

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 1/14/20

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Nicole Nielson (UDWR), Bill Butcher (Landowner/PRWCD), TJ Cook (UDWR), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Derris Jones, Charlie Holtz (Pheasants Forever), Clint Wirick, Jared Reese (BLM), Tyler Nelson (BLM), Kegen Benson (BLM), Todd Thorne (Carbon County), Scott Gibson (UDWR), Makeda Hanson (UDWR), Karen Nichols (HDR), Michael Perkins (HDR), Amy Croft (HDR), Heather Talley (UDWR, remotely), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator, remotely)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Lorien joined the meeting remotely by google hangouts, due to winter road conditions.

Uinta Basin Railroad update

Karen Nichols provided an update on the railroad. They are on schedule, working toward a decision at the end of the year. The scope of study was released in December 2019, and they are aiming to have the Draft EIS out in June. The three alternatives in the EIS will be Whitmore Park, Indian Canyon, and Wells Draw.

The Whitmore Park alternative is 88 miles long, including 18 miles through sage-grouse management areas, largely on private land and in Carbon County. The proposed path goes very close to multiple active leks. This is the project proponent's preferred alternative.

The group inquired about general plans, to understand what the impacts might be:

- Plans are for up to 9.8 trains per day, which means that there would be a need for multiple “meets and passes,” therefore multiple sidings. This is up from an original estimate of 7 trains/day. Maybe sidings would be needed. They are needed at tunnels, and one at Kyune. Other location options are under review.
- With deep washes, the group wondered if they would be filled or bridged. Most likely large concrete culverts would be used. How to handle debris flow may be a challenge. There may be opportunities for erosion control proactively when these are being put in. It was noted that there are pros and cons to going further upslope, but it could influence watershed protection and habitat fragmentation positively in some cases to do so.
- Impacts to sage-grouse are of obvious concern. Discussion included whether there would be tall structures (limited, but signal poles would be); fencing (the right-of-way would likely not be fenced); and overhead power (no clear answers on that yet).
- Weed management: whose job would that be? Probably the railroad would be responsible for weed management. It would be owned and operated by Rio Grande Pacific.
- Mitigation options and opportunities are under discussion as well. It could be either

mitigation projects or easement purchases; probably both. There would certainly be projects, and if anyone has specific ideas, Karen would be interested to hear them.

BLM policy updates

Jared Reese provided an update on the planning process. The 2019 Plan Amendments are still on hold. The big critiques in court included lack of analysis of cumulative impacts, removal of GHMA without adequate explanatory justification, and changes made in the federal stance on compensatory mitigation which were not analyzed, among other concerns. A supplemental EIS (SEIS) will address the substantive issues which were raised. That means that until any changes are made, BLM is working under the 2015 Amendments, which means that GHMA is back, and that the requirement for net conservation gain on disturbance projects is back. The Habitat assessment framework didn't change between drafts, so that is still moving forward. Right now there is not a lot happening with plan maintenance, which would be a separate process to address more logistical and non-substantive issues that were improved in the transition from 2015 to 2019 plans.

The seasonal habitat maps, a project in with USU, are still in progress. Hopefully they will be sent to biologist for review again within a month or two.

USFS is holding off on finalizing the plan they had almost ready for a record of decision in the fall, until it is clear what happens with the BLM plan.

Each year there is a meeting on the adaptive management triggers, to determine if any of the sage-grouse populations have met a hard or soft trigger. That meeting is happening the day after this one (i.e. Jan 15, 2020), so the next time we meet we will know if any triggers were met across the state.

BLM Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) overview

Tyler presented a PowerPoint about how the HAF works, and where they are with data gathering and analysis.

The HAF is a broad tool that allows us to look at several different scales of sage-grouse habitat. The scales are called several different names: 1st order (broad scale), 2nd order (mid-scale), 3rd order (fine scale/home range), and 4th order (site scale/seasonal use). Tyler, at the state office, looks at 2nd and 3rd order data, while field offices are responsible for gathering and using the site-scale data. At each scale, appropriate indicators are used. Every indicator is assigned a suitability rating for its location, to say how well the area is doing from the perspective of sage-grouse. Utah-specific data is used in Utah to determine what counts as "suitable" habitat situations.

HAF is useful for range assessments and will hopefully be eventually useful for larger-scale project planning. The fine-scale data will be most useful for this. Usually, data gathering is

initiated with an allotment renewal. Teams on the ground gather data that is appropriate for assessing seasonal habitat quality. At the mid and fine scale, the suitability judgements are somewhat subjective, as even Table 2.2, which helps with the site-scale, only says what is good – it doesn't define "marginal," for example.

The reports will be produced at the mid-scale, which includes fine and site scale data, once it is gathered. Most areas have not yet been completed, but BLM is working on many. The goal is to have reports done and filed so that they are available for future use/reference. They would only be redone if something substantial changed in the area; for example, a large fire. Tyler showed elements of a completed HAF assessment, on a mid-scale area called Wheeler, which crosses state boundaries, and includes both Ibabah and Hamlin Valley sage-grouse in Utah, as well as linked populations in Nevada.

In Utah, there are 7 mid-scale areas. Three (Sheeprocks, Cardon, and Panguitch) are only in Utah. The other four overlap into other states. This is great for habitat understanding, but can take longer due to increased coordination that is needed. Also, the higher profile or more concerning areas have been focused on first, such as Sheeprocks, which is next on the list after Wheeler, since the hard trigger was met for that population several years ago. By the end of 2020, Carbon might be done. The site-scale stuff just takes a long time. The goal is to have a HAF crew out for each BLM district this year, and to also have AIM crews adding data in areas they are working. Casey oversees seasonal crews, many of whom are contracted through American Conservation Experience (ACE). All data goes into Terradat.

USFS has a similar HAF process, though it is focused more on the site-scale since most populations on USFS land are in smaller areas compared to BLM's regional-size areas. The reports between USFS and BLM are not combined because the two agencies use difference mapping layers (BLM uses LANDFIRE, but USFS does not).

DWR lek trends

Lorien showed the group a PowerPoint presented to the statewide Plan Implementation Committee in August 2019, about the spring 2019 lek trends. This springs data will just add another year to this existing information. Many SGMAs had downward trends, but it is difficult to tell what the impact of the heavy snows was: many leks around the state were inaccessible until after the peak lekking had probably happened, so there is some hope that the actual numbers were higher than the counts that were made. The group noted that Emma Park and Parker were definitely affected by this.

Project updates

The group briefly reviewed WRI projects of possible interest to the group:

- 5282, which is in the SGMA
- 5220, a PJ removal in sagebrush country above Price, one bench above Porphyry Bench.

It is multi-phase, and has involved putting in BDAs; now moving downstream to recover riparian vegetation. It will be continuing down into Gordon Creek to help improve riparian/wet meadow habitat. It is also a PJ retreatment area.

- 5233, which will hopefully resolve major stream head-cutting issues on USFS land
- 5023, a beaver introduction into Sowers Canyon, directly adjacent to Anthro Mountain
- 5234, a Gunnison sage-grouse projects, planting sagebrush seedlings for the last few remaining Gunnison sage-grouse, on Nature Conservancy property. They are also trying to reestablish a wet meadow with and old well, and control cheatgrass in a 200-acre area of sagebrush. (It was noted that the Final Recovery Plan for Gunnison sage-grouse will be coming out in the next year.)

Nicole proposed a joint project planning meeting for anyone in the LWG interested, to develop a WRI project for the coming year's application period. One possibility would be to discuss project options in Whitmore Park, which could be helpful for the railroad conversation.

Round Robin updates

- NRCS has EQIP and SGI deadlines coming up: applications due in April, with funding likely by August or so.
- No one else had updates to share.

Field tour ideas

Two field tour ideas, possibly combinable, arose for the summer: a trip to Whitmore park to look at what a railroad might be impacting. It could touch on:

- Existing projects
- Potential projects
- Railroad pathways
- A HAF crew (or just Casey) demonstrating what is measured for HAF at the site scale

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will follow up with Jared to get results of the adaptive management meeting on Jan 15.
- Nicole will set up a joint project planning meeting
- Lorien will work on the field tour idea a little later in the spring.

Next Meeting:

The spring meeting will be set with a doodle poll.