

Colorado Cave Survey Meeting
10 am, Saturday, July 17, 2010
Golden Public Library, Golden, CO

Minutes from Emergency Meeting (Part I)

The Colorado Cave Survey (CCS) held an emergency meeting this weekend to discuss the apparently pending cave closures in USFS Region 2. Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and the majority of Wyoming and South Dakota are included in Region 2. Interested cavers from across the state and representing all seven of Colorado's grottos were present. Representing USFS Region 2 were Nancy Warren – Threatened and Endangered Species, Tom Willems – Recreation Planner, and R.E. Vann III – Director of Renewable Resources.

At the invitation of the CCS, Nancy Warren began the meeting by discussing the spread of White Nose Syndrome and how the USFS truly needs the help of the caving community. The USFS believes that bats are the primary vectors, but they cannot rule out the human element. As many cavers have already heard, biologists from the eastern regions of the USFS have recommended a more proactive approach for those out west based on their experience. USFS Region 2 currently believes the information about bats in Colorado is incomplete, and that there is “more information they don't know than what they do know”. They realize that a blanket closure is not the ultimate solution but believe that “doing nothing is not a plan”. Nancy would like for cavers and the USFS to work together on figuring out high versus low risk caves relative to WNS spread and criteria for determining the difference. Such information would be crucial for working on a more targeted approach to cave closures.

After Nancy's discussion, the floor was opened to questions from cavers and all three representatives from Region 2 participated in answering. Broadly, cavers spoke passionately, thoughtfully, and respectfully although all voiced opposition to the planned blanket closures. During this time, cavers repeatedly announced concern of how blanket closures would alienate the caving community from the USFS, and expressed that such a broad closure is unjustified, as only 20% of caves within Colorado are known to have bats. It is also believed that the majority of those Colorado caves that do host bats have extremely small populations (<20 bats). Cavers asked about the limited scientific understanding of WNS and how many felt it did not justify blanket closures. It was generally agreed that much more science is needed to understand WNS, but both funding and the pace of research are limiting factors. Cavers offered to help conduct research specific to the Rocky Mountain Region. Cavers pointed out the obvious weakness in blanket closures on public lands if there is no intention to interfere with commercial caves. Cavers pointed out that we could be a tremendous resource for communicating with the public about cave closures, if the closures took a targeted approach that the caving community supported. Cavers pointed out that there is a tremendous amount of volunteerism in the caving community. Cavers also showed a willingness to provide what information they currently know about bats, regarding caves within the state, in an effort

to help the USFS with a targeted cave closure approach. There was at least one offer to share information then and there if a blanket closure could be avoided. Over the course of the hour and a half meeting many other points were made and questions asked by cavers.

Toward the end of the meeting, Tom Willems indicated that he felt that some common ground had been found between cavers and Region 2. Tom made a positive mention of the fact that the level of public involvement in government has increased substantially in the recent past. Regarding the final decision on when and what kind of cave closure order will be issued, that is up to Rick Cables, the Regional Forester. The Region 2 personnel at the meeting are advising Cables on the decision and they indicated that they would communicate to him what had transpired at the meeting. To paraphrase Tom, ‘Your message will be presented.’”

Minutes from Emergency Meeting (Part II)

In the second half of Saturday’s emergency meeting of the Colorado Cave Survey (the part without USFS personnel present) the CCS voted affirmatively to take four specific actions relative to the WNS response:

1. We voted to send a letter on Monday morning to Rick D. Cables, the Regional Forester for Region 2, stating that the Colorado Cave Survey opposes a blanket closure of caves in Region 2. We voted to start with text developed by Dave Lester during the meeting, discuss that text via the CCS Google Group, and complete a second vote approving the letter by 7 pm Sunday night.

***Discussion / Action:** The letter was approved with 10 of the 14 representatives voting “yes”.*

2. We voted to communicate two other points to Region 2. First, that CCS would stay engaged in talks with Region 2 on this issue. Second, pointing out some existing public domain information (reports on the WWW) that shows what kind of data could be used to guide targeted closures.

***Discussion:** If we stop talking to Region 2, we diminish any influence we have on the process. The public domain data is not anything secret, but it shows that data already exists that could be used to guide targeted closures and seeds the idea that more such data could be developed.*

3. We voted to start developing our own data on bat presence and bat activity in Colorado caves. This focus of the original motion was Fly and Marble Caves, but discussion quickly expanded the idea. Mary Klaus agreed to accept reports on bat presence/absence or activity on caves across Colorado from any caver wishing to contribute them. Mary

has already set up an email that can be used to submit reports. It is:
coloradobatreports@gmail.com.

Discussion: *We did not have time to consider exactly what kind of data to request, or how it could be formatted. Perhaps Mary will have suggestions. Mary may also collaborate with Rob Barton a caver from the western slope on this effort. The data will not be stored any place where it could be stolen over the Internet. We will not consider handing any of this data over to any government agency without a formal vote of the CCS. Developing this database will give the CCS a strong tool for advocating for a targeted response to potential WNS spread.*

4. We voted to require WNS decontamination procedures be observed at all caves where the CCS administers access.

Discussion: *The BLM had already instituted this requirement at LaSunder, so nothing changes there. We will need to double check with the White River National Forest to clarify instituting this at Groaning. However, since the WRNF already had a decontamination advisory in place for all their caves, and we all know that Groaning is a prime Colorado bat cave, the WRNF is likely to agree. Decon will now be required for access to Fly and Marble caves. Bat presence in Fly is documented in the report, *A Survey of Colorado's Caves for Bats*, by Jeremy L. Siemers. This report is available on the WWW. Jason Conner also claims to have photographs of bats hibernating in Fly Cave, although he did not respond to a request to share them.*

Although not voted upon, it was discussed at both meetings to create a communication channel between interested cavers and USFS Region 2. Some kind of email distribution list, like a Google Group, was envisioned. Both Region 2 personnel and cavers expressed support for the idea.

Discussion / Action: *Derek Bristol has created a Google Group (Colorado White Nose Syndrome Discussion Group) to help facilitate communication between the Colorado caving community and US Forest Service Region regarding bats and White Nose Syndrome.*

The meeting was adjourned at 1 pm to allow another group with a reservation at that time to use the meeting room. Discussion