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CIRCUMSTANCES, CHOICES, AND CONSEQUENCES: UTAH'S SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION SAGA

By Terry A. Messmer, Utah State University

Circumstance(s): A condition, fact or event determining another; the sum of essential and environmental factors.

As I reflect back on the accomplishments of Utah's Adaptive Resources Management Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (LWGs), I am still amazed how the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), Utah State University Extension (USUEXT), and public and private partners were able to implement a process to conserve sage-grouse and sustain local communities in such a short period of time. In 1990, the UDWR estimated that sage-grouse in Utah occupied only 50 percent of their previous habitat and were one-half as abundant as they were prior to the 1850s. Similar population declines were reported range wide. These declines prompted several environmental organizations to consider petitioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list



Photo courtesy of Michael Guttery.

sage-grouse as threatened or endangered.

In late 1995, Dean Mitchell, UDWR Conservation Outreach Section Chief and former Upland Game Coordinator, and I drove to Dove Creek, Colorado, to meet with some folks about Gunnison sage-grouse. They had organized a LWG to develop a conservation plan for Gunnison sage-grouse. We had hoped we could "piggy-back" on their efforts to help out the Gunnison sage-grouse populations that inhabit San Juan County. We soon learned Utah was on it's own.

Choice(s): The power or right to choose from set of options or alternatives.

On the long drive home, we discussed the day's events and agreed that if Utah was to conserve these species and with it, the economic sustainability of local communities that would be affected by a listing, the state would need a plan and process of its own. The UDWR, under Dean's direction, chose to organize concerned stakeholders to write Utah's Strategic Sage-grouse Conservation Plan. This plan, approved by the Utah Wildlife Board in 2002 and revised in 2009, provided a statewide framework for sage-grouse conservation. The plan called for the formation of LWGs to increase local ownership and involvement in the development of community-based

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By Jason Robinson, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Upland Game Project Leader

As many of you may know, the greater sage-grouse has been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act several times by several different groups and /or organizations. The species is currently undergoing a 12-month review process. The findings of this review will likely be released on February 26, 2010.

In response to the concerns for sage-grouse, the Utah Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse was approved in 2002. Since that time the plan has been implemented largely through the efforts of local sage-grouse working groups, and Utah partners. Because of these efforts we now know more about the ecology of sage-grouse in Utah and what we need to manage their habitats to sustain the species. This information has been subsequently used to update and revise the 2002 Utah Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse.

This process consisted of organizing a committee of 15 individuals as an advisory group to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) to review the current plan. This work began in September 2008. The committee members represented a diverse group of interested parties, to include sage-grouse local working groups, land management agencies, researchers, oil and gas industry, private landowners, sportsmen, NGOs, the Wildlife Board, Utah Farm Bureau, and UDWR. Since that date, the committee has completed their meetings and discussions and provided valuable comments and feedback to UDWR regarding the Utah's Greater Sage-grouse Management Plan 2009. Several changes have been made from the original 2002 plan. This plan was presented by the UDWR through the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) in each of the five regions within the state. The public had the opportunity to come and ask questions and provide comments. The completed Plan was subsequently approved by the Utah Wildlife Board on June 4, 2009; the final Plan is available on the UDWR Web site (wildlife.utah.gov/uplandgame/sage-grouse).

The Plan outlines statewide goals and objectives, and further provides specific strategies to accomplish those objectives. Additionally, this Plan provides important biological information to managers and researchers, as well as serving as a reference document to guide management and research efforts within Utah. The Plan acknowledges the past efforts of the local sage-grouse working groups and again calls on these groups to continue their conservation efforts. The Plan also gives the local working groups further direction in their continued efforts to keep the species off the endangered species list. When all the strategies are put into place, the Plan will achieve its desired end results: species conservation and economic sustainability for local communities.

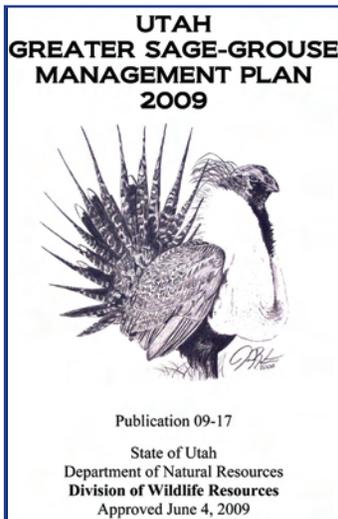
CIRCUMSTANCES, CHOICES, AND CONSEQUENCES (CONTINUED)

conservation plans. Implementation of these plans was seen as a crucial step to assist state and local governments and private landowners in conserving these species and their habitats while also achieving local, social, and economic objectives.

Consequences: A conclusion or results produced by a set of causes, choices, or actions.

As a result of these circumstances and the choices made, Utah now has 10 LWGs that have written and are now implementing conservation plans. Implementation of these plans is intended to benefit sage-grouse (Greater and Gunnison), other sensitive wildlife species, private landowners, and local Utah communities. Community based Conservation Program Specialists employed by USUEXT now work full-time on sage-grouse conservation. Also, researchers and graduate students from both Utah State University and Brigham Young University, in partnership with the UDWR and other public and private partners, have learned more about the ecology, distribution, and response of sage-grouse to management actions. This information will prove invaluable as LWGs move their plans forward. Lastly and more importantly, sage-grouse populations in Utah are stable to increasing as habitat is protected and improved. One of the consequences of range wide population declines as discussed earlier, was the potential for the species being petitioned for listing. The USFWS has petitions to list both species and will make a decision (see article above). Regardless of what this decision is, the future for sage-grouse in Utah remains bright because of choices made.

Local Working Group Members are called on to continue their conservation efforts to benefit sage-grouse and local communities.



Front cover of 2009 State Plan.

OBTAINING BETTER ESTIMATES OF UTAH'S GREATER SAGE-GROUSE POPULATIONS: ON THE ROAD AGAIN

By David Dahlgren, Utah State University

Our study plan was simple – In the late summer and early fall we would trap male sage-grouse on clear balmy nights (maybe wear a sweatshirt to keep warm), put radios on them, and they'd survive until next lekking season when we could monitor them and collect the data needed to better estimate the population. However, as with most everything in life, research projects have a way of getting more complicated. Allow me to explain.

To catch sage-grouse, you need to be active when they are most susceptible to capture. Typically, we start work around 10 p.m. and work to nearly sunrise. We drive up the mountain in the dark; hopefully with little to no moon (grouse are jumpy with a full moon). We unload the ATVs, connect the spotlights, and load up dip-nets. Each trapping team consists of a driver/spotter and a netter. The netter rides on a small jump seat bolted to the ATV. Once our equipment and crews are assembled we begin our search. Sage-grouse tend to roost on the lower sagebrush ridge tops, and so we search those areas with the spotlights, often using binoculars to increase our search area. Once the small greenish-blue eye shine is detected, the ATV driver approaches the bird, while maintaining the spotlight in the grouse's eyes, and the netter hopefully drops the net gracefully over the bird. Ya, right.

In past studies we have always struggled to get enough females marked for sample sizes large enough to represent population-wide reproductive data. Thus we have passed up on the many available males around the leks. During the spring males are so buzzed on hormones, they are easily approached and netted. However, in the fall the tables are turned.

Thus our efforts to get a large enough sample size of males have been more arduous than expected. We have sorted through the many available hens (the irony) and as of early December have a reasonable sample size of males for the Deseret Land and Livestock (DLL) study area, and are halfway there for the Parker Mountain population. We need more adult males on Parker, and look forward to that time just before lekking season when the male hormones turn on, and they are easier to approach. One of our goals is to have sufficient sample sizes of yearling and adult males. Juvenile males are easier to catch in the fall, yet they have been hanging in brood groups up until November. Making a last minute decision on which birds are male chicks versus the female chicks at 1:00 a.m. through a spotlight has been a bit tricky.

As of early December, sage-grouse flocks on Parker and DLL have gathered in their traditional wintering areas in large flocks, and trapping will be extremely difficult with so many eyes watching the ATVs or snowmobiles. We will likely do one more trapping push in February before the lekking season begins in March to obtain the last few bits of sample size needed for this study. If anyone enjoys freezing temperatures, sleepless nights, and warm sage-grouse in their hands let us know, and you too can have the amazing experience of winter sage-grouse trapping.



Photos courtesy of Todd Black, Michael Guttery and Eric Thacker.

If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

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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www.utahcbcp.org

SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT DATA AND PLANS ONLINE

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

A new Web site now provides a "one-stop shop" for sage-grouse issues in Utah. The website provides links to a number of helpful documents, files and other Web sites. The address of the Utah DWR's site is <http://wildlife.utah.gov/uplandgame/sage-grouse/>.

First, the site has links to the new 2009 Utah State Greater Sage-grouse Plan, as well as the Gunnison sage-grouse plan. These plans, especially the newly revised Greater Sage-grouse Plan, are intended to provide both management recommendations and be a source of additional references, like lists of studies that have occurred in particular areas, and other sources of information beyond what is in the plan.

You can also find links to GIS files that show local sage-grouse habitat at different times of year. This information can be used by county planners or others to determine areas where sage-grouse may be sensitive to energy development, housing, or roads. Links to management guidelines, restoration project information, SAGEMAP, and each of the local working groups in Utah can also be found on this page.

In addition to the DWR site explained above, a newly completed comprehensive rangewide assessment for Greater Sage-grouse is also now available online. The 24 chapters of *The Ecology and Conservation of Greater Sage-grouse: A Landscape Species and Its Habitats* represent the most current information available rangewide about greater sage-grouse, from information on topics ranging from diseases and distribution to a history of the management efforts. The Web site for this is <http://sagemap.wr.usgs.gov/monograph.aspx>.