

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 10/21/15

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Wade Paskett (UDWR), Klint Eastman (Hunt Oil/Nutter Ranch), Derris Jones (consultant), Ron Patterson (USU Extension), Steve Frischknecht (Sanpete Co), Clint Wirick (USFWS), Ben Nadolski (UDWR), Renee Chi (BLM), Quincy Bahr (BLM), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Listing decision update

Although everyone was already aware, Lorien noted that the USFWS decision in September was to NOT list sage-grouse as either threatened or endangered. The announcement was made the same day that BLM and USFS announced the Record of Decision (ROD) on their plan amendments for sage-grouse. Renee noted that this suggests that the USFWS feels that the BLM and Forest Service efforts are adequate, although everything will be reviewed again in five years to make sure the plans are being implemented.

BLM presentation on new sage-grouse plan amendments

At the last CaCoARM meeting, the group requested that someone from BLM present the new BLM plan amendments to the group. Quincy Bahr and Renee Chi, from the state BLM office, presented the basic tenets and some details of the BLM plans. The discussion took the full two hours of the meeting. Forest Service has a separate record of decision, which was not discussed at this meeting.

The presentation and discussion is summarized below:

- The BLM plan amendments cover three types of areas in Utah, only two of which are relevant in the Price area: priority habitat and general habitat. “Sagebrush Focus Areas” are a third category but are only in northern Utah.
- The areas include where BLM has decision-making authority but not ownership of the surface, such as where BLM manages the mineral estate. Where private land has federal mineral estate underneath it, the private landowner has all surface jurisdiction, except that they need to allow access to the mineral estate. In such instances, the BLM would apply the management from the plan amendments, but only to the minerals development where the agency has jurisdiction.
- Key concepts for how the plan amendments will work:
 - Minimizing additional surface disturbance
 - Improving habitat condition for sage-grouse
 - Reduce threat of fire in sage-grouse habitat
- Absolutely no leases will be rescinded.

- The science about buffer zones is quite varied. The BLM took the approach of using the minimum of what was recommended by the science as a starting point for the different sizes of buffers for different types of activities.
- “Allocations” refer to what types of uses are allowed where. In General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA), there are no new allocations, meaning no areas are opened or closed to particular activities any differently than they were before the amendments. There are several new management actions which apply in the GHMA, however.
- Areas managed as Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA) would have new allocations, such as “open to leasing with a requirement for no surface occupancy” for oil and gas, or “avoidance” for new rights-of-way.
- Wind production, as discussed in the amendments, applies only to commercial wind farms, not little windmills such as those associated with stock tanks.
- One powerline corridor, in Emma Park, was undesignated. There will be no impact on existing lines, but that corridor will not be used for future lines.
- There is a 3% cap on new disturbance.
 - The area used to calculate the amount of disturbance is considered both at a project scale and also a very large scale (the “biologically significant unit,” or BSU), which in the Carbon area includes the PHMA in the Carbon sage-grouse habitat areas in addition to Tavaputs and Anthro mountain. These areas are considered together for this purpose.
 - There is a specific list – provided during the presentation – of what counts toward disturbance calculations. If it is not on that list, it does not count toward disturbance cap calculations. Two-tracks, for example, do not count. Appendix E of the Record of Decision has more detail.
- Vegetation objectives:
 - Quincy and Renee provided a handout based on tables from the ROD that describe the desired conditions for different types of habitat. Page 2-6 (Objective SSS3) and Appendix D have additional detail. The details are to be used unless more relevant local data is available. The relevant text is: *“When using the above indicators and desired conditions to guide management actions or during land health assessments, consider that they are sensitive to the ecological processes operating at the scale of interest and that a single habitat indicator does not necessarily define habitat suitability for an area or particular scale. Indicators must be collectively reviewed, assessed based on the site potential, and put into spatial and temporal context to correctly determine habitat suitability, which will include more than one scale and multiple indicators.”* (p2-6)
 - These vegetation desired conditions are *aspirational* in nature: working toward them, rather than having them immediately in place, will satisfy the requirements.
 - Sagebrush removal and prescribed fire are still tools available for use under the appropriate conditions. They just need to be used carefully.
 - BLM has a goal of about 23,000 treatment acres per year throughout the state (amount varies by area). That’s slightly less than but in the same ballpark as, the state’s habitat improvement acreage goals.
- Mitigation

- There are no set mitigation ratios. The goal is “net conservation benefit” so it will be determined by the local BLM biologist, who needs to document what is being done and why it is appropriate.
- Fire
 - Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool/Team (FIAT) is a model that looked at factors like slope, temperature, and soil, and overlaid it with lek data to identify where to protect current intact habitat. The plan amendments include that tool and how to use it.
- Grazing
 - The basic premise is that proper livestock grazing and sage-grouse habitat are completely compatible.
 - No allotments were closed, and no AUMs have been reduced through the Record of Decision. More info on grazing can be found on pages 2-21 through 2-24.
 - “Improper grazing” as a threat is not that different than existing standards for protective sensitive species generally, in “Standard 3” from existing regulations.
 - The RMP does not include the new process for how lease renewals will incorporate the new sage-grouse details. The BLM will be coming out with additional process information sometime in December.
 - The USFWS was concerned about the time gap between a problem occurring on the ground and getting appropriate actions in place to deal with it. To address that concern, the top of page 2-23 explains that adaptive management will be written into new renewals/modification, essentially providing a threshold with a trigger that has different management options. (i.e. new leases will include the normal and also an “in-case” management option which can be implemented without lengthy bureaucratic paperwork.
 - The core premise is that as long as grazing related actions do not harm grouse (like ponds, fences, etc.), it will be fine.
 - The plan also provides for some options to address other grazing issues to the extent possible, such as wild horses and elk.
 - Working groups can be instrumental in encouraging local discussions and sending messages about local solutions and recommendations to the BLM for particular situation.
- Adaptive management triggers:
 - The plan amendments include “hard” and “soft” triggers for responses in case populations start to decline. They include management decisions which will be able to be implemented to address the problems without having to go through a very long additional process that might be too late. The details of the process are still being worked out, including who the members of the adaptive management team will be and exactly how the process will work.
 - An initial discussion of this is scheduled for tomorrow (10/22) between state, BLM, and possibly others.
- On Dec 22 or before, Internal Memoranda from BLM will address grazing and oil/gas implementation processes.
- Other implementation processes still in development include:

- Vegetation treatments
- Trails and travel
- Adaptive management
- Fire suppression
- Shapefiles are available; Quincy can help provide the right files to anyone who needs them.

As noted above, Forest Service issued its own Record of Decision, so although many features of the plans are similar, questions specifically regarding FS could not be addressed by the BLM during this presentation.

Future meetings, called “Stepping Forward” meetings, are planned in Price, Vernal, and elsewhere. The BLM is reaching out to explain its plans to the public. Quincy will send Lorien the email announcement to forward to the relevant LWGs.

Several individuals expressed concern that no USFS or local BLM staff had attended this meeting. They felt that it is complicated and it would be important that everyone in charge of implementing the plan amendments understood the big picture. Quincy will talk to local and state-level agency representatives about the issue to encourage more participation and engagement in the future.

At a future CaCoARM meeting, issues of contrast between the state and BLM plans may be appropriate.

Follow-up Needed

- Anyone with additional questions about the plan can contact Quincy or Renee directly, or route questions through Lorien.
- Quincy will bring the absence of BLM and USFS employees at this meeting to the attention of relevant state-level supervisors.
- Quincy will send Lorien the email announcement to forward to the relevant LWGs.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will likely be in January. The 20th is the 3rd Wednesday of the month. Lorien will confirm that there are no major conflicts, then announce the meeting over email.