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LOCAL WORKING GROUP SURVEY RESULTS

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

In March 2021, we conducted a short, 11-question internet survey of participants in the Community-Based Conservation Program's Local Working Groups (LWG) to determine how the year of virtual meetings has gone for them, and what ideas they had for the future. The respondents, a total of 75 people, were relatively evenly split across the state of Utah, with somewhat higher representation from the southern groups.

First, we asked participants to share how they felt about different aspects of the shift to virtual working group meetings. A majority (60%) listed the reduced travel time and the ability to attend multiple meetings in a day as positives. The ability to share screens was noted as positive by 52%. The dominant negative, felt by 71% of respondents, was the reduced social time at the end of meetings. Although the data contained no surprises, it was interesting to note that only 52% felt that the ability to share screens was positive (rather than neutral, 37%), suggesting that there is still room to improve the group information sharing value of the conversation by incorporating more people's screens; no doubt many people in conversations had maps, data, or images that could have been shared but were not.

Over three-quarters of the respondents felt that future meetings should have a regular virtual/zoom component. A few people noted that this would be worth doing so long as certain conditions were in place, such as:

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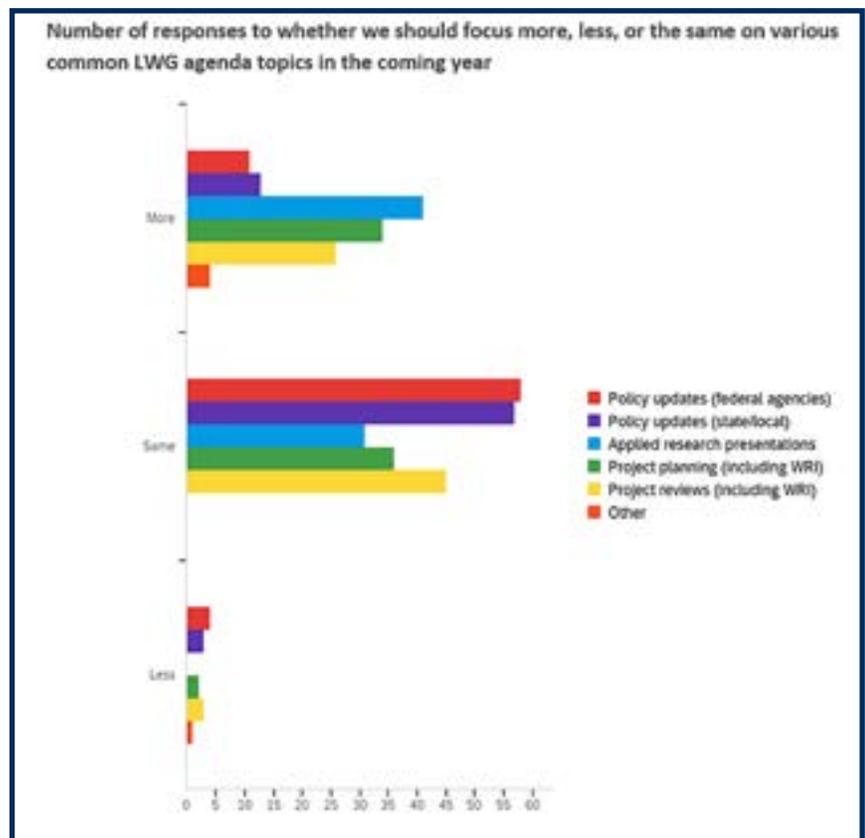
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LOCAL WORKING GROUP SURVEY RESULTS, CONT.

- Sound systems adequate to allow all conversations to be heard by all participants
- People try to make the meetings in person when possible, since the remote format skips the critical networking portion and makes more complex conversations challenging.

Conversely, the majority felt that that trying to add a virtual component to field tours was not a good idea. Only 15% were supportive of that suggestion.

Other observations and ideas for improving the general experience of virtual meetings include the following:

- Better use of the break-out group function would allow for better discussion options.
- Presentations via Zoom are relatively easy and work well. However, having longer or more involved discussions, or handling situations where conflict management is needed, is better done in person.
- The all-virtual format has been helpful and went more smoothly than people anticipated, but many are eager to return to in-person meetings for the networking and joint project planning that takes place in the less formal in-person setting.

We also asked about future presentation topics of interest to the groups. Nearly every topic we proposed received a strong level of interest. The highest interest was in “sage-grouse response to vegetation management projects,” and “livestock grazing and sage-grouse.” However, the wide interest across many topics – from pollinators to predators to usage of new technologies and maps – suggests that continuing to provide opportunities to learn a diverse set of information applicable to the work done in the groups should be a priority.

Respondents were asked to choose whether statewide presentations or those at a local level were preferable for informational presentations. Nearly 70% felt that statewide was better, but the fact that 30% chose “local” suggests that information is clearly worth discussing as it applies to local scales, something which can be achieved by providing statewide presentations virtually, but also local opportunities to discuss and apply the information.

The local working groups cover a wide array of topics, from policy updates to project planning. When asked whether we should do more, less, or the same, the vast majority suggested the same or more of nearly everything (see figure on page 1). This suggests that the diverse topics each add their own value and are all helpful in some way. Topics with the most interest in increasing the focus were “applied research presentations” and “project planning (including WRI).”

When asked to express where people saw the value from LWGs, the two highest ranked choices were “connections with colleagues I might not otherwise get” and “opportunities to collaborate on projects,” underscoring the focus noted earlier that people are eager to return to in-person meetings and resume the ability to connect and develop joint projects in that informal setting. Information on “new research” followed closely behind as a key value participants get from their LWG involvement.

A PRIORITIZATION TOOL TO PLAN CONIFER REMOVAL TREATMENTS

By Justin Small, Utah State University

Federal and state agencies responsible for managing landscapes to conserve sensitive wildlife species increasingly desire adaptive planning frameworks to optimize project costs and maximize ecological potential. In 2020, USU developed a prioritization tool to help guide land managers in planning future conifer removal sites to improve habitat for greater sage-grouse in landscapes currently encroached by conifers. This effort, led by Dr. Justin Small, Dr. Simona Picardi and Dr. Michel Kohl, was developed using conifer treatment data and economic cost data from Utah’s Watershed Restoration Initiative, high-resolution 30-meter annual vegetation cover data from the Rangeland Analysis Platform, and a GPS telemetry dataset of > 500,000 sage-grouse locations across Utah. The prioritization tool can be used by managers to predict vegetation response to future conifer removal treatments, sage-grouse use of post-treatment habitat, and ensure that conifer removal projects are based on habitat benefits accrued per unit economic cost. The prioritization tool will be incorporated into a web-based interface, and the final release is expected to be available on the CBCP website in late 2021.



Photos courtesy of Justin Small.

STATE-WIDE SAGE-GROUSE TRACKING DATABASE

By Simona Picardi, Utah State University

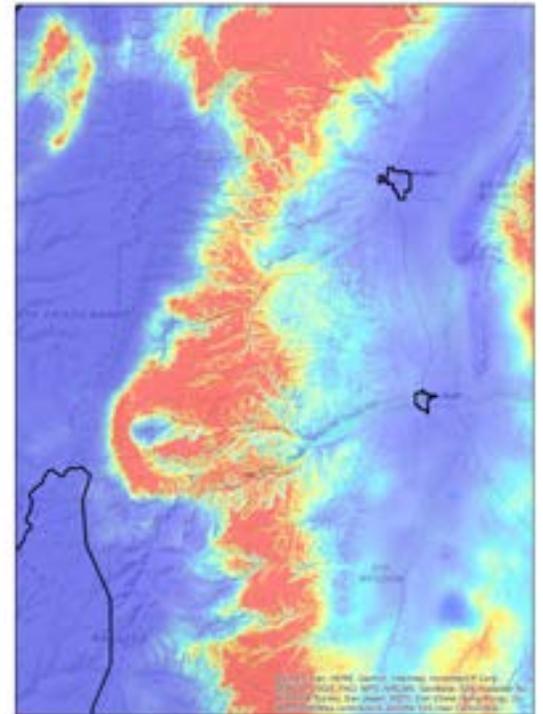
Since 1996, Utah State University (USU) and Brigham Young University (BYU) have collected a wealth of telemetry data for sage-grouse amounting to more than half a million locations throughout the state. Collection of these data was made possible by the financial support of more than 40 public and private partners and the Utah Community-Based Conservation Program (CBCP). These data have provided the basis for over 30 peer-reviewed research publication that guided the development of the 2019 Utah Plan. Since 2020, USU and BYU are working together with the Utah CBCP and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources to consolidate all existing sage-grouse tracking data into a comprehensive database using a next-generation data management system. The database will allow seamless integration of data collected across different projects and in different formats, as well as protecting data confidentiality by only allowing access to research and conservation partners via login credentials. Dr. Simona Picardi has been working with the BYU Life Sciences IT Team to build the software infrastructure to house the data, as well as compiling all existing data to date and reconciling it across sources. The database will be updated annually as new data becomes available. The beta version of the database was launched in January 2021, and the final release is expected by end of 2021.



ONE MAP TO RULE THEM ALL

By Simona Picardi, Utah State University

Utah State University has released new generation state-wide maps for sage-grouse seasonal habitat, available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16MyhNEe9BwZ6UwQ2PU9UAAfzw6O3IKii/view?usp=sharing>. These maps were developed as part of the BLM Habitat Assessment Framework. This effort, led by Dr. Michel Kohl, leveraged > 500,000 GPS tracking and nest locations to map nesting, summer, and winter habitat across the state of Utah using high-resolution vegetation data from the Rangeland Analysis Platform. The resulting maps quantify habitat selection at a 30-m resolution state-wide. The mapping process accounted for differences in habitat quality in different parts of the state to accurately reflect functional responses of sage-grouse to variation in baseline conditions. Products available include a continuous habitat suitability map for each season as well as categorical maps classifying habitat into suitable, marginal, and unsuitable. Habitat categorization was validated based on expert on-the-ground knowledge from biologists across the state. A recording of the webinar describing the maps and their application is available at <https://utahcbcp.org/presentations/>.



Sample map from the Habitat Assessment Framework showing areas of varying habitat quality for sage-grouse.

MEET NEW GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCHER, CODI BACKEN

Codi Backen is pursuing a master's degree in the Department of Wildland Resources at Utah State University. She will be working in Rich County continuing work that began in 2011. Researchers from Utah State University initiated a study on Desert Land and Livestock and on adjacent Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service livestock grazing allotments and private lands (known as the Three Creeks Allotments). The study will help to determine if greater sage-grouse vital rates (i.e., nest and brood success and juvenile and adult survival) differed by study area, and if any of the observed differences were related to vegetation composition and structure. If researchers can parameterize sage-grouse vital rates under different grazing scenarios, this may have implications for grazing policy west-wide. Completion of this project will provide definitive information regarding sage-grouse vital rates and habitat selection with respect to the presence of cattle and the effects of livestock grazing on vegetation composition and structure. This research will also provide managers with areas most suitable for sagebrush treatments that will have positive impacts on both cattle grazing and sage-grouse.

Codi is originally from a small Nebraska farming community. She has a B.S. in Wildlife Biology from Colorado State University. Since graduating, she has experienced a variety of natural resource positions, including work with sage grouse in Utah's West Desert, sea turtles in Hawaii, black bears in Alaska, and as a park ranger in Colorado. Codi is extremely excited to be back in Utah working with grouse again, and to carry on this research with grouse and livestock.

Codi can be reached at codi.backen@usu.edu.



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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JUSTIN SMALL TAKES POSITION AS THE SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION STRATEGY OPTIMIZATION COORDINATOR

Justin Small started working at Utah State University as the Sage-grouse Conservation Strategy Optimization Coordinator (SOC) in February 2021 after earning his Ph.D. in Wildlife Biology from USU in 2020.

Justin is a wildlife biologist with expertise using adaptive management strategies through broad stakeholder collaboration to find solutions to complex conservation issues. Before joining USU as the SOC coordinator, Justin worked on quantifying sage-grouse response to habitat manipulation in northwestern Utah. Justin has worked extensively on conservation issues within the public and private land interface of the Intermountain West since 2004. Justin is currently working on creating an interactive prioritization tool to assist land managers in identifying and planning future conifer treatments that optimizes economic resources and ecological potential for sage-grouse. While at USU, Justin plans on focusing on maximizing the impact of the SOC position in cross collaboration efforts with SOC partners and employing the appropriate analytical techniques to investigate if rotational livestock grazing can extend phenology events of native grasses and forbs to benefit life history stages for sage-grouse.

