

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 4/18/18

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Jim Spencer (NRCS), Dorrel Barker (co-chair and landowner), Ryan Jones (UDAF), Roger Barton (UDAF), Charlie Holtz (SGI/Pheasants Forever), Bill Butcher (landowner), Eric Thacker (USU Extension), John Sampinos (rancher), Matthew Thayne (UDWR), TJ Cook (NRCS/UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Dana Truman (BLM), Klint Eastman (Preston Nutter Ranch), Derris Jones (wildlife consultant), Jim Greenan (UDAF), Veronica Kratman (BLM), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Nicole Neilson (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Grazing and Sage-grouse

Eric Thacker, USU Range Extension Specialist, presented to the group about the connection between sage-grouse and grazing. He reviewed what the literature has said to date on this topic, how the regulatory environment has changed recently with regard to grazing management in sage-grouse habitat areas on federal land, and then discussed riparian area grazing and plant recovery.

One topic from his presentation was about changes in how grass height has been measured over the years to determine its relationship to grouse nesting success. Because unsuccessful nests were measured earlier in the season than successful ones, some of the grass height stipulations in federal policy are being reconsidered. Grass height still is an important factor, but overall range health may be more important than exact stubble height.

Eric also explained what new studies are finding about how grazing impacts sage-grouse. For example, early heavy grazing seems to lead to declines for sage-grouse (perhaps because of how cool season grasses respond to grazing), whereas late season heavy grazing may be positive for grouse. Eric explained how different factors, such as the time, timing, and intensity of grazing, and how much of a plant can be eaten for it to still recover, factor into these questions. In riparian areas, he explained how periods of rest can help riparian plants recover. There is not a one-size fits all prescription, and each area may have specific circumstances that influence range health and sage-grouse habitat quality.

Research Project

Brad Crompton updated the group on the sage-grouse collaring study being done on near the Scofield and Emma Park leks. A number of birds have been collared this year and last. Brad

presented data on movements from 5 Scofield birds and 8 Emma Park/Whitmore birds. Although the data is preliminary, it shows that the birds move between different leks. Brad will look at the data to see if it suggests any leks or other valuable habitat that is currently unknown. One of the birds spent time in a project area done for Bill Barret mitigation. Brad will continue to follow the birds' movements, and a few additional collars will be put out soon as well.

Improved statewide habitat mapping

Eric Thacker presented information prepared by Michel Kohl from USU, who was unable to attend the meeting.

USU is using past sage-grouse locations and many other data layers to extrapolate where good grouse habitat is. This process takes the attributes of points where collared sage-grouse were found, and then finds other points on the landscape that are similar even though we don't have a specific grouse data point there. The researchers at USU will be able to provide maps that show habitats that are like those used by collared grouse, which expands our understanding of where grouse may be spending time, not just where specific collared grouse spend time. This will be very helpful for project planning in the future. These maps will be available statewide sometime in 2019, and should be helpful for coordinating maps and habitat designations between different agencies as well.

Mitigation program update

The state sage-grouse mitigation program rule has been finalized. If federal agencies or others require mitigation for permanent disturbance to sage-grouse habitat, private landowners will have an opportunity to develop credits and sell them to the disturbers. An article will be coming out in the upcoming USU working group (CBCP) newsletter with some details. Anyone interested in exploring this option can contact Lorien and she will put you in touch with people who can help landowners get involved.

Two questions, which Lorien will follow up with Alan to answer, were:

- Could wet meadow improvement projects potentially count as mitigation?
- Will sagebrush removal projects be considered for credit generation, and if so under what circumstances?

Field tour planning

The group expressed interest in viewing sage-grouse habitat (or similar habitat, even if not occupied) in good condition and also some riparian areas to have a chance to consider the good end of habitat quality. The Forest Service has been considering a riparian tour as well; it was suggested that we combine forces and to the tour together. The group also wanted to invite the Parker Mountain sage-grouse group to join us as a possible tour location on the Manti-La Sal is between the two areas. June would be a good time. Lorien will follow up with Dave Dahlgren and the Forest Service to propose some June dates, then send out a doodle poll to the group.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will follow with Alan Clark on the mitigation questions.
- Lorien will send Roger Barton the USFS memo on grazing management changes
- Lorien will work with Nicole, Matt, and Dave Dahlgren to schedule the field tour.

Next Meeting:

Lorien will send out a doodle to schedule a June field tour, after contacting the Parker group and the Forest Service about coordination.