

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 11/6/13

Place: DWR office in Price, Utah

Present: Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Dana Truman (BLM), Ted Donaldson (DWR/NRCS), Nicole Nielson (DWR), Brad Crompton (DWR), Slate Stewart (UDAF GIP), Terry Messmer (USU Extension), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Introductions and Announcements

At the last meeting, there was discussion about merging the CaCoARM (a.k.a. Carbon-Emery, or Castle Country) sage-grouse group and the Uintah Basin group, there were several reasons to keep the groups separate. This includes distance, need to keep local landowners engaged, and strong effort from all the counties involved. The previous evening (Nov 5), Rex Sacco hosted a meeting for ranchers the previous evening, focused on the Draft EIS from BLM/USFS.

USU Extension will be hosting two conferences in the upcoming year. In February, there will be a Utah Sage-Grouse Summit in Salt Lake. Then in November of next year, Utah will host a national sage-grouse Forum, also in Salt Lake City, with support from the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). More details will be announced soon.

Federal Planning Update

Lorien presented the basics of the Draft EIS released by BLM and USFS in early November. This document outlines the possible sage-grouse stipulations that will be used to amend Forest Service and BLM Land Management Plans in Utah. There are five alternatives presented. Chapter 2 of the DEIS compares these alternatives.

- Alternative A is “no action.” This would mean that existing regulations and processes would not change. We know that this does not meet the USFWS’s requirements for “adequate regulatory mechanisms,” but it is useful as a point of comparison on specific strategies within the document, such as how many acres are currently open or closed to certain uses now, as compared with the other alternatives.
- Alternative B is based on the National Technical Team (NTT) report. This report was an addendum to the BLM’s Instructional Memorandum 2012-043. It presents suggestions for conservation measures to protect sage-grouse, based on science. Alt. B incorporates those suggestions into proposed regulations for the BLM and USFS.
- Alternative C is the most conservation-focused alternative. It is based heavily on public input from environmental organizations such as Western Watersheds Project and Wild Earth Guardians. It is split into two sub-alternatives, C1 and C2. One major difference between those sub-alternatives is how grazing is suggested to be regulated. One

alternative proposes reductions, while the other proposes elimination of grazing in sage-grouse habitat.

- Alternative D is the alternative proposed by the BLM and Forest Service. It covers every topic that must be addressed. In many cases, it goes into more detail than the other alternatives.
- Alternative E is based on the Utah Governor's Sage-Grouse Plan. Because the Utah plan also addresses issues outside the jurisdiction of the BLM and USFS, only aspects of the state plan that are relevant to federal lands are included. There are two sub-alternatives for E as well. E1 is based on Utah's plan. E2 is based on Wyoming's plan, because several small pieces of federal land managed out of Utah are within Wyoming's borders.

The Alternative preferred by both the BLM and the USFS is Alternative D. (Although the two federal agencies are working together, each agency must make its own decisions.) The final decision will probably incorporate elements from several alternatives.

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS. The working groups will all meet before that deadline. Anyone wishing to make comments through the working groups will have a chance to do so.

The BLM is holding a series of open houses held around the state if anyone wants to ask questions or see larger maps of the DEIS. If you go to the meetings, you will likely get more out of it if you have read parts of the DEIS already and have specific questions for the people there. Lorien will email the LWG list with a reminder about the closest open house.

Brad noted that he would like to understand the oil and gas impacts sections. Lorien has not read them, but there are several areas of the EIS that address those resources. Anyone who would like help finding specific information in the EIS can contact Lorien.

State Sage-Grouse Plan Update

Terry is on the state team to implement the state plan. That group is moving slowly forward but has some challenges. Their next meeting will be in February, in conjunction with the Utah Sage-Grouse Summit mentioned earlier.

The role of the LWGs in implementing the state plan is likely to be critical, but still needs definition. Among the opportunities will be working toward the habitat management and easement goals set out in objectives 2, 3, and 4. Providing feedback on finer-scale mapping and engaging local landowners will also be critical.

Terry explained that an important component of the state plan, which will require mitigation for disturbances in sage-grouse habitat, is to develop a baseline from which to calculate disturbance. Right now, a team from USU is working on that. They will have a product early next year to share with the state and the LWGs.

One aspect of the Utah Sage-Grouse Summit will also be a discussion of what each LWG can do to implement the state plan.

Other Research Updates

Terry is working with many current and former graduate students to publish peer-reviewed publications on sage-grouse in Utah. That information will be very helpful in implementing both state and BLM/USFS plans that are appropriate to Utah's sage-grouse populations.

Terry shared a case study of winter habitat management at Deseret Land and Livestock that highlights the need to identify critical winter range and ensure that it is managed appropriately. Terry is working with Todd Black to publish a winter habitat model for identifying potential critical sage-grouse winter range areas in Utah. Presentations at some of the regional UPCD meetings are planned. Once it is final, the model will be available online.

At the Utah Summit in February, there will be research updates in an accessible format, so that the state plan implementation team, LWG members, and others can learn about the most recent research findings. A suggestion was made that some of those research presentations be given as "dry-runs" at the LWG meetings in January.

Also, the DWR is working to get the lek locations "declassified" so that it is easier to implement management stipulations related to those locations. This is to address the issue that asking people to manage land near leks differently, but not explaining where those leks are, does not make sense.

This LWG: Identify and Function

The group discussed the importance of continued landowner engagement in local the sage-grouse conservation efforts. Everyone agrees that in the future, the CaCoARM group meetings should be in the evenings, and coordinated to maintain the local landowner involvement.

Dorrell, a local rancher, is the co-chair of CaCoARM. Also, Rex Sacco functions as a critical coordinator of sage-grouse efforts in the local area.

Projects

Several LWG members interested in discussing range management projects for sage-grouse were unable to stay for the meeting because they were meeting with a rancher. At future meetings, the topic of grazing projects will be continued. There is an opportunity to track grazing improvements and document the benefits to sage-grouse. In addition, Rex Sacco mentioned at the previous days' meeting that the local ranchers were very interested in the opportunities for a

mitigation bank.

Energy Updates

Bill Barrett Corporation has entered into an agreement to sell their West Tavaputs interests to a company named EnerVest. The original EIS, which has many sage-grouse stipulations, still applies, but the new company may have a different focus. They also may appreciate updates. Nicole will contact the new company to let them know about the LWG once the agreement has been finalized. There are still some winter habitat mitigation issues.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will email the LWG list with a reminder about the BLM Draft EIS open house in Price in December
- Lorien will provide the LWG members an opportunity to comment on the DEIS via the local working group without attaching names, if requested.
- As feasible, research presentations prepared for the Utah Summit will be given as “dry-runs” at the LWG meetings in January.
- At future meetings, address topics of grazing management and mitigation banking opportunities.
- Nicole will contact the new company on West Tavaputs to invite them to the LWG once the sale is finalized.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be on January 21 in the evening, coordinated with Rex Sacco’s landowner group.