, before irrigation and fall after irrigation. As the city grows, the water is spread thin, especially during drought. Concerns that Clear Creek is over appropriated. Corps work with state engineers' office for water availability data.

Comment: In a document, the wetlands were going to be in Bighorn National Forest. The city opposed that and chose to take the wetlands off the Forest.

For every acre of wetland impacted in Forest, had to be mitigated by 6 acres of wetlands. In 2008 to permit rules were updated – now more science based.

Flood mitigation discussed. South end has not been wet for years. Phil and crew fixed all the south end structures.

The management plan states: the wetlands would be managed primarily for quality functions, open space and ascetic quality, recreation, wildlife habitat, wildlife viewing, and education and research.

Phil: Wetlands should be filled by the city every spring and fall – in the spring before the irrigators turn on and in the fall after irrigators turn off.

City has an obligation to ensure the wetlands are functioning. Corps has obligation to enforce that the wetlands are functioning. BLM has obligation to oversee aspects of city's management plan.

Hydrological reports in 2001. Around 2020, a review by group volunteers with wetlands and natural resources experience found none of them were really compliant because the water was too low.

---

### **-Bighorn Audubon, JoAnne Puckett—Importance of wetlands for birds**

Bighorn Audubon is non-profit working for the protection of birds and their habits. We are a local chapter of National Audubon, but a separate 501(c)(3) non-profit, and separate fundraising, bylaws, etc.

Bird watching is a big activity along Clear Creek Trail and the wetlands.

The Buffalo wetlands a pretty phenomenal but need proper maintaining. As most people know, bird populations are declining due to loss of habitat, and in part due to the use of pesticides.

Of the 310 bird species documented in Johnson County, more than half of them (about 163) have been seen along Clear Creek Trail and the wetlands.

Birders contribute enormous amounts of scientific data on bird populations, distribution, migration, breeding, etc.

Birders support local economies and may travel long distances to see rare birds.

Per a 2022 USFWS report, around 96 million people in the U.S. closely observed, fed, or photographed birds; visited public parks to view birds; or maintained plantings and natural areas around the home for the benefit of birds in 2022. That's more than 35% of the nation's population aged 16 and over.

The USFWS survey also shows that birding is big business. More than six out of every 10 dollars spent in 2022 on wildlife-related recreation (which also includes hunting and fishing) came from wildlife watching, with birds cited as the greatest focus for wildlife watchers. Altogether, wildlife watchers spent more than \$250 billion last year to engage in their hobby—including more than \$24 billion on equipment such as binoculars, cameras, and bird food—for an average of \$2,188 per person.

Birders spent an estimated \$14 billion on their trips and \$93 billion on equipment and land in 2022. For trip expenditures, 49 percent was food and lodging, 36 percent was transportation, and 15 percent was other costs

*Cornell Lab of Ornithology: participatory-science programs, like the Merlin Bird ID app and eBird, also reflect the heightened interest in avian affairs. For example, as of March 2023 there were more than 1.5 million active Merlin users in the U.S., a fivefold increase from the 300,000 Merlin users in March 2020. Likewise, eBird monthly checklist submissions have doubled, from 600,000 checklists in March 2020 to 1.3 million by May 2023.*

## **WETLANDS and BIRDS**

From USGS, *Technical Aspects of Wetlands; Wetlands as Bird Habitat*

One of the best known functions of wetlands is to provide a habitat for birds. Birds use them for breeding, nesting, and rearing young. Birds also use wetlands as a source of drinking water and for feeding, resting, shelter, and social interactions.

About one-third of North American bird species use wetlands for food, shelter, and (or) breeding. Wetlands on breeding, migratory, or wintering areas are all important to sustain bird populations.

For most wetland-dependent birds, habitat loss in breeding areas translates directly into population losses.

As the wetland habitats in these areas are drained or altered, the ability of these areas to sustain bird populations decreases. Thus, widespread draining and altering of wetlands has affected bird populations.

Several handouts were available and for further reading please see: <https://www.bighornaudubon.com/buffalo-wetlands>