

West Desert Adaptive Resource Management Local Working Group

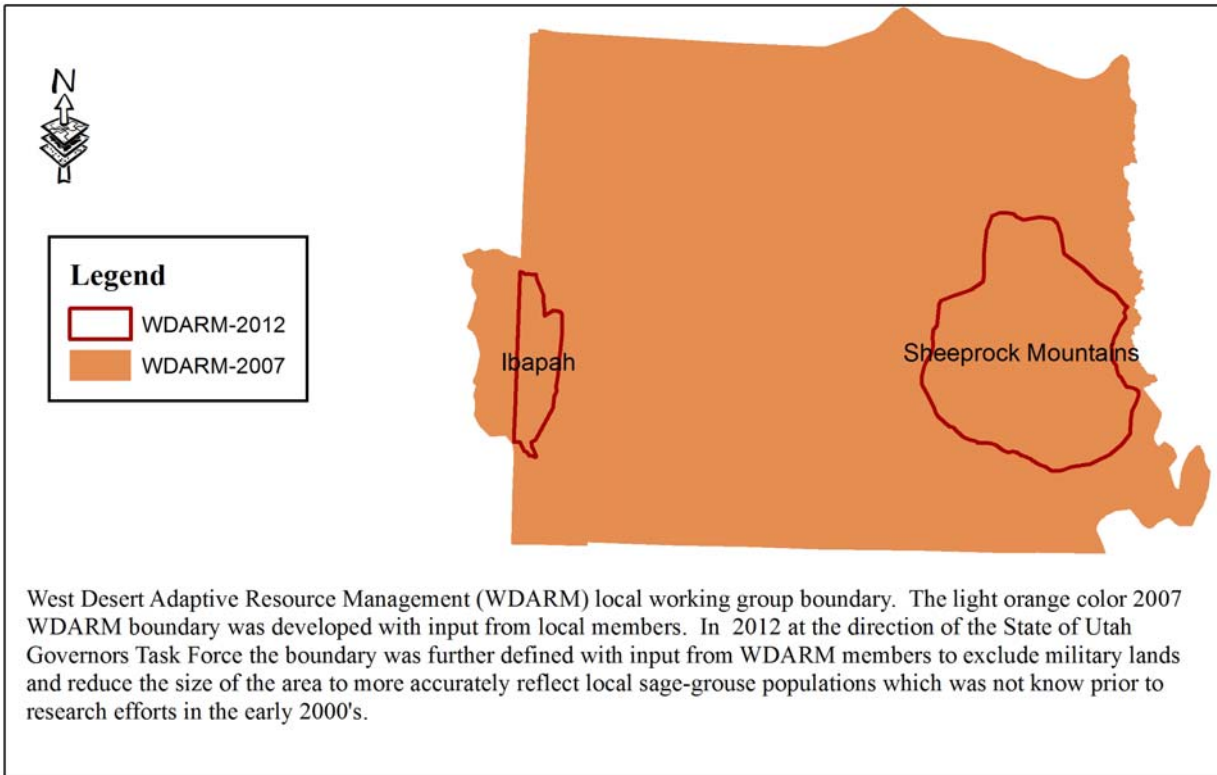


Figure 12. The West Desert Adaptive Resource Management (WDARM) Sage-grouse Local Working Group and new Sage-grouse Management Area (SGMA). The Ibapah and Sheeprock Mountains SGMA are located within the WDARM conservation area.



The West Desert Basin Adaptive Resource Management (WDARM) sage-grouse local working group is facilitated by Ms. Lorien Belton. WDARM meets three times yearly: a spring meeting, a summer field tour, and a fall meeting. The group may meet more frequently as the need arises. The following updates reflect the combined efforts of the group and individual agencies, landowners, and others on behalf of sage-grouse conservation in the West Desert.

Description of Area and General Population Information

The West Desert Adaptive Resource Management LWG conservation area encompasses sage-grouse habitats in Tooele and Juab counties. The two primary population locations are far apart: one in western Tooele County in the Ibapah region (including the Goshute Tribe's land), and the other at the eastern side of the two counties, known as the Sheeprocks. These more eastern populations include birds in the Vernon area as well as in the Tintic Mountains. Population trends in the area have declined over the last few years. From population highs in 2005-2006, small, isolated populations have declined in both the Ibapah and Sheeprock areas. Cheatgrass

and fire are of serious concern to the birds, and recent droughts and fires have exacerbated concerns about these populations.

2012 Conservation Strategies and Actions

The WDARM LWG focused on both planning processes and project implementations. Group members provided comments, suggestions, and discussion in the following ways:

- Updates to the threats chart and the strategies and actions in the WDARM local sage-grouse conservation plan, toward the goal of upcoming full plan revisions
- Detailed feedback to the Governor's Task Force sage-grouse working group on proposed sage-grouse management area boundaries for the Sheeprock and Ibapah areas
- Individual and group comments provided on potential stipulations in sage-grouse management areas
- Attendance at the Salt Lake City scoping meeting in January 2012, and providing other relevant comments, regarding the BLM's scoping process for revision of land use plans throughout Utah, including the West Desert (Salt Lake and Fillmore BLM Districts)
- Facilitator attendance at July 2012 meetings between Utah Governor's office staff and County Commissioners regarding the development of the state sage-grouse plan

In addition to extensive involvement with planning processes, WDARM participants individually and with their organizations continued to make progress on the strategies and actions outlined in the plan. This included:

- Funding and implementation of sage-grouse surveys on Dugway Proving Grounds. Dugway employees are conducting the research
- Participation in the Tooele County trails planning meetings, to encourage collaboration and joint efforts to achieve parallel goals
- Facilitator attendance at an August 2012 Tooele county planning meeting, to provide information on current planning processes as relevant to the county
- Attendance at the July 2012 Six-Counties Association of Governments field tour in July 2012, to provide sage-grouse information during that field tour
- Broad assistance with lek counts, coordinated by the DWR
- NRCS work on the SGI; SGI biologist Tammy Koldyke and other NRCS staff worked with landowners interested in doing proactive sage-grouse habitat work on their properties
- A SGI project on private land included mowing for a lek, water improvements, and fencing to improve grazing management. The project was completed in winter/spring of 2012. Matt Phillippi of NRCS was involved in project planning
- Spring lek-viewing field trip prior to the March 2012 sage-grouse working group meeting
- Installation of additional fence markers in areas near leks where fences may pose a flight hazard to sage-grouse
- Projects designed by BLM, USFS, DWR, and NRCS to improve habitat for sage-grouse. Seven projects were proposed and funded in early 2012 that would likely provide sage-grouse benefits. They include pinyon-juniper removal, weed management, and road closure projects
- Work by the BLM to improve recreation management on the Pony Express Trail, including restrictions on permitted activities in sage-grouse areas

- Continued raven control efforts

Project and Research Highlights

Dugway Proving Grounds has begun exploratory research to determine if sage-grouse are using areas of the DPG. Ground surveys, including pellet counts, were conducted in fall of 2012. Research results are not yet available. If evidence of sage-grouse use is found in the area, further research programs will be considered.

Researchers associated with the WDARM group have been very cautious about conducting research that might disrupt already stressed populations in areas where lek counts have been declining. Although there is a strong interest in documenting sage-grouse use of habitat treatment areas to better understand how sage-grouse are responding to those treatments, no collaring studies are being proposed, in order to minimize disturbance to current vulnerable populations.

Multiple habitat projects have been done recently for sage-grouse. Numbers in parentheses refer to WRI project numbers in the publicly accessible project database. Through the UPCD Central Region team, the WRI and other partners have paid for projects to remove pinyon-juniper encroaching into sage-grouse habitat, manage weeds, and seed or close roads in some cases. Projects completed in 2011 include pinyon-juniper removal in the Government Creek area (1927) and Ibapah (1928). Projects funded for 2012 with sage-grouse as a primary benefiting species, include the Clover Creek Bullhog Phase 4 (2221), The Onaqui East Bench Sagebrush Enhancement project (2220), The East Vernon Habitat Restoration (2292), the West Vernon Part 2: Black Crook (2293), and the Tintic Junction North Squarrose Knapweed Control (2232). Additional projects, particularly those involving pinyon-juniper removal, may be beneficial for sage-grouse long term because, although they are not directly improving habitat, they may provide firebreaks during future fires, or gradually contribute to corridors between isolated sage-grouse populations, if enough PJ is removed long term in the areas (e.g. East Tintic Bullhog (2222)).

Revision of Threat Matrix and Strategies Sections of Local Plan

The threat matrix was revised by the group over a series of meetings extending through the past year and a half (Table 10). Each individual threat level (the intersection of a specific threat and a specific element of the sage-grouse life cycle) in the plan was considered separately. The group debated whether additional information was known, or if conditions had changed from when the plan was written, when considering adjustments to any threat level. Numerous threat levels were adjusted accordingly. The group also clarified the wording of several of the threats. In general, changes from the original threat levels include:

- Decreased concern about home/cabin development
- Decreased concern about disease/parasite issues for sage-grouse
- Increased concern about fire, particularly in winter habitat
- Increased concern about invasive weed issues, particularly cheatgrass and knapweed
- Increased concern about energy development, particularly with regard to transmission lines and renewable energy potential impacts

Map Revisions

During the Governor's Task Force planning process in the spring of 2012, draft statewide maps for Sage-Grouse Management Areas were developed. Unique SGMAs were proposed for the Sheeprocks area and Ibapah. In June 2012, the group provided very detailed recommended edits to the maps. As part of that process, the Goshute Tribe requested that their full land be included in the Utah sage-grouse planning process by inclusion in the maps of any relevant lands for sage-grouse that fall within the boundaries of the Goshute Reservation. Comments were submitted to the state of Utah as part of the plan development process. The final version of the maps are not yet available.

Summary of Major Issues and/or Concerns

The WDARM LWG continued to develop projects and conduct outreach according to the revised strategies and actions in the local conservation plan. In the upcoming year, particular focus will be placed on:

- Public information and outreach activities , specifically those focused on recreational users of sage-grouse habitats
- Continue efforts to engage and assist counties in sage-grouse planning processes, particularly with respect to travel planning and assistance with county-level participation in the governor's sage-grouse planning efforts
- Research planning, as possible, to study the impacts of habitat improvement projects on sage-grouse movements and populations. Research on predation issues as red fox move into the Vernon area may be important to consider.
- Additional proposals for private lands projects to improve sage-grouse habitat where needed
- Additional revisions to the local conservation plan to address new information
- Continued efforts to plan and fund habitat improvement projects, with a strong focus on pinyon-juniper removal and protection of winter habitat areas

Primary threats to sage-grouse in the West Desert include cheatgrass and fire in all habitat areas, and the impacts of dispersed recreation, particularly in the Sheeprocks area. Concerted efforts will be needed to ensure that vegetation management strategies minimize weed concerns, provide firebreaks, and protect critical habitat. Efforts to reduce the negative impacts of recreation on weed dispersal, fire likelihood, and habitat fragmentation will be needed. In addition, predation management to understand and minimize the impacts of red fox invasion on sage-grouse populations appears to be an increasing need, and further discussion will be needed to determine an appropriate course of action.

Table 10. Relative importance/contribution of individual threats to reducing or degrading aspects of sage-grouse populations in the WDARM Resource Area. Threats are described in the “Threat Analysis” section of this Plan. Ranks are defined according to TNC (2005).

Aspects of sage-grouse ecology							
Threat	Population size	Population distribution	Breeding habitat quality	Late summer/fall habitat quality	Winter habitat quality	Connectivity of seasonal habitat types	Connectivity of populations & sub-populations
Altered water distribution	-	Very High	Very High	Medium (all but Ibapah), High (Ibapah)	Low	Low	Medium
Drought	High	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low
Severe winter weather	High	High	-	-	Medium	-	-
Existing and new fences near leks	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	Medium	-
Home and cabin development	-	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Power lines and other tall structures	-	Medium	Medium	Medium	-	Medium	-
Renewable and non-renewable energy development	-	High	Very High	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Roads	-	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Incompatible management of vegetation	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Poaching	High	Low	-	-	-	-	-
Fire in sagebrush communities	-	-	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High	High
Incompatible livestock grazing	Low	Low	High	High	Low	Low	Low
Recreation	Very High	Very High	High	Medium	Very High	Medium	Medium
Invasive/noxious weeds	-	-	Very High	Very High	Very High	High	Medium
Parasites and disease	Low	Low	-	-	-	-	-
Predation	Very High	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Pinyon-juniper encroachment	-	-	High	High	High	High	-
Conversion to agriculture	-	-	Low	Low	-	-	-