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COMMENT PERIOD ON REVISIONS TO 2015 BLM SAGE-GROUSE PLAN AMENDMENTS

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

In 2015, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) worked together to incorporate greater sage-grouse-specific management requirements in BLM and USFS plans across the West. In Utah, similar amendments were added to multiple Land Use Plans, Resource Management Plans, and Forest Plans. The plan amendments provided the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with a measure of certainty that adequate policies would be in place to protect sage-grouse. However, in many states, including Utah, the federal plans were criticized for how they differed from the state strategies.

To address the states' concerns, Interior Secretary Zinke signed an order requiring the BLM to address the issue of consistency between state and federal sage-grouse policies. A scoping period last winter gathered public input on how sage-grouse-specific policies could be improved. The BLM

incorporated that input in a new Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), which is currently up for comment. It compares two alternatives: 1) sticking with the existing amendments, or

2) making some changes based on the scoping comments. The "preferred alternative" is the one with the changes.

What might change in Utah?

Boundaries: One of the big differences between the Utah and BLM plans involves boundaries. The Utah plan outlines key areas called "Sage-Grouse Management Areas (SGMAs)." Those areas encompass the most important sage-grouse habitat in the state. Utah knows that some sage-grouse are present outside those boundaries, but management actions aren't focused there. In contrast, the federal plan includes "priority" (PHMA) and "general" (GHMA) habitat management areas. The priority areas have much stricter rules protecting sage-grouse, and mostly match up with the state's SGMAs, but the general habitat areas also have some management requirements in the BLM plan. The preferred alternative in the draft EIS proposes eliminating the GHMA designation and associated sage-grouse policies. It also includes new sage-grouse habitat guidelines based on Utah research.

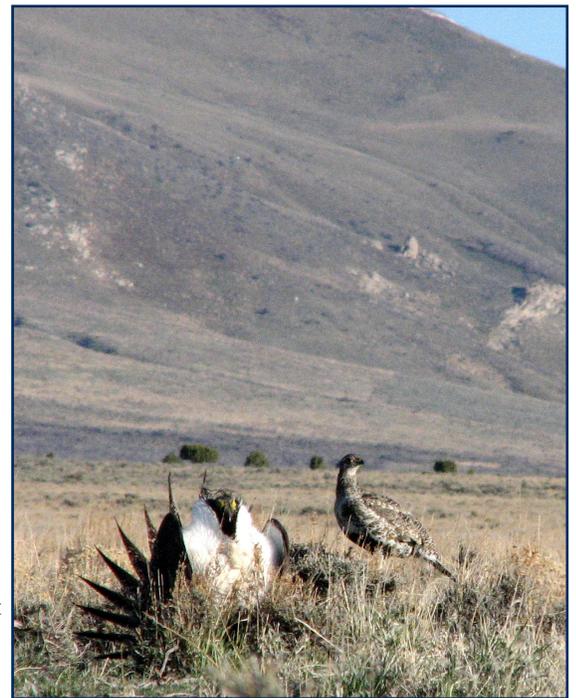


Photo by Todd Black.

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ARE WILD HORSES AND SAGE-GROUSE ON A COLLISION COURSE IN THE SHEEPROCK SAGE-GROUSE MANAGEMENT AREA?

By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

Last fall, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposed to remove up to three-fourths of the 450 horses that populate the Onaqui herd about 40 miles southwest of Salt Lake City (Figure 1). This was the first time the BLM had proposed to gather horses because of the potential impacts on sage-grouse in Utah.

The Onaqui herd occupies a 240,000-acre management area abutting Dugway Proving Ground in Tooele County. The population number is 450 animals, excluding the 2017 foal crop. The target population level for this area was set at 120 animals. The area also includes a portion of the Sheeprock Sage-grouse Management Area that has experienced a 40 percent decline in the sage-grouse population over the last 4 years and dropped in population 8 of the last 10 years. The BLM stated the action was needed to reduce effects the herd is having on vital sage-grouse habitat occupied by Utah's most imperiled sage-grouse population.

The 1971 Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act (WFRHBA) gave the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) the statutory authority to manage wild horses and burros to ensure their populations remained in ecological balance with other multiple-uses on public lands. Ecological balance was set at 26,715 horse and burros inhabiting 29.4 million acres of public land across 10 western states. The BLM estimates that 83,000 wild horses and burros now inhabit public lands.

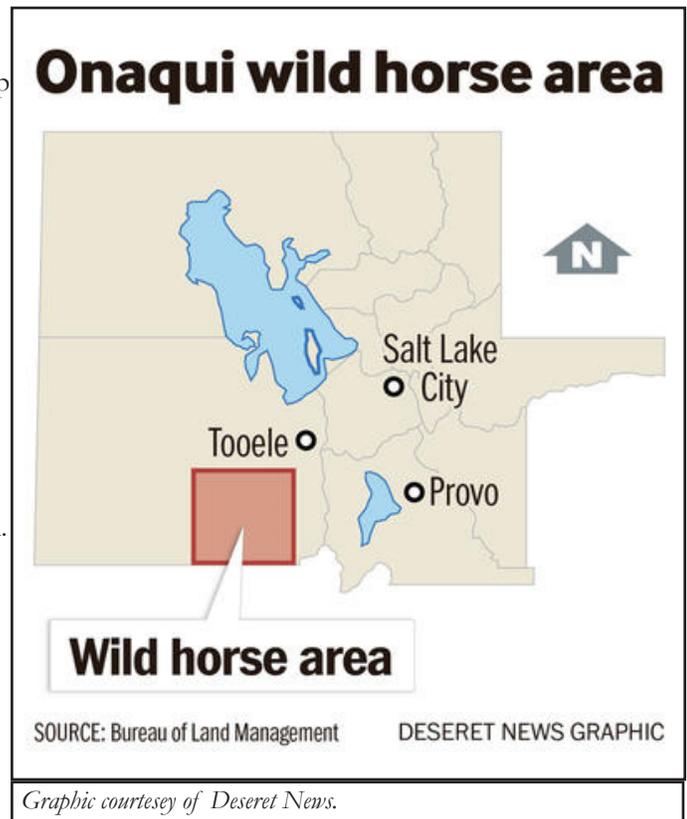
The USFS also manages approximately 7,100 wild horses and 900 wild burros on 53 wild horse and burro areas on approximately 2.5 million acres of National Forest System lands in 5 Forest Service regions, 19 national forests, and 9 states. Thirty-four of these areas are considered active and 24 are located in Arizona, California, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Utah, where they are jointly managed in cooperation with the BLM. The range of the greater sage-grouse overlaps 30% of the areas occupied by wild horses and burros.

The documented ecological effects of overabundant wild horse and burros include competition with and avoidance by wildlife of water sources, forage loss and altered plant communities, altered avian (bird) communities, altered small mammal communities, impacts to soils and insects, and sagebrush ecosystems. The presence and activities of wild horses on the condition of western U.S. mesic habitats (moist soils, meadows) may have the greatest impacts on wildlife and their habitats. In arid environments like the Great Basin, mesic meadows, streams (riparian habitats) and other wetlands comprise < 5% of the land area but are vitally important to the survival of hundreds of species. Wild horses use mesic habitats daily for water and forage and spend large periods of time in the mesic habitats of arid regions.

Arguably, the contemporary management of wild horses and burros on public land has become the most controversial issue facing the BLM and management of western landscape. The 1971 WFRHBA identified the tools the BLM and USFS could use to manage herd numbers. However, current congressional appropriation riders and litigation have restricted the BLM from using all the tools identified in the Act. Most significantly, the U.S. Congress has repeatedly blocked the sale of wild horses and burros without limitation and the use of euthanasia.

To shed new light on this issue, Utah State University's Berryman Institute hosted a wild horse and burro management summit in Salt Lake City, Utah, on August 22-24, 2017. Over 250, people representing 109 different organizations and agencies participated in the Summit. The Summit included sessions on wild horse and burro policy, legal matters, science, and best management practices. Subsequent to the Summit, the Berryman Institute published a special issue of Human-Wildlife Interactions on wild horse and burro management. This issue contains a comprehensive summary of the science, management, and policy issues related to wild horse and burro management. It can be accessed at <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi/>.

The jury is still out regarding the fate of the Sheeprock sage-grouse populations. All, however, agree that to restore the population and its habitat will require an "all-hands, all-lands" strategy that must include managing wild horses.



TRANSLOCATING GREATER SAGE-GROUSE IN UTAH: WHY AND HOW?

By Michel Kohl, Post-doctoral Fellow, Utah State University, and Terry Messmer, Utah State University Extension

Wildlife translocations are a common and often times successful conservation tool used to either restore extirpated or augment declining wildlife populations. Examples here in Utah include many big game species including moose, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats. These species are not alone however, as the Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) has actively moved (translocated) the greater sage-grouse across Utah to augment declining local populations. More importantly, Utah has demonstrated more success in these efforts relative to other states. A study published in 1997 (Reese & Connelly, 1997) estimated that over 7,200 sage-grouse had been translocated across the range of the species. These translocations occurred in New Mexico, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, and British Columbia. Only efforts in Colorado, Idaho, and Utah were successful. Since 1997, additional translocations have occurred in California, Washington, Alberta, and North Dakota.

The first documented sage-grouse translocation in Utah occurred in 1976 when 48 females and chicks were moved from the Parker Mountain Sage-grouse Management Area (SGMA) to San Juan County. Forty-three birds were then moved from the Uintah Basin SGMA and Carbon SGMA to the Parker Mountain SGMA from 1987 to 1990. During the 2000s, the DWR and Brigham Young University (BYU) began a long-term study and translocation effort to improve sage-grouse numbers in the Strawberry Valley SGMA (Baxter et al. 2013). In total, 336 female sage-grouse were moved from Uintah Basin, Rich, Box Elder, and Parker Mountain SGMAs to the Strawberry Valley SGMA from 2003-2008. In 2009-2010, 60 female sage-grouse were moved from the Parker Mountain SGMA to Anthro Mountain in Duchesne County by DWR and Utah State University Extension (USU). From 2016 to 2018, the DWR, in partnership with USU, has translocated 120 birds (90 females and 30 males) from the Parker Mountain and Box Elder SGMAs to the Sheeprock SGMA to reverse the population decline in that area.



Adult male sage-grouse translocated to the Sheeprocks Sage-grouse Management Area in 2016 as part of Utah Division of Wildlife Resources management actions aimed at reversing population declines in that area. Photo by Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

What we have learned: Effect on Populations – All translocations in Utah appear to be successful except for the San Juan County translocation where greater sage-grouse were moved into Gunnison sage-grouse habitats. Generally, it appears to take 3 years after the initial reintroductions to see a population response in terms of increased annual lek counts. This is likely because the birds often do not demonstrate similar survival and nesting success as the resident birds, and thus significantly contribute to annual production, until they make it through their first year (Duvuvuei 2013).

What we have learned: Genetics – The Strawberry Valley SGMA translocated birds have provided the best information regarding the effect of sage-grouse translocations on population genetics. This SGMA population declined from >3,000 individuals in the 1930s to ~ 150 in 1998 creating a severe genetic bottleneck. Following the translocations, BYU researchers reported significant increases in the genetic diversity of the population. This research demonstrated that translocations of sage-grouse were effective at increasing both population size and genetic diversity.

What do translocations mean for the species? – Translocations have been used as an effective tool to reverse population declines of sage-grouse in Utah. The success of the translocations can be enhanced when used as part of an integrated conservation strategy that includes habitat management and predator control. However, our successful sage-grouse translocations have complicated range-wide analyses that are currently underway to better understand the genetic connectivity of the species across its range. These range-wide efforts have been driven by a need to better understand how sage-grouse populations are genetically connected both within and across state boundaries so that managers can identify and subsequently conserve critical areas that serve as hubs of genetic exchange between populations. Utah areas that were highlighted by genetic studies as key for facilitating gene flow between populations might actually be artifacts of our historical translocations. Whether these areas are hubs for genetic exchange or a translocation artifact is a question for future research. Despite this, the science has confirmed that sage-grouse translocations have been an important component of Utah's species conservation strategy.

References Cited: (links can be found at <http://utahcbcp.org/publications>)

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COMMENT PERIOD ON REVISIONS TO 2015 BLM SAGE-GROUSE PLAN AMENDMENTS, CONT.

Mitigation: Since the amendments were adopted in 2015, the State of Utah has developed and adopted a mitigation program for sage-grouse habitat that is designed to work with federal plans. Because the details of that plan did not exist, it was not included in the federal plans. Now that that program is available, it can be considered for use by federal entities. The state plan does not include a net conservation gain requirement, and BLM has modified its mitigation policy as well. The preferred alternative incorporates the potential for using the Utah mitigation program for sage-grouse. The DEIS specifically requests comments on “how the BLM should consider and implement mitigation with respect to the Greater Sage-grouse, including alternative approaches to requiring compensatory mitigation in BLM land-use plans.”

Sagebrush Focal Areas: The original amendments included Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs). Although most SFAs were not in Utah, some extended into northern Utah counties. The SFAs were areas where additional recommendations were made for mineral withdrawal, which was to be worked on in a separate process. That withdrawal process was eliminated through other means. The preferred alternative removes SFAs from the amendments.

Triggers and Causal Factors: The original amendments include “soft triggers” and “hard triggers” that set thresholds for action, and specified some actions that could be taken, in case of sage-grouse population declines. However, there were no “un-triggers,” for use in the event that a population recovered. The new alternative includes additional specificity about the triggers, including responses for scenarios in which populations recover or completely disappear from an area. It also requires a “casual factors analysis,” which would need to be completed within 6 months of a trigger tripping. That would inform which triggered management changes are appropriate to maintain and which are unnecessary.

Transmission Lines: The 2015 amendments required burial of transmission lines where technically feasible. The DEIS allows for consideration of whether burying a transmission line is actually the best course of action to mitigate the impact on sage-grouse. The

EIS also now includes recommendations for power line buffer distances from leks, based on Utah research.

Grazing Permits: The 2015 amendments included a somewhat complex system for prioritizing grazing permit renewals, including assessment of those areas, according to sage-grouse habitats in SFAS, then PHMA, then GHMA. The preferred alternative removes the requirements to conduct permit renewals based on sage-grouse habitat areas. It also clarifies that while improper grazing can be a threat to sage-grouse, grazing in and of itself is not. Grazing improvement efforts are left to existing range health management. If livestock grazing is determined a causal factor in a specific sage-grouse population decline, that would be addressed at that place and time only.

Clarifications: In the 2015 amendments, several things were unclear, difficult to implement, or caused concern. The DEIS includes clarifications about water developments, lek buffers areas, grazing, and other items. There are many additional details in the DEIS not covered in this summary.

Both BLM and Utah CBCP staff can assist in understanding the document further or submitting comments. To comment, visit <https://go.usa.gov/xQZFW> by August 2, 2018.



Photo by Todd Black.

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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