

Rich County Coordinated Resource Management Sage-grouse Local Working Group

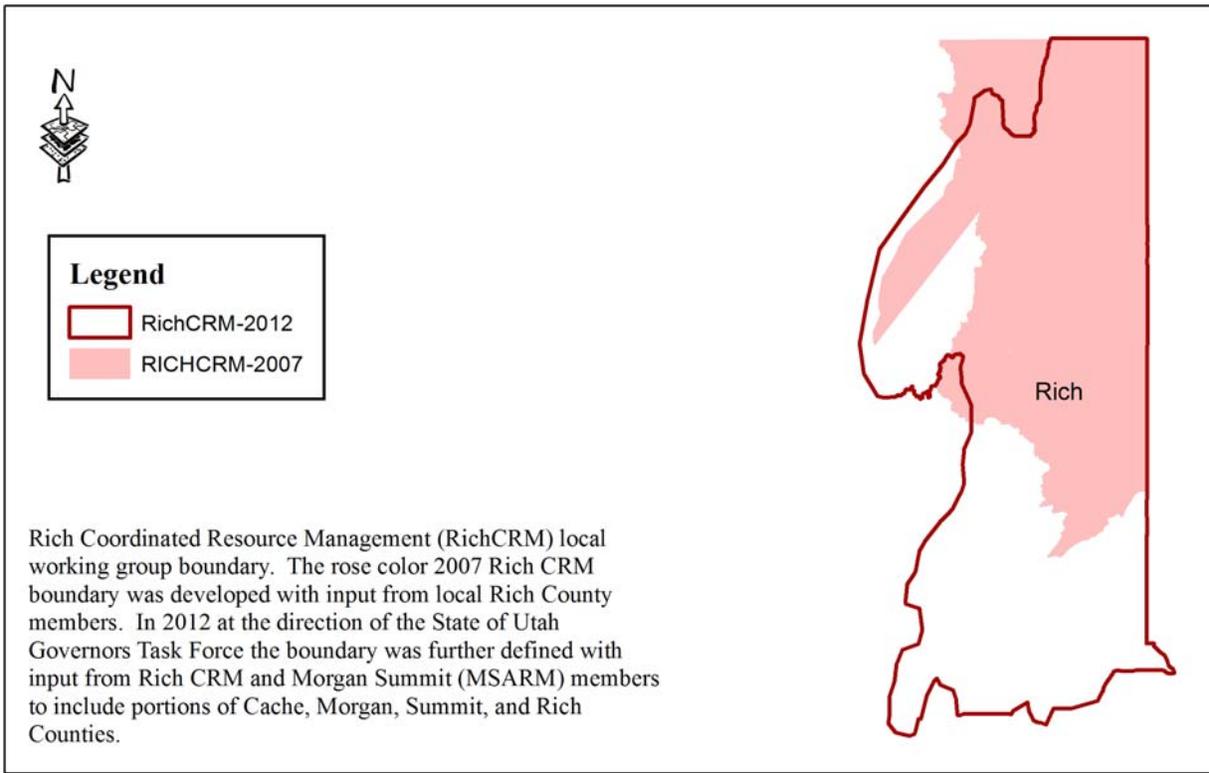


Figure 8. The Rich County Coordinated Resource Management (RICHCO) Sage-grouse Local Working Group and the new Sage-grouse Management Area (SGMA). The SGMA includes portions of Morgan and Summit Counties.



The Rich County Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) Sage-grouse Local Working Group (RICHCO) is facilitated by Mr. Todd A. Black. The RICHCO consists of state and federal agency personnel, representatives from local government, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, private industry, and private individuals.

In 2012 the group met formally three times to discuss and update the project data base, hear project proposals, and updates from research efforts and agencies. The group also discussed and reviewed strategies and actions from the sage-grouse plan. Additionally, one field tour was held to view and discuss research efforts and implemented actions and strategies, the focus this year was on BLM's efforts to reduce pinyon/juniper encroachment in key sage-grouse wintering areas. An additional CRM Board meeting was held early December 2012.

Description of Area and General Population Information

The Rich CRM is located in northeastern Utah, and is a significant population center for grouse in three states – Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming (Figure 8). The SGMA management area includes Cache, Rich, Weber, Morgan, Summit and Wasatch Counties. The area boundary was

determined by consulting with adjacent states, UDWR, and the Morgan-Summit Adaptive Resources Management Local Sage-grouse Working Group, and the CRM. It incorporates vegetation types used by sage-grouse.

Currently, there are 51 known active leks counted in the CRM boundary. The average number of sage-grouse attending these leks exceeds 20 males. One lek found on the Utah/Idaho border is one of the largest in the state with male counts often exceeding 150 grouse. The population remained stable with a slight decline in population numbers and male lek attendance since 2010. The area remains one of four areas in the state that still allows conservative hunting of sage-grouse. This follows similar trends throughout the state of Utah. This population is regarded as one of the most stable in Utah with a potential for growth. Sage-grouse in this area show resiliency to known threats, and are not regarded as being in jeopardy.

2012 Conservation Strategies and Actions

In 2012 the CRM devoted substantial energy, engaged in conservation planning processes for sage-grouse. This included internal discussions that contributed to revisions of both the threats matrix of the local plan (Table 6). In addition, a great deal of energy was put forth assisting with the Governor's Task Force planning process. Members from the CRM as well as the County Commissioners provided comments on the plan. In addition, group members and the facilitator attended meetings and provided input to the Task Force.

Some of the highlights addressing actions and strategies from the 2006 plan in 2012 included:

- Field tours with CRM members to review past treatments and restoration projects

Project and Research Highlights

In 2012 the CRM held a special meeting to review and discuss updating maps and boundaries and progress and changes to the LWG plan and revisions to the 2009 State of Utah Greater-sage-grouse plan as proposed by the Utah Governor's sage-grouse task force. Additionally, the group reviewed and made changes (see below) to the Summary of Threats to local sage-grouse populations from the 2006 Rich CRM sage-grouse plan.

The CRM partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) to implement a long-term research project to evaluate sage-grouse population and habitat responses to rest-rotation grazing. The CRM area exhibit a complex mosaic of land ownership, competing resource uses, and administration of the sagebrush habitats compound sage-grouse management and conservation in Utah. One population of sage-grouse during the course of a season may occupy land administered by several different federal and state agencies and private landowners.

Reported effects of grazing on greater sage-grouse and sagebrush steppe habitats differ. The reason for this is that no before-after-control-impact (BACI) studies have been conducted to specifically document the long-term impacts on greater sage-grouse vital rates and the effects specific grazing strategies on ecological site condition and trends. Changes to sagebrush steppe vegetation communities in response to management actions may be manifested over decades.

Concomitantly, the prohibitive costs of meaningfully monitoring vegetation and sage-grouse population changes over extended time periods have precluded meaningful documentation of grazing effects on greater sage-grouse.

The Utah Sage-grouse Strategic Management Plan (UDWR 2009) has identified the following research priorities regarding livestock and sage-grouse:

- a) How does domestic grazing directly affect sage-grouse populations?
- b) How does domestic grazing directly or indirectly affect sage-grouse habitats (all seasonal)?
- c) How do water developments affect sage-grouse and their habitat (directly and indirectly)?
- d) Does domestic grazing alter behavior in seasonal habitat areas (including meadows/riparian areas)?

The purpose of study is to scientifically document greater sage-grouse individual and population responses using a BACI design to vegetation changes that may occur under prescribed grazing of paired sites located in Rich County Utah. Specific questions to be addressed include:

- 1) Do sage-grouse vital rates differ under prescribed and traditional seasonal-long grazing practices implemented on BLM allotments?
- 2) Do sage-grouse seasonal habitat-use patterns and leks trends differ under prescribed and season-long grazing?
- 3) Does the quality of the seasonal habitats used by sage-grouse under prescribed and season-long grazing differ based structure, composition, and nutrient analysis?

This research project is being conducted on 2 study areas in Rich County, Utah. The first study area is Deseret Land and Livestock (DLL) where 81,000 ha (200,000 ac) are privately managed under rotational prescribed grazing practices. Three Creeks is the second study area, and consists of a 59,000 ha (146,000 ac.) collection of 27 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) grazing allotments mixed with private lands and managed under season-long grazing. Elevation at these study areas varies from 1900m (6200 ft.) to 2600m (8530 ft.). The study area consists primarily of sagebrush steppe habitat with stands of aspen and evergreens at higher elevations. Rich County occupies the SW portion of the Wyoming Basin management zone. The 2012 annual report can be accessed on-line at http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/rich/RC_2012AnnualReport.pdf.

Lastly, the CRM continued to work with Utah State University and the Idaho Game and Fish Department to study sage-grouse populations that inhabit the Bear River Plateau. These populations use seasonal habitats in Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah. The 2012 annual report can be accessed on-line at http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/rich/BearLakeUpdate_7-7-12.pdf.

Revision of Threat Matrix and Strategies Sections of Local Plan

The threat matrix was revised by the group over a series of meetings held in 2012 (Table 6).

Each individual threat level (the intersection of a specific threat and a specific element of the sage-grouse life cycle) in the chart was considered separately. Several threats were modified and the levels of the threat were adjusted accordingly.

Map Revisions

During the Governor's Task Force planning process, as noted previously, draft statewide maps for sage-grouse management areas were developed. The CRM will continue to work with UDWR and other agencies to modify and improve these areas as more information becomes available.

Summary of Major Issues and/or Concerns

One of the biggest concerns with the RICHCO CRM remains the threat of listing of the sage-grouse and what restrictions will be placed on public grazing allotments which remain a key source of revenue to the majority of the citizens in Rich County. Documenting the relationship between sage-grouse and livestock grazing remains the highest CRM priority. In 2012 the CRM provided \$5,000 to Utah State University to hire additional field technicians to collect field data for the on-going study.

Table 6. Relative importance/contribution of individual threats to reducing or degrading aspects of sage-grouse populations in the Rich CRM Resource Area. Threats are described in the “Threat Analysis” section of this Plan. Ranks are defined according to TNC (2005).

Threats	Reduced population size	Population distribution	Reduced breeding habitat quality	Reduced late summer/fall habitat quality	Reduced winter habitat quality	Reduced connectivity of seasonal habitat types	Reduced connectivity of populations and sub-populations
Home and cabin development	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Power lines, fences, and other tall structures	High	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Renewable and non-renewable energy development	Medium	Medium	High	High	Medium	Low	Low
Roads	High	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Drought and weather	High	High	Medium	High	Low	High	High
Hunting pressure	Low	Medium	-	-	-	-	High
Incompatible fire management practices	High	High	High	High	High	High	High
Incompatible livestock grazing management	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
Incompatible OHV and recreation	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Invasive/noxious weeds	Medium	High	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Medium
Parasites and disease	Medium	Medium	-	-	-	-	High
Predation	Medium	Medium	Low	-	-	-	Medium
Vegetation management	-	-	High	High	High	High	Medium
Pinyon-juniper encroachment	-	-	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low