

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 1/17/18

Place: DNR office in Price, Utah

Present: Derris Jones (wildlife consultant), TJ Cook (NRCS/UDWR), Makeda Hansen (UDWR), Stu Bedke (BLM), Tyler Nelson (BLM), Karl Ivory (BLM), Klint Eastman (Preston Nutter Ranch), Jared Reese (BLM), Brad Crompton (UDWR), Todd Thorne (Carbon County), Dana Truman (BLM), Scott Gibson (UDWR), Veronica Kratman (BLM), Leah Lewis (BLM), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Charlie Holtz (SGI/Pheasants Forever), Bill Butcher (landowner), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Research Project

Brad Crompton showed several slides provided to him by researchers that had initial kernel density maps for sage-grouse collared in the area. On the two leks near Scofield and on Emma Park, 13 total grouse were collared in the spring of 2017. Nest success from the collared hens was very high. The data is very preliminary, and the group was unfamiliar with how to interpret the kernel-density map format provided. One interesting point for the group was that one of the birds, over 5 days in November, traveled from Emma Park to Tavaputs (Bishop Ridge). Brad noted that there had not previously been documentation of that movement, although biologists in the area have wondered for some time if it were possibly happening. A new round of trapping will happen this spring to expand the project.

Tavaputs Plateau BLM project

Stuart Bedke, from the Moab office, presented a proposed WRI project to the group for discussion. It is called "Sage-grouse habitat restoration on Tavaputs." It is about 800 acres of lop and scatter. Nutter Ranch has done a lot of work up there, and so this is filling in work in some of the same area. The discussion focused on how there are many more pinyon in the area than many PJ projects have. Leah suggested that the project make sure to do "feathering" so that the edge is not as straight a line. That is in the plan to consider; it is not intended to be a clear cut. Checking the ecological site description to make sure areas that are naturally pinyon do not get removed would be important. Another suggestion was to reach out to tribal, even though the arch clearance is complete, to see if there are any culturally significant trees in the area.

BLM Update: Programmatic EISs in progress and IMs

Jared provided two updates from state/national BLM efforts. First, there are two Programmatic Environmental Impact Statements in scoping phase. They both cover a range-wide area of the Great Basin, and are focused on slightly different treatments, but are being done together because

they are related and cover the same footprint. A programmatic EIS is designed to provide a large-scale way to be more efficient during project EIS's, so similar analyses do not have to be done multiple times for each project area (for example, regarding different equipment types).

One of the PEISs will focus on large-scale fire risk reduction, and the other will focus on habitat improvement. Although sage-grouse issues were the original impetus, the PEIS will focus on the whole sagebrush/PJ ecosystem. One of the benefits of doing a PEIS is that it allows for consideration of cumulative impacts that are harder to identify and assess at project-level scales.

There will be four scoping meetings, including Jan 31 in Snowville, Feb 1 in Vernal, Feb 14 in Cedar City, and Feb 15 in Salt Lake. The scoping period for the two PEISs will close two weeks after the last scoping meeting, which is on Feb 15, so about early March. Although scoping periods can be confusing because it is not clear what to focus on, useful comments would be ones that identify particular species in areas, special areas of cultural or other significance that might not be obvious, information on weed invaded areas, etc.

Although the scoping periods are being done simultaneously, the fire breaks PEIS will likely be worked on first, once the scoping periods are over. Lorien will send information to the listservs about how to participate in the comments.

BLM Update: New IMs and other S.O. 3353 updates

Jared also provided updates associated with secretarial order 3353. Six of the seven BLM Instructional Memoranda related to the sage-grouse plan amendments (originally released in 2016) have been updated. Jared reviewed several of them. The grazing IMs will be discussed in more depth when we addressing grazing issues at the next meeting. The IMs that were revised are as follows (these are the topics, not the official titles):

- IM 2018-021: Habitat assessment framework
- IM 2018-022: Evaluation of the hard and soft triggers
- IM 2018-023: thresholds and responses for grazing
- IM 2018-024: priorities for evaluating and processing grazing authorizations
- IM 2018-025: how to implement the habitat objectives table
- IM 2018-026: oil and gas leasing in sage-grouse areas

Zinke's order also mandated several other things, including figuring out how to better align with state plans, and evaluating ways that the plan amendments might need to be changed or improved. A report from the scoping process that gathered data about those topics, at a range wide, statewide, and local scale, should be available by the end of the month.

Other WRI projects in the database

The group discussed two other projects (beyond Tavaputs one discussed earlier, 3947).

- 4207, Miller Creek Watershed Restoration: This is one of the projects that came out of a

challenge to create larger, more integrated projects across upland and riparian. The project has many components, including stream restoration, bullhog on BLM, SITLA and private, lop and scatter, 8 acres of pile-and-burn, and working with permittees on two new livestock water ponds and improvements to three others. It is in historic sage-grouse habitat, and will be a valuable project regardless.

- 4322, Range Creek Phase 1, is a bullhog of really tall Basin sagebrush in a canyon bottom. The project only has an indirect effect on sage-grouse, by perhaps providing a firebreak and stopping a future potential fire from jumping up above and burning existing sage-grouse habitat above the canyon.

Updates from the group

- The USFS scoping period for plan amendment changes ends Friday, January 19th.
- The North Spring project contract was awarded, and will start soon.
- On the Ford Creek project (controlled burns) this last year did not have enough water, so it will hopefully be able to be implemented this coming year.
- USFWS has been working on a range wide status assessment (SA) for Gunnison sage-grouse, which should be finished soon. The SA will explain threats and be a biological overview, and will be broken down by subpopulations.
- SGI had no local applications this year. Last year's few applications only came after a LOT of outreach and calling, so that was not done again
- Klint noted that they have seen lots of sage-grouse on Bishop Ridge. They have also been doing sage-grouse pellet transects to determine sage-grouse use in various habitat projects on Tavaputs, and comparing projects with and without wild horse use. The group encouraged Klint to get the data analyzed, perhaps by reaching out to have others help, as the data could be very interesting and help fill knowledge gaps identified by USGS and others.

Upcoming meeting topics

Topics of interest to the group for upcoming meetings: BLM IM detail on grazing, information from Eric Thacker on sage-grouse and grazing, and research updates from USU and BYU.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will invite Alan Bass at BLM to the upcoming meeting
- Jared will send Lorien the info on how to comment on the two PEISs during scoping.
- Lorien will send out info on the new IMs as well as the scoping report when it is released.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting was not set but April 18th was discussed as a possibility after the meeting. As it will be focused on topics of interest to grazers, an evening meeting may be the best.