

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 9/20/17

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Derris Jones (wildlife consultant), TJ Cook (NRCS/UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Michael Asch (USFWS), Jared Reese (BLM), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Quincy Bahr (BLM), Ben Nadolski (DNR/PLPCO), Todd Thorne (Carbon County), Dana Truman (BLM), Scott Gibson (UDWR), Veronica Kratman (BLM), Leah Lewis (BLM), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Charlie Holtz (SGI/Pheasants Forever), Roger Barton (UDAF), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

North Springs Habitat Enhancement Project

Dana Truman explained to the group that a long-planned project, a proposed PJ treatment called North Springs, has an environmental assessment (EA) out for comment. Because there is an EA, the BLM did a press release. There was a story about the project recently in the Salt Lake Tribune. The group was curious why this project, which is similar to many others done over recent years, got attention, especially since it is just like many other projects for PJ removal that happen around the state with WRI funding each year.

The EA covers a large total area (76,799 acres) of mixed landownership above Porphyry Bench, of which about 8000 acres would be actual treatment area. Areas proposed for treatment are about half in sage-grouse priority habitat (PHMA) and half in general (GHMA): approximately 4000 acres of each. Anecdotally, there used to be sage-grouse in the area. Long ago (prior to the Strawberry translocations), sage-grouse translocations were tried in the area.

The group expressed support for the proposed PJ project. It was noted during the conversation that many times projects only get negative comments even if they are good projects with strong support, as supportive comments are less likely to be submitted. Lorien will make a formal comment to the BLM to the effect that the LWG is supportive of the proposal and feels that the treatments would provide wildlife habitat benefits in the area. The evening of the meeting day was the deadline for comments to be most valuable, but comments will be taken afterward also.

BLM Secretarial Order Update

Quincy Bahr presented information on the recent Interior Secretary's order #3353, regarding federal sage-grouse plans. The order initiated a 60-day review, which was done by a team of individuals from Interior who worked with states (via the state membership on the Sage-Grouse Task Force). The intent was to find ways to strengthen state-federal collaboration on sage-grouse conservation, and not limit economic development. The intention is not to gut the federal

plans, and also be careful not to change things so much that it could put the “not warranted” decision in jeopardy.

The 60-day review resulted in a 13-page report that outlines possible changes. It included short-term and long-term possible changes. These changes might include editing the IMs that were released after the plan amendments, or identifying and clarifying where the flexibility in the plan is. Some changes might just involve “clarification” and be taken care of with internal BLM actions. Others, such as mapping changes, might involve plan amendments in order to be implemented. The report also identified opportunities for improved coordination between state and federal efforts. A key point in the report is that not all changes may be relevant to all states. Quincy explained that the specific process for addressing the points in the report is still being determined. There will be a lot of coordination between the BLM and the state of Utah, especially as the state plan is currently being revised.

Lorien will send a links or relevant documents to the sage-grouse listservs. The link to the report is https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/uploads/so3353_memo_coverletter_report_080717.pdf

Quincy encouraged everyone to read through the report and see if there are needs (particularly local needs) that were not identified in the plan that should be considered. Any feedback can be provided to Ben Nadolski, who is coordinating the state of Utah’s input.

State sage-grouse plan update process and input

Ben Nadolski explained that the state of Utah is doing an update of the state sage-grouse plan. This coming February will mark 5 years of the plan. Ben is doing a thorough review of all the elements of the plan, including map boundaries, objectives, threat explanations, and many other components. He is meeting with all the local working groups as well as many other entities that may have feedback or an interest in how the plan is implemented.

Ben presented each objective in the plan, as well as the map, and requested feedback from the group in three categories: What would you keep, what would you change, and what else should we be considering? Ben took detailed notes on the groups’ recommendations. Key topics of discussion were as follows:

- Mapping: there are opportunity areas, or non-habitat areas, in the Carbon SGMA boundary which are not very accurate. The lines and designations on the map are not what drive on-the-ground habitat project choices. The inclusion of the farthest west section of habitat also has created a less-than-ideal boundary area that may not make sense, and could be revisited.
- Population objectives: the group discussed the calculation of the ten-year rolling average objective at some length, with the general conclusion that no method is perfect. The current method seemed reasonable. Similarly, the population viability objective seems overall solid, although the definition of viability could be debated. There is a substantial difference between how the rigid requirements of the federal plans contrast with the

flexibility that the state has. The state can have more open-to-interpretation objectives like this in a way that federal plans cannot. It is helpful to be aware of how the federal plan might interpret a state objective, as the work on bringing the two plans into closer agreement takes place.

- Habitat objectives: The group was supportive of combining the habitat “increase” and “improvement” categories, as has been done for some time. This also connects to how irrelevant the “opportunity area” maps are on the ground. Conceptually, they are useful, but drawing the line between habitat improvement and increases is difficult. One objective that includes the acreage for both types of habitat work will be easier to measure. After discussion, the group concluded that the 75,000 acres/year goal was probably still realistic, at least for another 5-year plan.
- Regarding the objective for permanent protection, the group discussed a number of complexities, including the longer-timeframe (longer than one year) than most easement processes take. Work done to meet this goal in the past five years may have taken much of the lower-hanging fruit, and it may be difficult to meet the acreage goal. Consideration of other measures of effectiveness rather than acreage put into permanent protection, such as the imminence of development threat to a parcel, might be more meaningful ecologically.
- Mitigation: this was not discussed much given that the mitigation rule will soon be out for public comment again, and will then be incorporated into the plan.
- Threats: One threat that currently is given less focus in the plan is weed management issues, beyond just cheat grass. There is a rising awareness of weed issues that will likely be reflected in the updated state plan. Similarly, water availability and mesic issues were not a focus of the original 2013 state plan, but should be reflected in the new one.

Ben will be meeting with many groups this fall, and plans to work on incorporating the comments into a new draft of the plan in early winter before the legislative session begins.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will submit a public comment to BLM on the group’s behalf regarding the North Springs EA
- Lorien will read the BLM report
- Lorien will send the report and Quincy’s presentation out to the listserv
- When the mitigation rule is put out for public comment again, Lorien will send it out to the listservs for all the LWGs.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be November 15 at 5 pm at DNR. It is not clear whether holding meetings in the evenings actually makes it easier for landowners to attend, as was intended. This next meeting will still be in the evening, but we will likely begin meeting during business hours in the spring, fall and summer months next year.