

**LOUISIANA FORESTRY COMMISSION
ALEXANDRIA, LA
MARCH 1, 2016
MINUTES**

CALL TO ORDER

The Louisiana Forestry Commission meeting was called to order by Chairman Scott Poole at 9:58 a.m.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called by Epney Brasher

Members Present: Chairman Scott Poole, Mike Merritt and Kenny Ribbeck

A quorum was not present.

LDAF staff present: Wade Dubea, Epney Brasher, Roy St. Pierre and Don Smith.

BUDGET

Epney reported on the budget. The month of October was the most expensive for fuel and repairs to the dozer equipment. Over the past six months a large portion of the Aviation budget has been spent for updates to the radio communications to comply with the FCC regulations. Also, two new engines were bought to begin replacing engines that were ready to time out on some planes. So we are starting to do the engine replacements. Those engines are about \$50,000 each as far as the engine and the installation.

Tina Meiners arrived, so there was now a quorum present. Roll call was amended.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOTION: Kenny Ribbeck made a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting for December 7, 2015 with the exception of having his name struck, for it was noted twice on the record. Exception was noted, Mike Merritt seconded the motion. All were in favor.

BUDGET REPORT CONTINUED

Most of the budget expenses are normal operating expenses and we are where we need to be right on track at this point in the fiscal year. Wade noted that there was a mid-year cut that was an adjustment from the Division of Administration. It ended up being adjusted due to the Commissioner meeting with Jay Dardenne and the Governor. He explained that the department had already been cut by a large amount this fiscal year, so they deferred to a smaller cut of about \$300,000. By the time it was spread through the department, the portion that ended up coming to Forestry was manageable.

Because of what was going on at the Capitol, Wade pointed out that the lion's share of our budget is salaries, wages and related benefits. The supply budget includes fuel costs which fluctuate depending on the fire season. If the budget that is being proposed now does not get amended, the salary category would be where adjustments and decisions would have to be made. The total budget proposed for next fiscal year would not be enough to cover what our salary budget is now.

There was a question about any planes being out of commission. There is one plane getting regularly scheduled maintenance and another one doing radio updates. When one of those is ready to go, another plane will be brought in to do the radio updates. The changes being made are not changes on frequency. The changes have mainly to do with navigation and being able to track the towers.

Tina Meiners asked about having enough operators for the equipment. Wade stated that there are 102 fire fighters and 98 pieces of equipment. The question was if we could sell some of the equipment to cover some of the costs, but the equipment is tied to bonds and since we don't own them, they cannot be sold. The Commissioner is adamant about not selling the equipment.

Wade stated that if the current budget proposal holds, it would be a \$5.6 million dollar cut moving into the next fiscal year. If that cut was taken out in firefighters, we would lose 66 positions. Then the department would be out of the firefighting business. We could not operate with only 35 firefighters. Wade expects some of that money to be restored to the budget – typically that is what happens. But historically, the worst cut that we had was three million dollars and that was the year that we had to lay off 35 firefighters. So even if they put back half, we will still see a sizable reduction in personnel. It is a one-way street, once we downsize, we have not been able to regain capacity. This \$15 million budget is basically the line in the sand for firefighting. Basically, right now the response time is 45 minutes with the average size fire being 12 acres using the 10 year average information. By projecting forward a cut of 66 positions, all the 26 standbys across the state would have to close. There would not be enough people to man them. All the firefighters would have to pull back to the district offices. That would make the response time 2 hours minimum with the average fire size being 50 acres. That additional response time would increase the loss to the timber industry by about \$45 million each year. That is not including any homes or commercial losses by the fires. Wade quoted a study done in Alabama that would apply here in Louisiana and they figured the cost could ramp up into the billions of dollars if there was a longer response time with fewer resources to fight the fires. That information was shared with the Commissioner and Dane Morgan and Legislators who were interested in what would happen with having no firefighting force here. There is no version that is “down town Louisiana”, but the timber type, terrain, and populations are very similar between Alabama and Louisiana so it applies. So we are trying to get people to understand that this is the minimum. Louisiana is ranked #7 in the Southeast region for the number of fires. The Southeast region has 45% of the fires nationwide. We are ranked #11 in the number of fires that are suppressed by the State agencies.

GOHSP put together a document in case they needed to request a federal fire management assistance grant. Don Smith and Bret Lane had to proofread the document. As they were reading through the document, there were graphs, pictures and information that was incorrect. For example, they said that Caddo parish might have a fire every 100 years. There were 4 other parishes that might have a fire every 200 years. They had no idea where the authors of the document got the fire data that they used. They made it look like there were only 4 or 5 fires in the last 10-12 years. They had the potential hot spots for fires as Monroe, the middle of the Gulf coast and outside New Orleans. Wade said that this erroneous information was about to be turned loose on the Legislators who would be voting on our budget. Don and Bret talked with the man in the Governor’s office to show him the actual historical fire data along with some graphs and charts showing the actual data. Forestry’s actual data is recorded with the US Department of Agriculture and is out there for the Legislators in Washington to see. He said that the folks from FEMA wanted more “fluff” with that document, but he did not know where his people got this fluff that was incorrect. This document has already been signed by FEMA, so he has to get it back and redo it. It would not look good on his department when the actual and accurate data showed up. They have absolutely no understanding of what we do. This man has worked with the Forestry office for years in producing this kind of report, but this year had it put together with erroneous information and submitted it without running it by Don or Bret to make sure it was correct.

The question was asked about whom from the Department was going to the Legislature to defend the Department during these times. Wade stated that the Commissioner was there every day and his Assistant Commissioners were available to go with him or answer any questions concerning their sections as needed. Wade had spent the whole day getting together information on the FPP program. The Senators thought that there was \$6 million in the FPP fund that could be swept. What they did not understand was that each year \$2 million is obligated with a 2 year time period to get the work done. It may be 2 years before the request comes in for that money, but it is obligated by contract for that landowner. Right now there may be \$3 million in the account, but we are maybe a month from the next funding cycle which would obligate at least \$2 million of that easily or more. That will leave a million dollars or less that is above our budget authority to bring into the program. With the new changes in pricing, we were looking to have that additional money to come into the program. Instead of obligating \$2 million each year, we were hoping to obligate \$3 million each year.

Buck Vandersteen, Wade, and Scott Poole discussed the bills that were before the Legislature now and how they would affect all of the agencies and what they will do with the statutory dedicated funds. There are many

tax bills floating around in the Legislature, so there is no way of knowing what will happen this fiscal year. They have not even worked on next fiscal year. They are looking for the Legislature to go into the regular session and then go into another special session. This will be a lengthy process. The Forestry Commission offered to talk with the Legislators about anything they could help with.

Tina Meiners and Wade discussed the proposed cuts to the Forestry budget for next year. He was explaining how the cuts to the Department were spread among the offices. Buck thanked all the Forestry office for working on in uncertain situations.

Mike Merritt asked about working with the FPP program. Wade said that it would be business as usual until they hear any different. The sweeping of the funds is possible, but if we can provide proof of obligation, they will not take those funds that are obligated. Once the application is approved it is considered a contract.

Scott Poole asked about the nursery situation – if everything was finished and taken care of. Wade stated that Columbia Nursery still belongs to the Department and to the Office of Forestry. There was a proposal to put out all the properties for lease. The attorney is working on the paperwork to handle Columbia Nursery separate from the other properties. The property will not be up for sale, so it would be leased only. The majority of the nursery specific equipment had to be redistributed to other states because this equipment was purchased with federal grants. The farming equipment that is tagged has to go thru the state to be auctioned off. The Office of Forestry got to keep the proceeds from the scrap metal that was sold.

DIVISION REPORTS

Roy St. Pierre answered questions about some of the cases on his division report. Wade stated that there are four investigators and Roy supervises them all and assists in the investigations as needed. They agreed that there is a lot going on now in the enforcement area that keeps them all busy.

OLD BUSINESS

MOTION: Mike Merritt made the motion to accept the updated rules for Indian Creek which were discussed at the last meeting and Kenny Ribbeck seconded the motion. All were in favor. The updates were approved and will be registered.

NEW BUSINESS

Wade reported that Buck Vandersteen hosted a meeting with landowners, industry and private from across the state to discuss a proposal for funding the Office of Forestry. The Office of Forestry has had a budget cut every year for the last eight years with additional mid-year cuts. This comes because the Office depends on the state general funds to operate. There was a proposal made to fund the Office without relying on the state general funds either entirely or mostly. This proposal would be an assessment on the tons reported for severance tax purposes. This would not be to add onto the severance tax because the constitution states that the severance tax is the only tax to be collected on timber. The proposal was to use the tonnage reported and charge an assessment on that weight and the funds go directly to the Office of Forestry. That would eliminate the need to rely on state general funds. There were other proposals like assessing a charge based on each acre of timberland. But that would put a burden on the large landowners. The per-ton assessment was better because it would be charged as timber was harvested, so it would not hit most landowners every year. The assessment would be paid off the top at the mills before the monies were distributed to the landowners. If they did not harvest timber, there would not be an assessment. If this proposal is accepted, we want a group to get together to help draft the legislation to be submitted. If this proposal is not accepted, we want input from others as to what we can do to get off of the state general funds. Then we would need a committee to help draft the legislation to put that into action. At this point, there has been no legislation submitted. There was much discussion on possible fees for fire suppression in the state. Several plans were discussed and dismissed. Private assessment was dismissed by the group. Some public assessment must be made. The group was supportive of what the Office of Forestry does with what resources it has. There are discrepancies in the assessment of the eight cents per acre. Some tax assessors are not collecting it. The wildland interface was discussed also. Many possibilities were discussed. Statutorily dedicated funds were discussed in how they are raised and how they can be swept. The proposal from the committee would be to get an assessment of two to

three dollars on all homeowners' insurance policies statewide for funding for Forestry. The number of policies is suspected to be close to 3 million. The goal was to get 10 million dollars to fund the Office of Forestry for fire suppression. They are still open to all suggestions. Hunting club insurance was mentioned along with renter's policies. An assessment on fireworks sales already goes to the Fire Marshal's Office, but they don't do any fire suppression.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

No public comments at this time.

The Commission went into Executive Session at 12:13 pm.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: After return from executive session, a motion was made by Mike Merritt to adjourn the meeting; Kenny Ribbeck seconded the motion. All were in favor. Meeting was adjourned at 12:24 p.m.