

**Minutes of the Colorado Natural Areas Council  
Teleconference – Department of Natural Resources, Denver**

**October 4, 2004**

**Council Present:** In person: John Masson

Via telephone: Dennis Brinker, Phil James, Dr. Tom Ready, Kathy Yates

**Council Absent:** all in participation – 2 vacancies

**DNR Staff:** Rob Billerbeck, Karin Freeman, Larry Kramer, Jeff Thompson

**Citizen Participants:** Fran Enright – Clear Creek County Open Space, Dave Bathke – Contract Biologist, Linda Mahoney – citizen observer

Council Chairman, John Masson, called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

**Introductions:** Rob introduces staff and council.

**Reports from Staff:**

Rob Billerbeck – Meeting agenda, Update and future directions on the Natural Areas Program. Changes to structure and goals with restaffing of Ron’s position.

Rob Billerbeck introduced himself and gave some of his background with State Parks and the Natural Areas Program. Rob has been with State Parks for 6 years, with his first two years in the Natural Areas Program. Rob started in State Parks as a seasonal CNAP employee under Ron West. He has a Masters Degree in Conservation Biology with a background in general biology and GIS/database management. Rob also worked with a land trust in California.

Upon the departure of Ron West from the Natural Areas Program, it was decided that Natural Areas would be restructured and moved under the umbrella of the Resource Stewardship department of Natural Resources. Rob is the director of Resource Stewardship and will be directing Natural Areas along with his previous duties. Larry Kramer added that with Natural Areas under this new structuring the Program is more integrated into the system. This will give more options to Natural Areas in the areas of funding and staffing.

It is planned to re-staff Ron West’s position with an individual with skills in biology and public relations. This person will need to be a “people person”. This person will be working on exposure for Natural Areas through State Parks as well as with the general public. The re-staffing of this position is Rob’s first priority in directing Natural Areas.

Rob’s second priority in directing Natural Areas is to revisit Natural Areas. Sites on the list of Natural Areas open to public visitation will receive first priority for visitation. There are about 30 areas on this list.

To help ensure that Natural Areas does not become an “orphaned area” of State Parks, Rob envisions requiring staff of State Parks to annually visit a Natural Area or two within the their area. State Parks regional managers would be invited to one or two sites a year as well. This

concept is designed to keep State Parks staff in touch with Natural Areas that fall within the regions for which they are responsible.

Larry Kramer reinforced Rob's explanation of the restructuring of the Natural Areas Program. He said that by putting Natural Areas under Rob's department, Resource Stewardship, the program would be better integrated into the hierarchy of State Parks and would have better options for funding.

Kathy Yates then asked about improved marketing assistance for the program from State Parks. Rob explained that Ron had been working with Gary Thorson of the marketing department and he will be following up on this and making it a priority. Gary and Claire have new ideas for marketing the Natural Areas Program such as pursuing the idea of Natural Areas bus tours and getting the program into more State Parks publications. This would address areas appropriate for public visitation, where it has been approved by the landowners or managers.

John Masson added to the conversation on support for Natural Areas by relating information about the new Department of Natural Resources director Russell George. Russell was in the state legislature when the legislation for CNAP was passed. He was and is supportive of the program.

John also mentioned that John Swartout of GOCO is also supportive of the program and that this could lead to additional funding from GOCO. John explained that the enabling language of GOCO and Natural Areas run parallel, especially in the realm of education/outreach. John commented that Natural Areas has more support than it has had in a very long time.

Larry Kramer added that he will request more GOCO base funding to go into Natural Resources and therefore more funding could be available for Natural Areas. John commented that "baby steps" should be taken with changes in Natural Areas because funding is a tough issue in state government at this time. Larry followed up by saying that since Natural Areas now falls within Natural Resources that it is included in the new 5-year strategic plan for DNR.

John Masson also mentioned that Barb Carr contacted Russell George about filling the vacant Natural Areas Council positions. It was agreed that Council and Staff should brainstorm and submit ideas to Rob as to possibilities. Someone with a geology or paleontology background would be ideal.

Rob concluded by stating that the Natural Areas Program is in a new phase. During this transition, Rob feels it is important to keep in touch with the Natural Area Volunteer Stewards to keep them informed that the Program is still active and moving forward. One way to do this could be to integrate a Volunteer Stewardship meeting with a Council meeting. This would get Natural Areas staff, Council, and stewards in personal contact and let the stewards know that the program is still moving on Natural Areas issues.

Tom asked how many sites are in the works at this time. Karin Freeman and Jeff Thompson commented that there are a lot of Forest Service sites that are registered in the Natural Areas system and are ready for pursuit of designated status.

### **Jeff Thompson – addressed Council with an update on the State Land Board Inventory**

Jeff Thompson updated the council with a report on the Program's progress on the State Land Board Inventory. The State Land Board manages over 3 million acres in trust, mostly for the benefit of the K-12 schools of the state. The Natural Areas Program is in its ninth year of inventorying the state lands in the state. The Program has been inventorying land on a county by county basis and this year is inventorying the last three counties in this process. The counties being inventoried this season are Adams, Washington, and Yuma. The work in Adams and Yuma counties has already been completed and the Natural Areas staff is currently working to complete 25 parcels in Washington County to finish the entire state inventory for the Land Board.

The process for completing the inventory included going to Farm Bureau offices and evaluating aerial photos of the Land Board parcels in each county to assess them for land use, vegetative cover, and presence of water. These parcels were then ranked by the Natural Areas staff for two qualities; natural condition (N rank) and recreation potential (R rank). Each of these areas was ranked on a scale of 0 to 3, with 0 being no potential (usually meaning that it has been plowed and cropped) and 3 being in pristine condition (all Land Board land has some use and therefore usually does not reach a 3 ranking). These rankings are used to prioritize which parcels will be visited in the field. Parcels with low ranks are re-evaluated for visitation and a random draw of these sites is visited to ensure that the aerial photo evaluation was accurate.

Dr. Tom Ready asked about the acreage in Stewardship Trust. The State Land Board is mandated by the State constitution to hold between 295,000 and 300,000 acres of state land in Stewardship Trust for high natural qualities. The amount currently in the Stewardship Trust is 295,672.

### **Karin Freeman – addressed the council on the new Geneva Basin Iron Fens Natural Area**

Karin Freeman gave the Council background information on the newest Natural Area, Geneva Basin Iron Fens N.A. Located in the bottom of the Geneva Basin, the iron fens here are one of eight known localities of iron fens in the state and one of the best examples of an iron fen in the state. These numbers and assessments of condition came from Dr. David Cooper from Colorado State University.

This Natural Area is has the only known occurrence of Girgensohn's sphagnum moss in Colorado. Two fairly rare plant communities also exist here; a bog birch/Englemann Spruce/sedge community.

Karin gave a brief overview of the Colorado Natural Heritage Program's ranking system. She explained that there are two rankings. A "G" ranking rates the global significance of an attribute and a "S" ranking rates the significance within the state. The Girgensohn's sphagnum moss ranks G5 – S1, indicating that it is fairly common globally but very uncommon within Colorado. The birch/spruce/sedge community ranks G2 –S2, indicating that it is fairly uncommon globally and within the state.

Interesting and rare limonite terraces are an attribute of Iron fens. Karin explained that when the iron precipitates out of the surrounding strata it is deposited on layers of peat where it hardens into terraced shelves. This gives the Geneva Basin Iron Fen Natural Area a “Yellowstone setting” scenic quality with the terraced shelving surrounded by wetlands of mosses, sedges, and grasses.

Rob brought up the challenges on the site. The main challenges are that recent off-road vehicle use is altering the plant communities on the limonite terraces. Fran Enright is currently working with Clear Creek County and the Forest Service to install gates and fell trees where access is the most common.

Dave Bathke, the contract biologist for the Geneva Basin, will be sending a final copy of his scientific research to the Natural Areas Program. A second Articles of Designation document will be prepared for Clear Creek County.

Fran Enright asked for a logo from Natural Areas for the signage the County plans to install in the area.

### **The next Council meeting, Vacancies in the Council, and John Massons reinstatement as Chairman of the Natural Areas Council**

Plans for upcoming meetings included holding one on the east slope and one on the west so that Volunteer Stewards could attend. A slide show accompanied with a field trip is planned for these two meetings. It is the hope of the Council and Rob that the Programs staff issues will be resolved before these meetings.

There are currently two vacancies in the Council, those formerly filled by Shara Castle and Brian Ash. Russell George, Larry Kramer, and Governor Owens have all expressed a desire to fill these positions. Dr. Tom Ready reinforced the fact that a geologist would be a welcome addition to the Council, someone to fill Lee Shropshire’s role on the Council. John Masson suggested that we start a list of suggestions from Council and staff as to possibilities to fill these vacancies. Rob and Ron started a short list before Ron’s departure that can be built upon. Dr. Ready asked if people need to be from a certain part of the state to qualify. Phil James said that there are no geographic requirements. It was suggested that Council and Staff submit suggestions by Friday October 8<sup>th</sup>. Lou Taylor, Lee Shropshire, and Harley Armstrong’s names came up as possibilities for filling the vacancies.

Larry Kramer said that he is recommending John Masson to Tim Pollard for reappointment as Council chairman. Phil James supported this idea.

### **Other Discussions**

John Masson brought up the point that a proper send-off is in order for Ron West. John commented that the Program owes Ron a great deal and that Ron provided incredible emotional and professional support through the very tough times that Natural Areas went through in the

recent past. It was suggested that at the December 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting discussion about an appropriate send-off should occur. The idea that the send-off should occur in conjunction with the front range Volunteer Steward/Council meeting was received favorably and that this meeting might occur in January or February.

Rob addressed the Council as to its feelings on the use of teleconferencing for the meeting. Council was OK with the teleconference, saying that it is a more practical but less desirable way to hold meetings. Discussion to have one teleconference, two outings, and one in house meeting per year was well received.

## **Decisions**

### Designation of Geneva Basin Iron Fens as a Natural Area

The Natural Areas Council voted unanimously in favor of the designation of the Geneva Iron Fens site into the Natural Areas system. Dennis Brinker, Phil James, John Masson, Dr. Tom Ready, and Kathy Yates voted.

### Approval of Minutes from the July 29, 2004 Council Meeting

The minutes of the last meeting were approved by the Council with one abstention. Dennis Brinker abstained, as he was absent from the last Council meeting.

### Next Natural Areas Council meeting

The Council approved a December 3<sup>rd</sup> date for the next meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

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Jeff Thompson c/o Rob Billerbeck

Approved:

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John Masson, Chair