

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 1/13/15

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Dorrell Barker (co-chair and rancher), Ted Donaldson (NRCS/UDWR), Leo Harvey (rancher/landowner), Dana Truman (BLM), Robert Thomas (rancher/landowner), Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Ron Patterson (USU Extension), Brandon Steinberg (NRCS), Derris Jones (consultant), Bill Butcher (landowner), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

WRI projects proposed

The majority of the meeting was spent reviewing projects proposed in the Watershed Restoration Initiative database. Lorien explained that the database is a central location for many land management projects in Utah. Projects are proposed by individuals representing a wide variety of entities. Many agencies and private organizations pool money and resources. Then, diverse teams of individual agency staff work together at the regional level to review the projects, and provide suggestions and ideas for working together or improving the project. The projects are focused on improving overall land health and wildlife habitat. The meeting where all projects in this region will be presented is January 14. The projects discussed at this sage-grouse meeting are only the subset of projects that may benefit sage-grouse. It is helpful for the sage-grouse group to review the projects, learn about what is being proposed, and offer and comments, suggestions for changes, or endorsements of the project from a sage-grouse standpoint. The database of projects is publicly available, so anyone can review them. If you want to make comments, you will need to sign up for an account. The web address is <http://wri.utah.gov>

Each project has a unique identifier in the database, a 4-digit number.

3198 is a pinyon-juniper (PJ) removal project in the Hiawatha area. 3590 acres of PJ is proposed to be removed by the lop-and-scatter method, which involves chainsaw crews cutting down the trees that are invading into sagebrush areas.

3365 is the Hiawatha/Miller Phase 2 project. Another PJ removal project, this will improve wildlife habitat in “opportunity area” of the Sage-Grouse Management Area (SGMA). It will be done using a bullhog, which masticates the trees and is better for denser stands of trees that would be difficult to remove in other ways. It essentially mulches the trees onsite. The project design has left some corridors in the PJ that will allow for big game movement. It would take place on Leo’s private land. Leo is interested in having the area become an outdoor classroom and a resource for the community.

3199 is a project to address the dense Thurber fescue on the Tavaputs Plateau. Although it is outside the SGMA, there is a sage-grouse population on Tavaputs that would benefit from

habitat improvement work. Right now the Thurber fescue (grass) is very thick and chokes out the sagebrush and other beneficial plants, making it lower quality habitat for sage-grouse. The Nutter ranch has using a disc to tear up some areas where the grass was established. That happened in the fall. This project is a proposal to put seed of other plants on the area, as well as do some additional discing. The sagebrush in the area is upper elevation mountain big sagebrush, which comes back well after being disturbed. The group discussed the seed mix that would be appropriate. Dana cautioned against using too much yarrow as it can get dominant.

3267 is a PJ removal project on Cottonwood Ridge. It includes 1000 acres of lop and scatter and 1000 acres of bullhog on the Tavaputs Plateau. It will remove the conifers that are encroaching into the sagebrush. The plan is to clear this area completely so the sage-grouse can benefit as much as possible from both habitat improvement and a lack of predator perches. There is a lot of sage-grouse use of surrounding areas, so the hope is that it will be an areas for the birds to use as a transition zone between their summer and winter ranges. This project is particularly important for sage-grouse, although mule deer will also benefit. Most of the money coming for this project is from mitigation money, but WRI is being asked for more to expand the project. It was noted that EnerVest is taking on Bill Barrett's responsibilities. Right now the EIS allows them to disturb up to 1000 acres. About 600 have been disturbed so far, so they will likely be doing mitigation work in order to expand further in the future.

3448 is a PJ chaining on Tavaputs, on Bishop Ridge. The DWR chain is going to be used. That means that an archaeological clearance needs to be done. It will also be seeded after the chaining. Nicole asked for any feedback on improving the seed mix to be most appropriate for the area and elevation.

3271 is a request to help fund a conservation easement in the Emma Park area. It is a high-quality sage-grouse area and the landowners are interested in maintaining it.

Many of the project managers were in attendance at the sage-grouse meeting, so took questions and suggestions during the meeting on their individual projects.

International Sage-grouse Forum recordings

The group had planned to watch a mitigation session recording from the sage-grouse Forum in November, but requested that the link be sent instead so everyone could go home on time.

Landowner Workshop?

Lorien asked if there would be interest locally in holding a workshop for landowners to provide more information on sage-grouse topics. There would likely be interest in getting more information from NRCS about their programs, like how to do a PJ removal project, the realistic timeframe from planning to funding and implementation, how the process works, and success stories. Ted offered to help. Dorrell, Lorien, and Ted will coordinate to identify a time.

The NRCS SGI application deadline is March 20th.

Disturbance Mapping

At the end of the meeting, the baseline disturbance map that was discussed at the last meeting was brought out to be finished. Most of the group left, but several individuals stayed to provide added input. Nicole and Derris will add the last details and then pass the map along to Eric Ellis or Eric Edgely.

Follow-up Needed

- Nicole and Derris will add the last details and then pass the map along to Eric Ellis or Eric Edgely.
- Lorien will send the group a link for the mitigation presentation from the Forum, and any other topics that might be of particular interest.
- Dorrell, Lorien, and Ted will coordinate to identify a time for a landowner workshop.
- Lorien will make sure that future meetings are more conveniently scheduled for ranchers.

Next Meeting:

The spring meeting date was not set, but some particular times of day and month should be avoided problems. Avoiding the 2nd Tuesdays and the 2nd Wednesdays of the month would allow the conservation district folks to attend. Something on the third week of the month would be better; ideally mid-week. Also, 7 pm meetings are better for landowners since many of them get off work at 5 pm and need to do ranch chores before going to any meetings.