

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 12/9/14

Place: City Planning and Zoning office in Price, Utah

Present: Rex Sacco (Carbon County), Steve Frischnect (Sanpete County), Clint Wirick (USFWS), Eric Ellis (UDWR), Ted Donaldson (NRCS/UDWR), Jeanie Jensen (rancher), Jared Reese (BLM), Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Ron Patterson (USU Extension), Brandon Steinberg (NRCS), Derris Jones (consultant), Bill Butcher (landowner), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Pinyon-juniper strategy maps

Eric Ellis explained the state pinyon-juniper encroachment strategy and mapping. Based on conversations with local biologists, several priority areas for pinyon-juniper that will benefit sage-grouse have been identified. Phase I and Phase II encroachment areas were identified using the new NRCS PJ layer. Then local biologists help identify areas where sage-grouse nesting, brood rearing, lek areas, or winter habitat might be able to be improved by removal of those trees. Three colors for the polygons were identified, indicating the urgency of the concern (whether it should be dealt with in the next 2, 5, or 10 years). It is expected that the polygons will all be ground-truthed before projects are proposed for funding. Also, because the source database was not very accurate in the 0-10% PJ density range, there may be key areas that could be treated simply and cheaply that should be high priority now, although they are not shown here. It was noted that Emma Park has many very lightly scattered trees that might need to be addressed.

If anyone in the working group feels that key areas have been left out of these polygons, they should contact Eric Ellis. Once the polygons are available for download so managers can use them, Eric will send something out to the LWGs through Lorien. Nicole offered to be the point person for edits to the polygons if people have suggestions for additions or edits to these areas.

Eric noted that most of the sage-grouse habitat in the CaCoARM area is not affected by PJ encroachment. Several people in attendance at the meeting said that projects were already being proposed for some of those areas. For example, a large portion of the North Spring area (the colored polygons near the southern tip of the Carbon SGMA) is being proposed for WRI project by Ronnie at DWR, and should be in the WRI database in January. The area is a mix of federal, state, and private land.

Projects proposed locally

There are several projects proposed locally for pinyon-juniper removal. Jared (BLM) and Robbie (DWR) are working together to propose a WRI project near and north of the gun range up on Horse Bench. It will likely include bullhog and lop-and-scatter. In the first phase, there

will also be opportunities for individuals to cut fence posts. The second phase will be near Hiawatha (which is at the very bottom of the SGMA). A third phase will be further north. NEPA, through an EA, analyzed about 21,000 acres. 12,000 of those acres were identified for treatment. 5000 are on BLM, and the rest are either on SITLA or private land. Some of the funding will be through mitigation from energy fields in the area. Ted noted that many landowners in the vicinity have put in SGI applications (some of which will be contracted). The combined efforts allow the habitat improvement work to be done on a landscape scale in a strategic way. Derris noted that in this southern area, much of the habitat improvement will benefit big game much more than sage-grouse, but there may also be sage0grouse benefits.

Another proposed project, on the Tavaputs (Cottonwood Ridge) is out of the SGMA but will still benefit local sage-grouse. Originally, mitigation was identified so that Bill Barrett could drill during the seasonal closure time. 2070 acres of PJ removal is proposed to remove encroachment into sagebrush areas. Brad noted that he has some collared grouse in the area. There is currently \$350,000 available from Bill Barrett. WRI will be asked in January through a project proposal. Other companies may also be interested.

Rex feels that the Tavaputs, despite its sage-grouse populations, was not included in the SGMA because the West Tavaputs EIS, from 2010, includes appropriate management stipulations already.

Lorien asked Eric how this kind of mitigation fit into the state sage-grouse plan. Eric explained that Alan Clark is working on that, but private lands will be voluntary.

International Sage-grouse Forum updates

Lorien and several other individuals provided an overview of sessions from the international Sage-Grouse Forum. The group expressed interest in having a more detailed availability of the videos so that individual presenters could be more quickly located and watched.

Additional Topics

Lorien asked the group what presentations or information would be of interest at future meetings. The group would like to hear from Todd Black or Rick Danvir about DLL. Also, watching the mitigation presentations from the Forum would be of interest. The next meeting was set for Jan 13th at 5 pm in the DNR office.

The NRCS SGI deadline will be coming up. It may be at the end of March but the date is not yet set.

Disturbance Mapping

Eric explained the purpose of the disturbance maps. The group did some identification of areas jointly, but then at the end of the meeting, several individuals stayed to help identify unknown areas. Nicole Nielson has the map and will continue gathering input to make sure the areas are

all labeled appropriately. Lorien will send Nicole and Brad Derris the password to access the online data to make it easier to finish, and provide a deadline for doing so.

Follow-up Needed

- If anyone in the working group feels that key areas have been left out of the PJ priority polygons, they should contact Eric Ellis. Once the polygons are available for download so managers can use them, Eric will send something out to the LWGs through Lorien.
- Lorien will send the disturbance map password, and a deadline, to Nicole and Derris.
- Lorien will let the group know about proposed WRI projects in the area that should be reviewed by the group before the UPCD meeting on the 14th.
- Lorien will send Rex the full email list for the listserv so Lorien and Rex can be using the same lists.
- Lorien will work with the CBCP team to make the online videos from the Sage-grouse Forum more accessible.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be January 13, at 5 pm. This will allow time for project discussion and comments before the local UPCD/WRI project meeting on the 14th. The CaCoARM meeting location will be moved to the DWR offices to accommodate more people around the table.