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BLM SCOPING PROCESS BEGINS FOR NEW SAGE-GROUSE PLAN REVISIONS

Lorien Belton, Utah State University

In 2022, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will initiate a new planning process to amend greater sage-grouse management stipulations and guidance in BLM Land Use Plans (LUPs) across Utah. This process will provide an opportunity for stakeholder input to clarify and streamline the existing complex regulations, many of which are currently being litigated. This planning process, like others before it, will provide new management guidance for sage-grouse that will apply to a suite of individual regional plans across Utah.

The BLM LUPs have been amended twice in recent years to include considerations related to sage-grouse. One plan was finalized and published in 2015. In 2019 the BLM published a record of decision that amended the 2015 plan. The 2019 LUP amendments incorporated new science, much



Figure 1. Utah Conservation Plan For Greater Sage-Grouse.

This science was incorporated in the 2019 Utah Conservation Plan for Greater Sage-grouse (https://wildlife.utah.gov/sage-grouse/Utah_Greater_Sage-grouse_Plan.Fig.1). The amended 2019 BLM LUP was litigated by environmental groups and has not been implemented due to a court injunction. The 2015 BLM LUP was challenged by the State of Utah, and other states, but because of on-going litigation 2015 plan is currently in use. The current planning effort, begun in 2021, focuses on amending and updating both BLM plans.

The first major step in the planning effort in Utah is two scoping meetings. They will be held online and will have identical content, as well as a chance to comment. The meetings are scheduled for *Tuesday, January 11 at 1:00 pm, and Monday, January 24th, at 6:30 pm.* The scoping period provides an opportunity for stakeholders to provide input on topics to be included in the drafts of revised regulations. After the scoping period ends on February 7, 2022, the BLM will use the information gathered to develop a new draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) which will then be released for public comment and further review.

To register to attending the Zoom scoping meetings, go to: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2016719/530>

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The word Anthropocene is increasingly being used to describe the period of time during which human activities have had increasing environmental impacts on the Earth and the ecosystem services it provides humans. Many ecologists regard the period, since the beginning of the industrial revolution, as constituting a distinct geological epoch.

In the last issue of the Utah Community-based Conservation Program Communicator newsletter (<https://utahcbcp.org/cbcnewsletter/CommunicatorOctober2021.pdf>) Heather Talley and Avery Cook, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, reported on the status of greater sage-grouse lek counts that were completed in 2021. State wide lek counts within Utah sage-grouse management areas (SGMAs) were down 2.2% from 2020 counts, with 2126 male sage-grouse counted on 183 leks within SGMAs. This continued the overall trend of declining population totals since the last peak in 2015. Range wide loss of sagebrush habitats and decreases in populations led to petitions for listing sage-grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act.



Figure 1. Common ravens disrupting lekking male greater sage-grouse. Image capture by trail camera (photo courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey).



Figure 2. Wild horses and pronghorn captured near a depleted water source in Wyoming by a trail camera (Photo courtesy of D. Scasta). (photo courtesy of U.S. Geological Survey).

In October of 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in recognition of unprecedented range wide efforts, determined that the species did not warrant listing. However, the species remains a Wildlife Species of Concern in Utah. In 2022, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will initiate a new round of scoping meetings as they seek to amend their 2015 and 2019 greater sage-grouse land-use plans (see the article in this newsletter). No doubt current sage-grouse population trends and BLMs revised land-use plan will weigh in the upcoming USFWS status review of the species. Research confirms that the common raven (Figure 1) and free-roaming equid (i.e., wild horse and burros; Figure 2) are directly (increased predation) and indirectly (habitat destruction), respectively impacting sage-grouse and their habitats. In August 2021, the Journal of Wildlife Management published a paper in a special topics issue on the management of feral horse entitled “Sage-Grouse Population Dynamics are Adversely Affected by Overabundant Feral Horses,” (<https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jwmg.22089>).

This paper caught the attention of Congress. Although previous research has linked overabundant wild horse populations to habitat degradation, this paper linked horse abundance to sage-grouse population declines in Nevada. The authors reported that for every 50% increase in horse abundance over the designated appropriate management level (AML), sage-grouse abundance declined by 2.6%. As of 2019, horse herds exceeded AML in Nevada, by >4 times on average across all herd management areas. If horse populations continue to grow at current rates unabated, they projected that sage-grouse populations will be reduced within horse-occupied areas by >70.0% by 2034, on average compared to 21.2% estimated for control sites. Sage-grouse declines in these same areas have previously been linked to the loss of sagebrush cover which has also facilitated increased predation by another native wildlife species – the common raven (<https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.2193/2009-047>). Raven populations have increased by over 1000% percent in the last decade and expanded their range into other areas in the U.S. where they are now are the major predator of other imperiled native ground nesting birds. For some, the solution to this conservation dilemma, is simple; reduce populations of the offending animals and you reduce the impacts. But, it’s not that simple as these animals have vocal, committed, and growing constituencies.

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So, why should Congress be concerned about wild horses, ravens, and sage-grouse? All of these species are protected by legislation enacted by Congress. Thus, Congress ultimately appropriates funds to manage of these species as well as to restore of the habitats impacted. Congress also has similar constituencies.

The introductory paper in the JWM special issues is entitled “The Wildlife Profession’s Duty in Achieving Science-Based Sustainable Management of Free-Roaming Equids (<https://wildlife.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jwmg.22091>). The authors of this paper extol wildlife managers to become more fully engaged in a new dialogue seeking solutions. Ravens, like wild horses, are simply doing what they were programmed to do - survive. Anthropocene humans have enhanced the capacity for ravens to survive and have also contributed to the rapid increase in wild horse populations. So, does this make ravens and free-roaming equids victims or villains?

NEW SAGEBRUSH CONSERVATION RESEARCH PROJECT INITIATED IN TRI-STATE REGION OF UTAH, IDAHO, AND NEVADA.

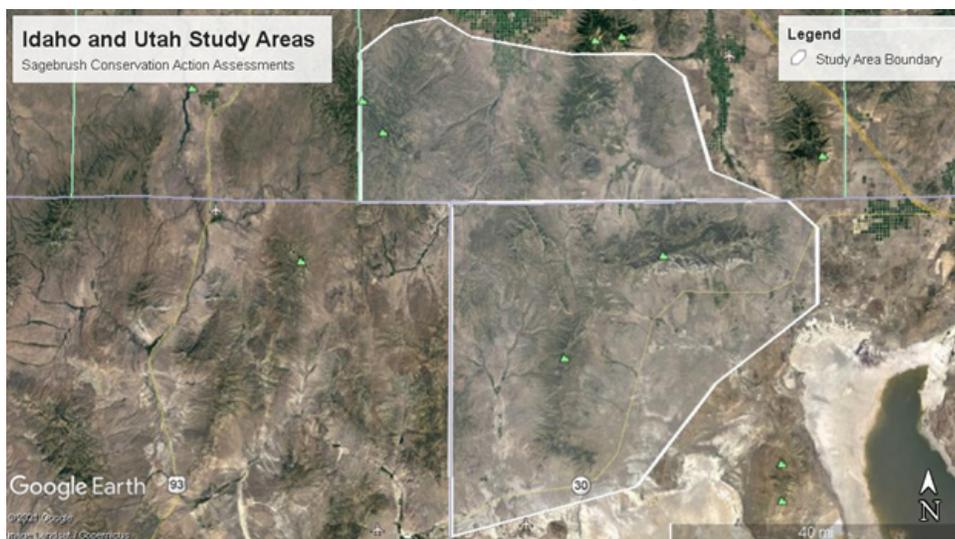
Dave Dahlgren and Eric Thacker, Utah State University

Sagebrush conservation is one of the most significant natural resource concerns across the western U.S. Sagebrush obligate species such as greater sage-grouse, sage thrasher, Brewer’s sparrow, and sagebrush sparrow are currently species of conservation concern. Sage-grouse have been considered an umbrella species for sagebrush ecosystems and significant conservation planning has occurred. Understanding sage-grouse habitat selection is critical to implementing the conservation actions within these plans. Additionally, conifer encroachment into sagebrush communities has been identified as a threat to these species and pinyon-juniper removal has become a common management practice aimed at conserving sagebrush and the associated species. However, at the same time pinyon jays, a pinyon-juniper obligate, has been experiencing gradual population declines and there is a paucity of scientific evaluation of this issue, especially as it relates to sagebrush conservation actions.

One of the most significant threats to sagebrush communities in the Great Basin is fire and the interrelationship of fire with cheatgrass invasion. While we know that catastrophic wildfire can alter and degrade sagebrush systems, we have little understanding of the recovery of sagebrush communities following fire and the response of sagebrush obligate species.

This 4-year project will address the following objectives; 1) sage-grouse habitat selection, 2) sagebrush obligate passerines and sage-grouse response to fire recovery, 3) pinyon jay response to conifer removal, 4) rangeland health assessment and avian communities, and 5) cheatgrass-adapted species response to management.

We will use a combination of radio-telemetry and bird surveys to assess the response of our target species to the disturbances and management actions that have occurred across our study area. Field research will begin in the spring of 2022.



The proposed study area includes large portions of extreme northwestern Utah in west Box Elder County, UT, and a large area in the southern portion of Cassia County, ID (Figure 1).

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**CONT...NEW SAGEBRUSH CONSERVATION RESEARCH PROJECT INITIATED IN TRI-STATE REGION OF UTAH,
IDAHO, AND NEVADA**

The proposed study area includes large portions of extreme northwestern Utah in west Box Elder County, UT, and a large area in the southern portion of Cassia County, ID (Figure 1). This large area has large greater sage-grouse populations with little information concerning movements and habitat use. This area also supports sagebrush obligate passerines, such as sagebrush sparrow, Brewer's sparrow, and sage thrasher. Additionally, the pinyon-juniper woodlands likely provide habitat for pinyon jays, albeit at the northern extent of their range, which are becoming an important species of consideration when it comes to sagebrush conservation and conifer management. The study area also has an extensive fire history in sagebrush communities, issues of cheatgrass invasion, and large areas of conifer mastication, where the above objectives can be met.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is the primary sponsor of this research. We also acknowledge support from the Utah Department of Natural Resources Watershed Restoration Initiative and the Idaho BLM State Office. This research will be coordinated with the West Box Elder CRM, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Utah Chukar and Wildlife Foundation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners Program, and Utah Conservation Districts.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

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GRADUATE STUDENT

Ruger Carter is a new PHD student who will be leading the Tri-State research project discussed on page 3.

PhD Student
Co-Major Advisors: Drs. David Dahlgren and Eric Thacker
Thesis: Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Selection and Response of Sagebrush Obligate Birds to Fire Recovery in the Great Basin

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