

ANTLERS — A full house of sportsmen and women filled the Wildlife Heritage Center in Antlers Thursday night during a special meeting called by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation to give regional residents input into a slate of new game and rule changes.

The meeting was directed by Southeast Region Supervisor, Joe Hemphill, as nearly two-dozen area game rangers and wildlife personnel looked on.

The proposed rule change that brought the standing room only crowd revolved around the ODWC's proposal to close the Honobia WMA to ATVs and ORVs almost year-round, allowing only access with these machines during deer season. The proposed rules also sought to place numerous other restrictions on ATV riders, such as not crossing creeks, not riding double, must be 700 cc engine size or less, and even restricted ATV use to lawfully licensed deer hunters.

Hemphill said owners of property who had leased their lands to the Oklahoma Wildlife department, "wanted to gain control of their land back."

One-by-one, citizens voiced their concerns and oppositions to the proposed rules. One woman, who advised she and her husband had invested a lot of money in rental cabins on the road between Cloudy and Pickins, said her business would be gravely hurt if the new proposals were adopted, as a large percentage of her clientele enjoyed riding four-wheelers along the mountain roads.

Another person questioned if the ultimate goal of the John Hancock Insurance Company and other landowners was to "run the hunters off and lease the land directly."

State Representative R.C. Pruett commented that on a recent drive through the area, he noticed a significant amount of garbage and beer cans scattered along roadways. "These landowners have a lot of money invested and occasionally, they have other companies, who are interested in purchasing numerous sections of land, visit and tour the area. Obviously, they aren't at all pleased when they see a lot of beer cans scattered along their roadways."

Several sportsmen in attendance said the ATV riders would be willing to form "adopt a roadside" programs similar to the adopt-a-highway programs... and keep the area picked up and clean. Others said they would be willing to sign insurance waiver documents if liability insurance was an issue for the landowner.

Hugo Daily News Publisher Stan Stamper said he took exception to the fact that anyone not deer hunting was being discriminated against by virtue of the seasonal ATV use proposal. Stamper said he and his family would be required to take another vehicle 100 miles round trip just to retrieve a vehicle used to shuttle canoes up-river.

Addressing his comment to both Hemphill and ODWC Commissioner Mike Bloodworth, who was present at the meeting, Stamper said, "I think it is imperative that the Wildlife Commission adopt a policy that says it will not adopt access policy that discriminates between any of the lawful land users. Someone fishing or hunting squirrels should have the same access privileges to the WMA as a deer hunter." He added, "People who are avid fishermen shouldn't be treated

like second class citizens.”

Stamper also took exception to proposals to ban ATVs crossing creeks or Little River, saying that such a policy would force sportsmen to have to drive many miles to access a hunting or fishing area and remain legal.

Longtime Hugo hunter and sportsman Tom Pence also addressed the Commission. “I’m 71-years-old and I’ve been hunting in these mountains for many years. I don’t think a four-wheeler riding or crossing creeks or streams does any damage at all, and it certainly doesn’t do the damage the timber companies do with their massive logging equipment.”

Pence’s comment drew a number of “amens” from the large gathering.

Also in attendance was State Sen. Jerry Ellis, who stated, “I think the land companies are getting a pretty good deal in Oklahoma (in their dealings with the Wildlife Commission.) They get fire protection from the state. They get a huge tax break. We all know that 98% of the people who use their lands are law-abiding citizens and there’s no way we can stop the 2% who want to break the rules from doing that anyway. I don’t think it makes sense to punish the law abiding citizens for the transgressions of just a few. We have a fragile economy right now. I don’t think we need to be taking any action that makes it more difficult for our business people to survive.”

Ellis said he attended a similar meeting many years ago when a group of Weyerhaeuser managers were discussing locking the sportsmen out of their lands. “One of the managers tossed a penny box of matches on the table and said that right there can do more damage to our lands than all the sportsmen combined.” Ellis said the WEYCO leaders quickly backed away from the idea of locking the sportsmen out.

Ellis said he hoped the Commission would table any action on adopting the new regulations and give all parties concerned an opportunity to find common ground and go forward with a cooperative plan.

Ellis asked Mike Bloodworth, who is currently the Chairman of the Wildlife Commission, if he would support a two-year moratorium to give all parties an opportunity to work together toward a long-term plan that would address everyone’s needs.

Bloodworth said he thought the two-year moratorium was a solid plan. “I fully agree and much prefer that we take a step back and try to work out a plan that addresses the needs of all three parties involved,” Bloodworth said. “The Commission hears what you are saying. I agree with Sen. Ellis. If there is any alternative to adopting these proposed regulations, I want to see if we can find it and work with area sportsmen and the property owners.”

Bloodworth said he was not sure when the matter would be placed on the Commission’s agenda for action but assured he would let area sportsmen know.

In discussing other rule changes being proposed by ODWC, Hemphill said bear hunting

regulations would be changing from a quota system to a 21-day no-quota plan. He said last year 31 bears were harvested in two days in 2011, and 10 of the hunters reported they would have waited longer for a larger or more mature animal if given the opportunity to do so.