

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 11/16/16

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Jim Spencer (NRCS), TJ Cook (NRCS/UDWR), Jared Reese (BLM), Quincy Bahr (BLM), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Staffing changes

Leah Lewis has moved from the NRCS SGI biologist position to a job with BLM in Vernal. She will stay involved in sage-grouse issues. Nathan Roberts replaced Slate Stewart. Lorien will update the listservs.

Short updates

TJ has lots of fence markers. Contact him if you know anyone who needs some.

BLM is working on an EA, managed out of the Moab field office, for large-scale sage-grouse vegetation treatment in this area. It would be nice if it covered full sage-grouse population use areas, rather than only the boundaries of the field office. It covers Tavaputs. The idea is to identify a large planning area as well as specific areas to target inside it. Multiple treatment options are included, to give flexibility for later while still staying within the examined alternatives.

Jim Spencer noted that he attends this meeting from Roosevelt because of the population connection with the Anthro Mountain birds, who drop into Emma Park at times.

Water tables and sage-grouse

The group discussed how to increase the conversations about the relationship between riparian/wet meadow restorations and good sage-grouse habitat. The field tour for next year can look at streams where Beaver Dam Analogues (BDAs) have been used. Jim Spencer has a manual for how to put in BDAs. They are useful because right now Utah's beaver restoration plan only involves certain designated streams. The plan will be revisited in 2020. For now, BDAs can provide similar benefits without the problems associated with beavers being transplanted into areas. The group also discussed the uncertainty associated with how shallow-water wells near wet meadows might impact grouse habitat. It is not happening as much in this area but might be an issue in the future. Any discussions about that should be sure to involve water rights personnel who can answer technical questions.

BLM IMs

Quincy Bahr presented to the group about the seven new BLM instructional Memoranda (IMs) that were released this fall. They provide additional guidance about how to implement the plan amendments for sage-grouse that were approved in 2015 for 98 different BLM plans west-wide. Those plans allow for a large amount of discretion. The IMs are intended to help different field offices interpret that discretion similarly.

Common threads in the IMs include:

- Rangewide procedural consistency and transparency
- Retain flexibility to adapt to local conditions
- Gather monitoring data to support/justify locally-relevant decisions
- Continue to coordinate with stakeholders to identify and consider local conditions

The seven IMs that were released include:

- 2016-139, which addresses how the overall plan implementation is being tracked
- 2016-140, regarding the adaptive management trigger process
- 2016-141, about how grazing permits will be prioritized for review
- 2016-142, on including thresholds and responses in grazing plans as appropriate
- 2016-143, regarding oil and gas implementation
- 2016-144, about monitoring sage-grouse habitat and other areas using standard systems

First, Quincy explained IM 144 on monitoring. AIM is a consistent process for collecting data for many things, including but not limited to sage-grouse. The Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) is an additional system which fits into AIM, but is specific to sage-grouse. Most of the data collected using AIM processes can feed into HAF assessments, although some of AIM is not relevant to HAF. HAF also includes other data gathering that is only relevant for sage-grouse habitat (e.g., sagebrush shape, distance to conifers, etc.).

HAF looks at sage-grouse habitat from four different scales. First order HAF looks at the species range across the West. Second order HAF looks at population areas, and dispersal between sage-grouse populations. HAF third order is relevant to seasonal habitat movements and connectivity at local population scales. Fourth order HAF examines the site-scale experience of sage-grouse, such as habitat suitability in a particular area. First, second, and third order analysis are important for regional and state-level understandings. At the local scale, fourth order HAF data provides the most valuable information to the agency at the site scale.

AIM crews in each field office collect data at AIM points. BLM is currently working on ways to do more points in sage-grouse habitat areas, and include HAF. The core idea is to make data collection more efficient – gathering it once, but using it to answer multiple questions.

Next, Quincy reviewed the two grazing IMs. While these documents focus on grazing, it doesn't mean that grazing is being viewed as a big threat to grouse; but instead that having grazing in so many sage-grouse areas means that it is important to have standard and fair procedures to address any threats to sage-grouse that might be related to grazing. In the IM, the prioritization guidance explains how offices can look at all allotments, and then decide based on dates of renewal, resource concerns, priority versus general habitat, etc. where to focus the time of those working on permit renewals. The IM outlines the internal process to use and decide whether allotment leases can be simply renewed under FLPMA (under the same terms as before) or whether the area needs to be examined more closely and renewed using a new NEPA (EA) process.

If everything is going well in an allotment, there will likely be no reason to change anything. If it is a potential problem, then the system allows that to be dealt with more quickly. Local determinations are very important, and flexibility is provided at the local scale. Quincy noted that there is neither a clear benefit nor specific concerns for grazers who are in priority sage-grouse habitat.

The order for monitoring priorities in the grazing IMs are just an administrative ordering that focused on:

- First years after a new system has been in place (to see if it is working well)
- Soon-to-be-renewed permits (so there is data to use when making decisions)
- Areas with water (lotic and lentic) as they may be more important to sage-grouse and other species, and/or more vulnerable to grazing changes
- Areas where thresholds and responses have been included in new permit renewals, so there is sure to be data to support and response decisions, and
- Areas where livestock might be likely to impact seasonal habitat.

The thresholds concept basically allows adaptive management at a very local scale. Quincy included slides in his presentation on "alternative selection" and "thresholds concepts," which explained it in more detail. The decision to include a threshold or not in a permit renewal is slightly complex. It was noted that "fully processed permit renewals" must include threshold options in the NEPA document. That does not mean that there must be a threshold included in the permit renewal, however, just as one of the alternatives that is considered. If the permit removal isn't "fully processed," say, just a "partially processed renewal," it may not be necessary to consider any thresholds at all in the renewal process.

Thresholds:

- Need to be related to things that are actually feasible to measure
- Ideally would focus on limiting factors, if they are known
- Should not be tripped easily by something really little; for example, would better be determined by multi-year trends rather than one year of data

Evaluating multiple responses (rather than just one) in the NEPA gives a lot more options.

- Responses can be included in the terms of conditions of a permit: if A happens, then B
- Having fewer responses makes it easier to know what might happen, but reduces flexibility for the ranch, so balancing certainty with flexibility will be a challenge
- If you analyze other options in the NEPA, but do not chose them for inclusion in a permit, they can still be included in a new *decision* if needed based on the original NEPA. There is still some process required to do that, but you don't have to repeat the entire NEPA.

Last, Quincy briefly reviewed the IMs on Disturbance Tracking and Oil and Gas.

For disturbance tracking:

- Future approvals (permit renewals, leases, etc.) for the types of projects that are identified in the BLM's disturbance tracking appendix and that will create disturbance will require a polygon form the project proponent that shows the "as-built" final disturbance footprint
- The disturbance calculations will also include tracking reclamation. If sage-grouse are using the area, it can also be pulled out of disturbance, even if it does not meet habitat requirement guidelines.
- An area can be removed from disturbance designation if it is restored to sage-grouse habitat guidelines, even if sage-grouse aren't seen using the area specifically.

For oil and gas:

- The IMs clarify how oil and gas leasing and other decisions will be prioritized.
- It specifically does NOT direct BLM to wait for lower value sage-grouse lands to be leased before higher priority lands.
- It does NOT prohibit leasing in PHMA or GHMA, only makes it lower priority
- All existing rights on leases already issued will be honored.
- Prioritization is per lease: if rejected once the same lease can be requested for consideration again the following year, for example. There is no "never-again" decision made for leases in this process. (i.e. this process does not result in permanent removal of leases for consideration just because they are proposed).

Follow-up Needed

- Jim and Lorien will coordinate to get the BDA document out to those at the meeting and others who would be interested.
- Lorien will add new personnel to the listserv as noted.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting was not set. Evening meetings were set so that landowners could attend, but mostly agency staff have been attending recently. The group discussed having fewer evening meetings (perhaps only in winter) but others mid-day to accommodate different attendees.