

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 4/22/15

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Dorrell Barker (co-chair and rancher), Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Sue Bellagamba (TNC), Steve Frischknecht (Sanpete Co), Jeanie Jensen (Tavaputs Ranch), Clint Wirick (USFWS), Steve Christensen (Sun Advocate), Blair Eastman (Hunt Oil/Nutter Ranch), Derris Jones (consultant), Daniel Eddington (UDWR), Klint Eastman (Hunt Oil/Nutter Ranch), Bill Butcher (landowner), Ben Nadolski (UDWR), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Roget Barton (UACD), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Terry Messmer, (USU Extension), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Population updates

After introductions, Brad Crompton provided updates on sage-grouse population trends in the Carbon SGMA and Tavaputs area. He noted that this springs counts showed record high counts of males. Average number of males per lek were also up considerably in the Tavaputs area, while they remained relatively steady (about 19 males/lek) in the Carbon SGMA. The high counts in Tavaputs are a benefit of a dry winter – the area was much more accessible than usual.

Brad noted that helicopter surveys had located a new lek in the Emma Park area. Also, there has been an improvement in the well and compressor area – when the compressor was initially put in, all the males (up to 75 in the past) left the area. Now that the compressor has been modified to quiet it, birds are starting to return.

Terry Messmer noted that lek counts are up elsewhere in the state as well. In Box Elder, everything appears to be happening at least two weeks early due to the unusually mild winter. Sage-grouse population fluctuations have a lot to do with the timing and amount of spring moisture. He noted that statewide, 48 new leks have been discovered since 2007.

Right now, there are three collared birds on Tavaputs, and there will be more this summer. A lot of VHF collars will go on this summer.

Listing update on the Bi-state population

Terry Messmer updated the group on a recent FWS decision regarding the bi-state (California-Nevada) distinct population segment. The Service found the bi-state population to be not warranted for listing. This is a big success for many people and agencies that have put a huge amount of effort and energy into making sure that local efforts are adequate to protect the bird. Over \$30 million has reported been spent in the area, including conservation easements and other work. It is difficult to say for certain how this reflects on the greater sage-grouse decision, which

covers a much larger area and many more birds, but is an interesting development.

Governor's Executive Order and State Plan Implementation

Terry Messmer explained that the Governor recently issued an executive order that provided more detail and “teeth” for how state agencies should implement the state sage-grouse plan from two years ago. In essence, it provides direction for agencies to work together, and ensures that any agency which might act in ways that impact sage-grouse be sure to consult with the state wildlife agency (UDWR). The UDWR also have a greater record-keeping requirement associated with those coordination efforts.

Ben Nadolski explained that he has taken over the position vacated by Eric Ellis. One of his first tasks was to help negotiate and write the MOUs between state agencies related to the executive order. Those will be in place shortly. Ben is the point person for much of the implementation of the state sage-grouse plan. Terry noted that one significant development is that the legislature has funded the LeRay McAllister fund with one million dollars for sage-grouse easements. This will be very helpful in providing matching funds for easements which require partial non-federal match.

Someone asked what the status of the relationship between the Carbon and Uintah Basin groups is, and whether those areas had been merged. Although there was discussion initially when Lorien took over from Todd as the facilitator of the CaCoARM sage-grouse group, it quickly became clear that the groups did not want to merge. The Carbon SGMA (and the Tavaputs area, which is not in an SGMA) are the focus of the CaCoARM group. The Uintah SGMA (which covers Diamond Mountain and adjacent areas in Uintah, Daggett, and Duchesne Counties, is the focus for the Uintah Basin working group (UBARM).

Terry mentioned that the boundaries of the SGMAs can be adjusted by petition, from sage-grouse local working groups or others, if the biological basis for them looks incorrect. Boundaries can be changed to remove areas if it can be shown that an area does not really contain sage-grouse, or new areas included if that is also scientifically defensible. Currently, SGMAs contain habitat which is where approximately 94% of Utah's sage-grouse live.

Upcoming Pinyon-Juniper projects

Nicole noted that there are several PJ removal projects planned for this summer, including near Hiawatha, on Cottonwood, and on Tavaputs. The group briefly discussed the difference between the lop-and-scatter method of PJ removal (mechanical but removing individual trees, generally via chainsaw crews) and the bullhog method (which involves a large shredder machine that “masticates” the trees. The projects may have varying benefit for sage-grouse depending on their proximity to currently occupied habitat, but all have the potential to improve the area for sage-grouse in the long term.

BLM process update

The BLM and USFS have been working for several years on a very large Environmental Impact Statement that will provide the detail to amend all BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) and Forest Service Forest Plans (FPs) in areas with sage-grouse habitat. That document is very close to being finalized and will likely be released in the next few months. It is currently undergoing final administrative processes.

Terry explained that USU has helped develop sage-grouse guidelines for this state that are based on data from Utah. The guidelines used in most situations were developed in Idaho, which has higher precipitation and other sagebrush habitat characteristics different from some areas in Utah, so the goal was to provide more detailed local information on what sage-grouse use and need in this state. Dave Dahgren has been the lead on that project. One upcoming challenge will be developing a way to monitor and make project-level decisions based on that information, once it is completed.

Open questions

Someone asked how sage-grouse movements vary across the state of Utah. Terry Messmer explained that there are over 35,000 data points in the database we have. One thing those data show is that our birds are often space limited, and one way to help them is to increase the amount of good habitat available to them. In general, though, each population varies with how much it moves. Some populations migrate longer distances, and others stay very much in the same small areas. This is why having the local data we have really helps us understand population needs at a local level.

Terry also explain what other research is coming out soon. A long-term study on Deseret Land and Livestock will show what happened over many years of sagebrush vegetation treatments in that area of Rich County. It will also mention the Three Creeks area. Terry noted that the governor's sage-grouse plan, while it does not ban sagebrush treatments, does require a greater level of scrutiny on those projects when they are proposed to make sure they will not be detrimental to sage-grouse.

Another upcoming study will involve monitoring both cows and sage-grouse simultaneously to see how both species respond to one another and other conditions on the ground. That will be a three-year study.

Steve asked how drops in male leks counts are reflected in population trends. It depends on what trend, but it definitely can be seen in the average-males-per-lek trend. Terry explained that studies have looked at whether those trends tell us anything about next success, and it was found that male counts at leks to track with female nest success, so it was determined that counting males does give us valuable population information. The fluctuations in counts are a big reason why the ten-year-rolling average, not just any one years' numbers, are what biologists use to inform management decisions.

Terry mentioned that one interesting new research finding involved two groups of birds on Parker Mountain, and it found that nest success was very strongly correlated to diet of the hens before they went to nest. The level of a certain chemical found in sagebrush, called turpene B, was highly related.

Someone asked whether the disturbance maps we worked on at past meetings are available. Ben Nadolski agreed to check to see if they are accessible. If so, Lorien will send out the link for that to the listserv.

Field tour planning

The group discussed options for a summer field tour. There was interest in visiting the Porfrey bench area and if possible witnessing the machines in action during a bullhog. The Helper chaining would also be an area to visit to see a past PJ removal project. Nicole will work with Lorien to develop a tour plan and find a date that would work.

Easement discussion

Sue Bellagamba, with The Nature Conservancy, explained that TNC is currently working on five possible easements for sage-grouse, one locally and four in Box Elder County. Butch and Jeanie Jensen are pursuing a conservation easement on their property, which includes some great sage-grouse habitat and a newly discovered lek. NRCS has granted 75% of the easement cost, and they are now looking for the remaining 25% through a habitat council application. Having a letter of support from the LWG for this project as a benefit to sage-grouse would be very valuable. The group discussed the possibility and was supportive. Bill Butcher moved to have the group provide a letter of support, and Roger Barton seconded. Dorrell Barker will work with Rex Sacco to draft a letter, circulate it to the group, and then Dorrell will sign as co-chair.

Next meeting dates

The next sit-down meeting will be scheduled once the BLM FEIS is out for discussion. Because the release date is not certain, the group did not set a date, but we will stick with the regular meeting date/time of the 3rd Wednesday of the month. If Quincy Barr or someone else from BLM can come to the meeting to address questions, that would be ideal. The field tour date will be determined based on when we can get to the field to see equipment working on a PJ removal project.

Follow-up Needed

- Nicole will work with Lorien to develop a field tour plan and find a date that would work.
- Lorien will send out the link for the disturbance maps if they are available online.
- Dorrell Barker will work with Rex Sacco to draft a letter, circulate it to the group, and then Dorrell will sign as co-chair.

- Lorien will work on arranging a meeting when Quincy Barr or another appropriate BLM representative can come to answer questions about the BLM FEIS.

Next Meeting:

As noted above, the field tour and next meeting dates are dependent on project schedules and the release of the BLM FEIS. Once those are determined, Lorien will work with the co-chairs and tour coordinators to determine a date.