

**LOUISIANA FORESTRY COMMISSION
BATON ROUGE, LA
JUNE 7, 2016
MINUTES**

CALL TO ORDER

The Louisiana Forestry Commission meeting was called to order by Chairman Scott Poole at 10:01 a.m.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called by Epney Brasher

Members Present: Chairman Scott Poole, Gradon Clemons, Wayne Hagan, Michael Hudson & Bill Jenkins

LDAF staff present: Wade Dubea, Epney Brasher, David Campbell, Lindsey Hunter, Don Smith & Roy St. Pierre

Guests included: Buck Vandersteen, Dr. DeHoop, George Tiley, and George Ramsey.

Contact information was given out to all commission members for review and to make changes as necessary.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOTION: Mike Hudson made a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting for March 1, 2016; Gradon Clemons seconded the motion. All were in favor.

BUDGET

Epney reported on the budget and explained for the new members. The supply budget is usually spent mainly on fuel. This last fiscal year we did not spend a lot of the fuel budget nor did we have a lot of equipment down for repairs. The rains that we have had have kept the wildfire numbers down.

This year most of our protection budget was for the acquisition or maintenance of equipment and has mostly been spent on the aircraft fleet. Two engines have been replaced and we are in the process of upgrading about half of the fleet of 12 planes to the new FAA standard for communication to those radios in the planes. These are not the radios that we have for air to ground communication with the ground crews, this is strictly for aviation communication. These are the ones that are required by the FAA for the fire towers and the navigational abilities.

Wade explained that coming out of the regular session and into the special session, Forestry's budget for the coming year has been fully restored. So it will be an extension of this year's budget. This is much better than the beginning news of being six million dollars in the hole. Wade called attention to the fact that the majority of our budget is salaries, wages & related benefits. Out of a 15.5 million dollar budget, we will spend roughly \$10 million on personnel. If there were any cuts to the Forestry portion of the state general fund this is where we would have to cut.

Scott Poole asked about the balance in the FPP account. Wade explained that there was a balance of six million dollars in the account, which included the \$2.2 million obligated to fund for the coming year along with \$2.2 million that was obligated for last year. This program is a two year program and last year's obligations will start closing out soon. Wade continued to explain that we opened the application period a full month early. There was a threat of that account being swept, so we tried to obligate as much of that money as possible so that it would go to the landowners of the state.

The FPP program was explained to the new members as follows – FPP is based on the state portion of the severance taxes collected and that the parish where the tax was collected gets 75% of the money. The remaining 25% is then divided. Three quarters of that 25% goes into the FPP program and the remaining quarter goes

straight into the state general fund. The three quarters that comes to us is about \$3 million for FPP and it goes directly into the Treasurer's office. Then the Legislature sets our budget authority. So we only have authority to use what they set for us which has been \$2 million for the last few years. If we need to, we can go back and request a budget adjustment to bring in more to fund the program. This account is a statutorily dedicated fund. There have been at least four bills lately to undedicate these funds and let the Legislature decide how to distribute the money from these funds. But so far they have not passed. We will have to see what comes out of the special session. There have been sweeps that have taken funds from the account in the \$100,000 range, but it has not affected the program. As a result of that, the Commission elected to make some changes to the FPP program. The maximum amount has been increased from \$10,000 to \$15,000 on the cost shares. The rates for the different practices have been changed to make them more compatible with the rates in private industry as well as other states. The number of practices that we will fund has been increased. One of the main practices that we changed had to do with prescribed burning. Prescribed burning was only allowed for site prep and longleaf only, but now it can be used for any type of reforestation effort. Right now we are on a two year cycle. The money was left in the Treasurer's office during that time. We knew that it was obligated, but the Legislature looked at it as available and just sitting there. It took a lot of effort to get them to understand that it was obligated to the landowners of the state. Administrative costs and research can be paid for by this fund. They have not been paid in the past, but the fund can be used for those with the Commission's approval.

Wade was questioned about the coming year's budget. He stated that barring any unforeseen problems coming out of the special session, the budget amount for next year should be the same amount that it was for this year. Since there were no layoffs required this past fiscal year, we are filling four positions that had been vacant. There are two forester positions that have gone through interviews and are ready to be offered to prospective employees. Also two crew positions are available and applications are being accepted now. That will put us at the 158 that we are allowed. In the first special session, the Legislature allowed for us to have ten more firefighter positions. There was no money allotted to cover those positions, so they have not been filled. If funds become available, then we can hire those ten additional employees.

DIVISION REPORTS

Wade went over the highlights of the division reports. Mike Hudson asked if the stewardship program was growing. Wade stated that yes, but the issue is directly tied to having enough personnel to work the application process.

The overlap of the wildfire season happening at the same time that is right for prescribed burning was discussed. There have been plans to make prescribed burn teams to take care of that task while relieving them of their wildfire duties. We are looking at having a team in the northern part of the state along with a team in the southern area. So we are looking to ramp up our prescribed burn program.

Scott Poole asked about rotating the personnel and the age of our firefighters. Wade stated that over the last eight years, we have had to deal with repeated layoffs. We have lost a lot of our younger firefighters that we had trained. Many of our firefighters have left through retirement. So we have lost the experienced firefighters along with the younger trained firefighters. We are left with that mid-section of folks that are advancing thru the ranks and getting older.

Buck Vandersteen asked about funding those positions needed thru the self-generated funds brought in by the prescribed burning. We have discussed the increase in funding prescribed burning may bring in more self-generated funds. Epney Brasher explained that they were looking into making those positions on the burn crews appointed and not permanent positions as well as other options.

The aviation report was questioned. Wade explained that in 2011 there was a severe drought season with multiple fires every day, large fires. So the planes were in the air a lot directing the ground crews on the fires as well as detection. The past two years there has been a tremendous amount of rainfall which has kept down the number of fires. Also the number of planes was reduced from 16 to 12. The district lines have been redrawn and the flight patterns changed to streamline our efforts.

Scott Poole requested an electronic report from the Enforcement section as often as he can. He wants it to be shared by the Commission with industry so that they can know who is being pursued along with the good work that the Enforcement division is doing. Epney stated that the information on the Enforcement report is about cases that are closed, so that information can be shared. No cases that are under investigation are shared in the report.

OLD BUSINESS

No old business.

NEW BUSINESS

The lease agreement has been advertised for the Columbia Nursery property. Wade will be there for prospective lessors to look at the property on June 8. The term of the lease is ten years. The provisions were discussed along with the disposal of the equipment. The properties that were previously noted as the Beauregard and Oberlin nurseries are under LAFA, to which they are in charge of.

Epney explained the proposed changes to the FPP program. The rates that were previously approved by the Commission have been implemented. Some of the practices were not being utilized, so they have been deleted. Wade explained the change wanted for the prescribed burning allowance. The ten year time period would not be started over if the site was burned during the contract. The change from a 24 months cycle to 12 months was explained, along with reasons for the change request and advantages of a 12 month cycle. Another change that will be taking place is that the social security number will be taken off of the application. The social security number will be used only on the W-9 for paying the cost shares for tax purposes. A tracking number will be assigned to each application for security reasons. The new application with all the changes should be in place for the next application period beginning in April.

One amendment would be to change the contract period from 24 months to 12 months accounting cycle. Another amendment (13.11b) would be to exempt burning during the 10 year contract. Much discussion followed on specifics of the program and the practices being funded. The intent has always been to invest this FPP money back into the forest community thru the landowners.

MOTION: Wayne Hagan made a motion to amend the accounting cycle, and any current amendments to make the changes needed and to allow Commissioner Strain to sign on behalf of the Commission; Mike Hudson seconded the motion. All were in favor.

The outdated by-laws were presented and a request for input to rewrite the by-laws for the Forestry Commission. This is to be discussed at the next meeting.

The personnel salary review tiered situation was discussed.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Buck Vandersteen brought comments about the closing of the state nurseries and consolidation of industry nurseries and concerns about there being enough seedlings available for the forestry community. At this time the Teachers' Tour is going on. There are concerns about no markets for cut timber in the southeastern part of the state. He also brought up the tax changes made by the Legislature so far with more possible because of the special session.

The August meeting will be at the LFA convention in Lake Charles. Discussion of rates and procedures for severance taxes will be on the agenda at that meeting along with recognizing former commission members.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Gradon Clemons made a motion to adjourn the meeting; Mike Hudson seconded the motion. All were in favor. Meeting was adjourned at 11:39 a.m.