

**Babcock Ranch Advisory Group  
Public Meeting, June 27, 2017**

Minutes of the Public Meeting

Babcock Ranch Advisory Group (BRAG) Members in Attendance:

Lisa Carlton, Mabry Carlton Ranch  
Kenny Harrison, Land Owner / Cattle Operation / Arcadia  
Franklin B. Mann, Lee County Commissioner  
Mike Kemmerer, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Babcock-Webb Wildlife Management Area  
Michael Haymans, sitting in as Charlotte County designee  
John Holzaepfel, Natural Resource Planning Services  
Mallory Lykes Dimmit, Lykes Bros. Inc.

BRAG Members Not in Attendance:

Walt Bethel, Re/Max Harbor Realty  
Nigel Morris, designated by Charlotte County  
Gene Lollis, Buck Island Ranch

Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Personnel Present:

Jim Karels, Florida Forest Service Director  
John Browne, FFS Land Programs Administrator  
Erin Albury, FFS Operations Chief  
Carl Conrath, FFS Ranch Manager  
Catherine Ingram, FFS Land Planning Coordinator

Other Presenters

Ken Smith, Tarpon Blue  
Marc Criffield, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Chair L. Carlton called the meeting to order at 9:00 am.

Introductions of BRAG members present.

J. Karels briefly presented a Sunshine Law refresher, and how the law applies to the BRAG.

J. Browne presented a refresher of the BRAG purpose and responsibility, according to statute; spoke about new BRAG members and which members are no longer part of the group; discussed the management of the Lee County portion of BRP versus the Charlotte County portion.

L. Carlton asked for a motion to approve the 11-24-15 BRAG meeting minutes. F. Mann motioned to move, K. Harrison seconded. Minutes approved.

L. Carlton asked for a motion to elect a new Vice Chair. F. Mann motioned for K. Harrison to be the new Vice Chair, and K. Harrison accepted, with unanimous consensus from the BRAG.

J. Karels presented a status update regarding the management of BRP. Topics included: land management plan approval, FFS management of ranch operations for approximately four months during interim between taking over management August 2016 and establishing a lessee, details of super-lease, sale of cattle and equipment to Tarpon Blue, progress with public recreational opportunity development, OOF, working ranch, minimal damage created by wildfires on BRP this year, water storage project, exotic species and the commitments the various managers have to treat, Kitson's mitigation areas on BRP and the open lines of communication between FFS and WMD. J. Karels indicated various areas and points of interest on a property map for the BRAG. Lee County portion is no longer under the oversight of the BRAG.

M. Haymans and F. Mann discussed how the management on Bob Janes Preserve is different from how Charlotte County portion of BRP is managed.

L. Carlton, C. Ingram and J. Karels discussed the map and the Optimal Management Boundary. J. Karels indicated several roads on the map to orient the BRAG members.

J. Karels spoke about the FFS coordination with FWC, and also discussed the state in which the property was in when FFS took on managing responsibilities, and the level of managing dollars that FFS had available to manage the property with from the beginning of the management period.

J. Karels discussed the good opportunities the property has both for agriculture and for the citizens of Florida.

J. Karels spoke about some key players involved with Tarpon Blue, including that Arnie Sarlo, Tarpon Blue partner, formerly used to run the ranch and is very familiar with the property and the various types of ag operations that occur on the land.

K. Smith presented about Tarpon Blue including the lease term details, the re-branding of the eco-tour, the main players involved with the lessee. Also discussed: Tarpon Blue has a history of working with environmentally sensitive lands, easements, federal and state governments and conservation programs. The agricultural side of the working ranch was discussed including: cattle, the former, present and future states of the pastures, BMPs, irrigation, non-native species control, prescribed burns both former and present occurrences, roads and fences. K. Smith discussed the eco-tour and the marketing campaign Tarpon Blue has initiated to bring in more and younger tourists, and the state of the restaurant as was received from the previous manager. Future hopes of what the tour, and potentially other tours, can offer on BRP was discussed, including the desire to fit the solar panels, associated with the future Babcock Ranch Community, into a possible educational tour that could reference those, as well as agricultural operations. Also discussed were harvest potential for various forest products on BRP.

F. Mann and K. Smith discussed timber harvesting potential and prohibitions for BRP, exotic treatments and the goals for treatment by Tarpon Blue, FWC and FFS as a concerted effort. J. Karels elaborated on the subject of multi-entity exotic treatment partnership. F. Mann stated that

he is comforted by the partnership on exotics controls. K. Smith detailed the state budget's current capacity to manage state-owned conservation lands, including the treatment of exotics, and the need for more funding from the legislature. F. Mann stated that we have lost pristine lands to exotics and if we aren't fighting "it," then "it" is beating us.

K. Smith and F. Mann discussed the eco-tour and the fees collected that are associated with it.

M. Haymans inquired about the long-term exotic vegetation eradication plan and if it includes intentions to reseed natural vegetation areas. J. Karels discussed the exotics mapping that is ongoing and how it will help in the overall eradication efforts, the battle regarding the old world climbing fern in Telegraph Swamp, and how the prescribed burning of the uplands will be key to controlling exotics. Also mentioned were restoration possibilities located within the WMD mitigation areas.

M. Haymans, J. Karels and K. Smith discussed timber harvest potential and the sustainability goals and intentions of Tarpon Blue, and RCW stipulations on the forested areas of the ranch.

M. Haymans and K. Smith discussed the possibilities of roller chopping on BRP, food plot maintenance and quail hunting.

F. Mann and K. Smith discussed the presence of a vibrant quail population on the property. F. Mann expressed quail couldn't be found anywhere in the county in the past many years.

M. Kemmerer, F. Mann and M. Haymans discussed hunts on BRP, and the potential for hunting opportunities for various sectors of the public (youths, etc.).

K. Harrison commented on the exotic control goals, and partnership to attain the goals, for the property. He was happy to hear FWC and FFS would be supplementing Tarpon Blue's commitment to treating at least 200 acres per year. He declared that he has history running cattle and he's seen many kinds of non-native, invasive vegetation species; the climbing ferns scare him. However, in recent years, it is cogongrass that scares him the most. He elaborated on how it grows so fast, it spreads so easily, and it is so hard to kill, despite the amounts of money and labor spent just to get ahead of it and not even knock it out. K. Smith stated that Tarpon Blue would be looking into the possibility of employing cost-share programs on BRP to deal with the exotic issues. K. Smith also stated that if it was economical to treat more than 200 acres (per lease stipulations), they wanted to. J. Karels elaborated on the subject of exotic control.

M. Haymans asked if it were possible for the state to make money off of the exotics, similar to how the state once thought that maleluca was once possibly a "valuable" commodity. K. Smith spoke about a rumor he had heard regarding selling Brazilian pepper berries as a spice. M. Haymans confirmed the rumor, that pink peppercorns do indeed come from the Brazilian pepper plant. F. Mann, K. Harrison and K. Smith discussed the probability of such a harvest, and that a berry harvest would not alleviate the actual infestation.

J. Holzaepfel asked Mr. Arnie Sarlo, former Babcock ranch manager, about the old world climbing fern in Telegraph Swamp. A. Sarlo elaborated on exotic control opportunities during his time on

the ranch when the Babcock family still ran it. He stated that he agrees with J. Karels in that the infestation must be contained. K. Harrison spoke about the lack of cogongrass treatment-dedicated personnel when Kitson's group was managing the property, and the fact that all types of groups, from environmentalists to agriculturalists, agree that the exotic infestations need to be eradicated and that it takes money to achieve. M. Haymans spoke about other types of non-native, invasive problems.

L. Carlton called on Carl Conrath, FFS BRP Ranch Manager to give BRAG an update on the recreational opportunities available to the public on BRP.

C. Conrath recapped what has occurred onsite in terms of recreation since FFS management takeover in August 2016, including working with the Florida Master Naturalists to re-work the hiking trails, establishing new equestrian trails by working alongside the local equine chapter members, and the recent and future Operation Outdoor Freedom hunt events. He stated that FFS wants to work more with Tarpon Blue in the future on these types of opportunities, as Tarpon Blue was the sponsor of the recent OOF hunt on BRP. At the request of L. Carlton, C. Conrath indicated recreation areas on the map for the BRAG. He stated that FFS will continue to work with user groups in the future to establish recreational opportunities for the public, and mentioned that FFS has two foresters onsite to help with the maintenance of recreational areas.

L. Carlton stated that it sounded like FFS had addressed the concerns regarding recreational opportunities for the public that were brought up at the last round of Babcock Ranch Preserve public hearings and meetings. She asked C. Conrath if any outstanding issues remain regarding recreation. C. Conrath stated that FFS will keep working to improve recreation on BRP, and further elaborated on more work FFS has completed and is in the process of completing, in coordination with user groups like the Caloosa Saddle Club, to improve recreation on BRP.

M. Haymans inquired about the possibility of coordination so that equestrians can ride during hunting seasons. C. Conrath explained how the various activities on the property, including the agricultural operations, all work well together. J. Karels elaborated on the process for obtaining a limited special permit for equine use on BRP.

M. Haymans asked if there was a calendar of BRP events/recreation dates, as well as prescribed burns and cattle movement dates the public can view for planning purposes? C. Conrath explained that FWC posts all hunt dates, and FFS will work to get the dates posted on the BRP website and the property kiosks. K. Smith stated that Tarpon Blue communicates with C. Conrath regarding Tarpon Blue prescribed burns and impacts to hunt lessees. C. Conrath elaborated on special permit use protocol.

F. Mann stated that he needed a better understanding of hunting. He asked for information regarding who leases and for how long, and who coordinates the hunting program on BRP. J. Browne answered that FWC oversees the hunting on BRP.

L. Carlton announced that this segways into the next portion of the meeting: FWC's presentation.

M. Kemmerer presented the hunt program to BRAG. F. Mann stated that he does not understand the tiers. M. Kemmerer broke down the tiered structure of the BRP hunt program, including elaboration on permits, geography and access. K. Smith added information and stated that Tarpon Blue has had no issues with the hunt program on BRP, as the co-existence of the two activities onsite is seamless. Vehicles that are attributed to the hunters have placards to indicate so.

F. Mann inquired about where the hunt fee goes. J. Karels and the group elaborated on the subject and discussed.

L. Carlton called on FWC to present the subject of hunting to the BRAG.

M. Kemmerer discussed the funds that have been spent thus far on the hunting program on BRP. F. Mann asked for another explanation on Tier II hunting and permitting. M. Kemmerer went over the permitting process, leased areas and hunt camps and the associated FWC responsibilities regarding them with F. Mann.

M. Kemmerer and M. Haymans discussed the intent for each hunt area to have a camp. M. Kemmerer further elaborated on FWC personnel dedicated to BRP, and funding that has been spent on BRP equipment, RCW mowing, operational funds, Tier I area check station maintenance, etc.

J. Holzaepfel inquired about the RCW population. M. Kemmerer spoke about the 16 known RCW clusters on the property.

F. Mann asked for more specific information regarding the different types of hunts on BRP and the determination of lease award process. M. Kemmerer and F. Mann discussed the subject in detail. M. Haymans and M. Kemmerer discussed the data available in terms of what has been caught onsite in past years and set quotas. M. Kemmerer stated that the Tier II hunters are some of the best conservationists, as they usually will not take does, and they monitor themselves really well.

M. Kemmerer spoke about RCWs and the personnel that has been dedicated to doing this work onsite. He also went over the available hunt camp amenities that FWC is making available to each hunt camp site. K. Smith and M. Kemmerer discussed hunt camp specifics, permit specifics, access to the sites, and the permit renewal process. M. Kemmerer stated that the folks who pay to use a site are usually going to take better care of it.

M. Haymans inquired about guests per permit and M. Kemmerer elaborated.

Next, Marc Crickfield, FWC, gave a presentation on panthers, including the following topics: species info, protection listing history, Florida's recovery plan information and the population needs for de-listing potential.

F. Mann and M. Haymans discussed panther populations and the geographic distances it takes to establish more than one "population." M. Crickfield discussed why it is important to establish

more than one “population” in Florida. M. Dimmit clarified the notion of separate populations, geographically speaking.

F. Mann asked what the relevance this presentation had to the BRAG meeting at hand. Then he spoke about hogs, panther and hog species occurrence south of the Caloosahatchee River, and if striking a balance is feasible. He remarked that bringing back the panthers has been so successful south of the river, that no hogs are around. He asked if there are issues like that on BRP.

M. Crickfield stated that trail camera footage is an important monitoring tool and thus far has shown herds of hogs in the vicinity.

F. Mann spoke about stories he has heard of folks that run cattle south of the river who are losing calves to panther attacks – similar to what occurred out west with the reintroduction of wolves. He queried if panther success could be in conflict for other interests, and stated he wasn’t sure if there was an identifiable problem yet or not. M. Haymans discussed how hogs are back in Big Cypress and that a balance does occur in cycles. F. Mann claimed no hogs were present for eight years on his 2,600-acre leased hunting land. M. Crickfield stated that when the pigs start breeding, their population will rebound quickly. F. Mann stated that the hogs haven’t come back in many of the surrounding counties and there is no indication that they will. He told M. Crickfield that he was doing a super job (with working to increase the panther population).

M. Crickfield continued his presentation elaborating on the history of the panther’s regional range, as well as the breeding range in Florida. The purchase of the BRP conservation lands is part of the panther natural recolonization efforts. F. Mann asked how many panthers were known to exist north of the Caloosahatchee River. M. Crickfield stated that 15-20 exist north of the river, and up to this point, they were all males. K. Harrison stated that he had never seen a panther in the woods but had come across many instances of tracks regularly, as well as immature tracks a few miles north of here, and tracks of more than two female cats.

M. Crickfield stated that two males and one female were known to be on BRP. FWC will be monitoring the cameras in the future, but will not be doing any “capture” work, as that is risky with female cats. He declared that the management activities occurring on BRP were conducive to the panthers inhabiting and using the property. He elaborated on the topic of den and kitten habitat onsite being crucial for growing a panther population, details regarding roller chopping methodology to leave patches for den habitat, as well as prescribed burning regimes in the area that will benefit the habitats.

A. Sarlo asked about the original panther population and home range. M. Crickfield made an educated guess that the original population in Florida was probably around 2000.

J. Holzaepfel inquired about roadkill specimens and if DNA tests were conducted; if so, do test results reveal comparative ratios between Texas Cougar and Florida Panther genes. M. Crickfield stated that DNA tests are done and they do see quite a bit of Texas Cougar genes, as those species did get well distributed out into the population, however, exact percentages are not available. J. Holzaepfel asked if behavioral differences exist between the two species. M. Crickfield noted that there may have been some localized adaptations, but since the population extended from South

America to North America only about ten thousand years ago, that doesn't leave much time for much local behavioral change patterns.

- 5 Minute Break -

L. Carlton noted the next item on the meeting agenda was to have a BRAG group discussion. She asked the group to determine an agreed upon schedule for future BRAG meetings, noting that every quarter seems like too much, and once a year may be too infrequent. M. Haymans suggested twice a year. F. Mann stated that though this is an advisory group, but that he'd like to keep up with it, and this meeting has been helpful to him and he appreciates what everyone has done to put the meeting together. He stated that every six months was a good meeting interval. L. Carlton noted the general consensus amongst the BRAG members on having BRAG meetings every six months.

L. Carlton and J. Karels discussed how the BRAG members can best communicate with FFS regarding BRP. L. Carlton, F. Mann and J. Karels discussed the calendar year and getting new meeting dates. There was discussion among members regarding a possible site tour and location of the next meeting. K. Smith weighed in on ADA compliance issues and carrying capacity issues for publicly noticed meetings and various meeting location ideas mentioned by others, as well as potential Sunshine Law complications regarding a BRAG site tour.

L. Carlton opened up the meeting to public comment.

Robert Bagans, on the Board of Directors of the local chapter of the Southern Off-Road Bicycling Association. He stated that Florida is one of two states that have the most dangerous conditions (fatalities) for off-road cycling. He wants to see folks get the opportunities to get off the pavement and into the natural areas. He stated that the Association has established trails in the vicinity but on different lands. The bicyclists he represents want to use existing grade roads onsite and not create environmental impacts. He stated that the deer are not intimidated by the activities, in fact on a nearby property where the deer density is pretty thick, he has to talk to the deer as he is riding through in order to get them to move. He stated that folks engaged in this activity need hard packed surfaces, not the soft areas that the horses ride on. He indicated on the map where the good roads the cyclists can use are located. He offered up some quick parameters of their standard types of rides. L. Carlton asked FFS if this request could be followed up on by staff. F. Mann asked if there was immediate resistance or did it seem like there was a possibility of sharing the property for the usage of cyclists. J. Karels stated that now that the idea has been presented to FFS through the BRAG, now FFS can discuss internally and look at options that may work for the state and the lessee. R. Blagans restated that bikes and horses use different types of trails and cited normal bike trail standards for what he was suggesting. He explained that horses are not confined and will walk through meadows and other types of terrain whereas bicyclists stick to the hard-packed trails.

F. Mann stated that it is nice to have conservation land and wants the public to be able to access the property and enjoy it. It is worth exploring how we can accommodate groups of 2-8 cyclists on BRP.

K. Smith stated Tarpon Blue is open to exploring the options but keeping in mind the risk exposure regarding the heavy traffic, including heavy agriculturally-affiliated traffic, on BRP. Tarpon Blue would want 100% indemnification. Tarpon Blue does not control the traffic on BRP. The cyclist activities would have to be more highly managed than the horses, and how would that work with the timing of hunting seasons? R. Bagans stated that his group does not ride on other properties during their hunts. L. Carlton stated that the various managers could explore options. M. Haymans spoke up about separate standards for bike and horse trails. He mentioned and discussed that at a different meeting about a year ago, he heard pleas from the local public who want access to public lands for recreation. He asked the managers to please look for ways to include cyclists on BRP, and not ways or reasons to exclude them.

With no further discussion, L. Carlton moved for the meeting to be adjourned; F. Mann so moved the motion.

The BRAG meeting adjourned at approximately 11:37a.m.