

**CASTLE  
COUNTRY  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date:** 10/29/19

**Place:** BLM office in Price, Utah

**Present:** Bill Butcher (Landowner/PRWCD), Makeda Hanson (UDWR), Kegen Benson (BLM), Stuart Bedke (BLM), Derris Jones, Scott Gibson (UDWR), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Nicole Nielson (UDWR), TJ Cook (UDWR), Ryan Jones (UDAF), Mike McKee (Seven County Infrastructure Coalition), Michael Perkins (HDR), Amy Croft (HDR), Karen Nichols (HDR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

*BLM update*

BLM plan amendments were finalized this spring, and have been in use for the past several months. However, a recent injunction on implementation of those amendments happened on October 16<sup>th</sup>. Until more information is available on how the situation will be resolved, the BLM is currently going back to the 2015 plans. State BLM has asked field offices to send lists of projects that have been approved since the new amendments came out, to see if any of them will need to be revisited. Lorien will notify the group via the listserv of updates.

*Forest Service updates*

Forest Service has also been working on plan amendments for sage-grouse, that would update the 2015 plans. A final EIS was released in August 2019, and it received several protests which were in the process of being worked through when the BLM injunction happened in October. It is not clear how the USFS process may be influenced by the BLM situation, but because the plans had similar changes (for example, removal of GHMA and SFAs), and similar concerned parties (to the lawsuit and the protests), the timeline for the Record of Decision from USFS will likely be extended to resolve those issues.

*Uinta Basin Railroad Proposal*

Mike McKee (Seven-County Infrastructure Coalition) and Karen Nichols (HDR) presented to the group about a proposed railroad coming out of Vernal. A railroad would help meet the need for transport of goods out of the Basin since Highway 40 is the primary route. There are multiple possible rail routes that have been discussed over the years for such a project. Key points:

- The Seven-County Infrastructure Group in a group of seven counties that are a kind of political entity in Utah. They work on regional infrastructure, like broadband. They are the project proponent.
- The Community Impact Board (CIB) approved \$27.9 million to fund the exploration and feasibility studies for a railway link between the Uintah Basin and the Wasatch front. Private funding is available for actually building the railway if and when it is approved.

- The lead federal agency (that coordinates the NEPA process) on the project is the Surface Transportation Board. They are also the relevant licensing agency.
- There are regular interagency planning calls to keep everyone apprised. PLPCO is the coordinating agency for all the state agencies, so the state can speak with one voice regarding the project. Locally in Vernal, TJ Cook is a point person to reach out to with questions.
- From an original 29 possible routes, the scoping period narrowed it down to 3. Originally, routes leaving Vernal going east through Colorado and going west toward Helper were considered, but currently only western routes are being examined.
- One goal is to make sure that it tie into more than one railroad company, so there can be competition.
- The Coalition's preferred route is the Whitmore Park route. Whitmore Park has a small number of landowners and quite a few (five) sage-grouse leks in the proposed rail corridor. The proposed path of the railway is within the existing (although very wide) road corridor. The exact locations are not defined as further engineering work needs to be done.
- Trains would likely be going about 15 miles per hour maximum because of the topography. One estimate of the amount of traffic is about 7 trips per day (including both directions).
- Permitting will require 404/401 permits (from the state on Utah land, and from EPA, on tribal lands). There is an MOU with the Ute tribe and the Coalition has been given access.
- The project timeline calls for a draft EIS in the spring of 202, a final EIS in fall of 2020, and design and construction in 2021-2023.

The main concern for this group is the stretch of rail proposed through Whitmore Park. Many topics were brought up by the group during the discussion, many of which would require additional research or information gathering.

- Time of year and noise studies
- Lack of knowledge about how sage-grouse respond to trains going through
- Amount of disturbance from construction, and restoration expectations
- Options for train timing during lekking season
- Possible ways to leverage a railroad project to address water table, erosion, and wet meadow habitat concerns (mitigation or engineering during the project) that already exist in the project areas.
- Will access roads be needed?
- Access to leks for biologists; safely crossing tracks?
- Any fencing planned, for cattle and sage-grouse safety? (right now no fence is planned, and there are no fences currently marking the road's right-of-way)

Lorien will notify the group when the Draft EIS is available for comment. If the engineers have future updates, they are welcome to request a spot on the agenda for future CaCoARM meetings.

*WRI project updates*

Several projects were discussed briefly:

- A planned burn on BLM and private in the Cayune area, in mixed conifer and aspen
- PJ work on BLM/private (West End Park/Horse Creek)

**Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will keep the group apprised of federal planning updates related to the BLM and Forest Service amendment processes.
- Lorien will notify the group when the railroad draft EIS is available for comment.

**Next Meeting:**

The next meeting will be January 14<sup>th</sup> at 2 pm in the DNR conference room.