

**CASTLE
COUNTRY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 12/1/20

Place: Zoom meeting

Present: Bill Butcher (Landowner/ PRWCD), TJ Cook (UDWR), Clint Wirick (USFWS), Jared Reese (BLM), Kegen Benson (BLM), Scott Gibson (UDWR), Makeda Hanson (UDWR), Tyson Todd (SITLA), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Ryan Jones (UDAF), Amy Croft (HDR), Heather Talley (UDWR), Evan Rees (UDWR/NRCS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Uinta Basin Railroad update

The group discussed the recently released Uintah Basin Railroad draft EIS, which is out for comment. [Comments were due at the time of the meeting by December 14, 2020 but have since been extended to January 28, 2021]. For some draft EISs in the past, Lorien has summarized comments from the discussion during working group meetings, and submitted relevant concerns or questions as formal comments. This could be done again if the group would like.

Because no one at the meeting was able to present an overview of the large document, the conversation revolved around key questions that several people will look into after the meeting. Amy Croft, a consultant for the applicant, suggested that the majority of topics the group would be interested in would likely be in the chapters on wildlife, water, and land resources, although some mitigation for such topics as noise might be in sections more focused on logistical and mechanical plans.

TJ noted that DWR was asked to put together a mitigation strategy. Their document asked for, among other things, wet meadow restoration, perch deterrents, and a mitigation system for installing BDAs to compensate for lost acres of sage-grouse habitat. The assumption was that at least some mitigation actions could be done with the application paying an in-lieu fee, and having DWR or contractors conduct the work on the ground. Several of the topics discussed during this conversation were not easily located in the draft EIS, particularly in the proposed mitigation section, if they are there at all. Lorien, TJ, and Heather will look more closely at the document to determine whether those topics are addressed in the draft EIS.

Additional points of discussion included:

- It is unclear whether trains not running during certain times of day during the lekking season was anywhere in the document.
- Sound impact on sage-grouse is a potential impact that does not appear to be addressed in the document. Makeda noted that there is going to be sound detection work done in Emma Park this winter.
- Amy explained that the baseline biological reports were done by HDR, and are available online. They include wetland and water feature delineations, general reconnaissance

work, and general wildlife surveys, with specific new field surveys only for a few key species, such as Mexican spotted owl and four plants. Most species information was based on existing data from DWR and others.

- Agricultural and recreation access is also a concern, as rail lines and fencing may cut off routes used to access certain areas currently. The Wells Draw alternative, for example, would tie up the most currently accessible land, which is mostly BLM. It is unclear without a closer reading of the document whether pedestrian or equine access would be allowed in areas even if motorized crossing are not available.
- Water flow impeded by the railroad crossing is a concern, with some discussion in the document about plans to meet relevant regulatory requirements to avoid flooding and water flow restrictions.
- Train speeds were discussed briefly; the question of how fast is too fast for wildlife to get out of the way, as well as how fast trains could reasonably travel the route, full or empty, based on the terrain.
- There are pros and cons of fences; if trains go fast, then they could be helpful for keeping some wildlife and livestock off the tracks, but fences come with many negatives as well, and need to be constantly maintained to be effective.
- Preliminary comment ideas included assessing whether the wildfire prevention and weed management measures listed in the document would be likely to be adequate.

In general, the group felt that the document was large and difficult to wrap our heads around, and required a much more in-depth dive to determine whether core concepts relevant to sage-grouse, like habitat impacts, disturbance, wet areas impacts or improvements, weed and fire management, etc. were adequately addressed in the EIS. Anyone interested in working on this can follow up with Lorien after the meeting.

BLM policy updates

Jared Reese provided several updates:

- Habitat mapping is just wrapping up, and will include improved habitat maps for wintering areas, due to including the GPS data.
- Christine Fletcher has recently been hired to replace Melissa Wood. She deals with the political and policy aspects of BLM's statewide sage-grouse plan implementation, while Jared focuses largely on the biological details.
- The Supplemental EIS done in response to the fall 2019 court decision has been finalized and sent to the judge. Until there is a decision to the contrary, the BLM will still operate off the 2015 plan amendment documents.
- A programmatic EIS about fire and fuels vegetation management is also complete. Project managers can now refer to the cumulative effects analysis contained in that document without having to reinvent the wheel for every project. That covers a wide area, including Nevada.

Project updates

- TJ and Kegen are doing preliminary planning for a PJ removal project at the west end of Emma Park. It will probably not go into WRI this round.
- Nicole continues work on the Miller Creek projects in Gordon Creek (PJ removal and also stream/BDA's on Gordon Creek)
- The Conservation District was doing some fence marking projects in Emma Park; not sure if it happened, as it was going to be a project with high schoolers and so many school things have been disrupted by covid. Ryan has fence markers and will include Bill, TJ, and Annelise in a discussion.
- Clint is working with Eric Thacker to do a workshop on low-tech restoration techniques for wet meadows, as there has been a lot of interest but some of the people being asked to assist with design still would like additional training.

DWR lek trends

Lorien showed the group a PowerPoint presented to the statewide Plan Implementation Committee in October 2020, about the spring 2020 lek trends. It was noted that 2019 was a very difficult year to get accurate counts, so it is difficult to say what the short-term trend is exactly.

Round Robin updates

- Makeda reminded everyone of the WRI/partners meeting on Dec 8.
- Evan Rees will now be working at NRCS in the office, as the new farm bill biologist. Annelise, as the new SGI biologist, will be working with him and Jim Spencer as well.
- Bill is looking at a rabbitbrush treatment, possibly involving Lowell at NRCS

Field tour ideas

A summer field tour idea was suggested to consider wet meadow projects (or potential project areas). That will be discussed more at the spring meeting and once we have a better idea of how covid may impact field tours this upcoming summer.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will work on the railroad EIS; anyone interested in the conversation can reach out. Any comments submitted on behalf of the group from today's meeting specifically will be circulated to those people before submitting it.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting (February or March) will be set with a doodle poll. It will likely include a presentation on the new BLM/DWR HAF maps.