

**MSARM
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: November 13, 2013

Place: Wanship, Utah (Fire Station)

Attendees: Mike Welch (QRM), Patti Barney (NCRS), Chris Nelson (UACD), Erin Bragg (Summit Land Conservancy), Stephanie Graham (Transcon Environmental), Craig McKnight (NCRS), Lisa Yoder (Summit County), Spencer Gibbons (UFBF), Chad Wilson (DWR), Pam Kramer (DWR), Dave Rich (DWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Discussion and Updates

State Sage-Grouse Plan Update

Lorien explained that the local working groups will likely have a large role in implementation, but the details are still being worked out. Ways the groups are likely to be involved include:

- work toward the habitat objectives in the plan
- easement discussions (identifying areas in need to protection, in addition to help that specific partners like land trusts can provide)
- ground-truthing maps that will be used for baseline disturbance measurement

The group discussed implementation of the state plan:

UPCD Project Reviews

Mike Welch suggested that the LWGs need to be more involved in reviewing projects for sage-grouse that are proposed through the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development region teams. One concern he has is that private lands projects, even when good for grouse, are not given high priority for funding. This could be for a variety of reasons, but LWG review and endorsement of appropriate projects could help give the UPCD teams better feedback about what projects will support sage-grouse. Mike will continue his efforts to encourage this at the Northern Region meeting. Lorien will attend the Northern UPCD meeting on Dec 10 as well as helping the LWG identify projects that would be appropriate for MSARM to review. Lorien will contact Amy Defreese to discuss how this could be facilitated. Mike suggested that the LWG meet in early January to discuss those projects.

Easements

Easements are clearly very relevant in the MSARM area. Because housing developments are a real concern for sage-grouse, and a reason for habitat loss and fragmentation, easements are an approach that makes sense. However, there are impediments to making progress on this front:

- Most of the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) payments designated for sage-grouse by NRCS went to Box Elder County this year. There were \$3 million available, and about \$30 million in requests throughout the state. It was not clear how many of those requests were from the MSARM area.

- The last continuing resolution in Congress funded some NRCS programs for the next year, including NRCS's EQIP program, which does projects on the ground and includes much of the sage-grouse initiative program. However, GRP funding was not included so certainty on that funding level for upcoming years (including this one) will depend on the next Farm Bill.
- Although there is a lot of interest in easements in this area, land prices are very high, so funding those easements is a challenge. The local land trust organizations (Utah Open Lands, Summit Land Conservancy) have ranchers that are interested in easements, but would like help prioritizing where to focus because of the limited funding. Erin Bragg noted that it would be helpful for the S.L.C. board to see maps that could help in this effort. Lisa Yoder will check to see what the county has available that might be helpful.

Disturbance and Non-Habitat Mapping

In addition to habitat project review and easement planning, the LWG will have an opportunity to provide feedback on maps that are being developed at USU, that will provide a baseline against which disturbance to sage-grouse habitat in each Sage-Grouse Management Area (SGMA) will be measured. When these maps are available, the LWGs should have an opportunity to provide feedback on their accuracy.

Another issue is that the SGMAs in the state plan currently have very wide boundaries, which include areas that are not disturbed, but are just not sage-grouse habitat. The local groups will be instrumental in identifying those areas. Non-Habitat areas are treated differently in the state sage-grouse plan, and do not have restrictions placed on them and do not count toward disturbance totals. Because most of the land in the MSARM area is private, the disturbance calculations may be made, but disturbance limits are not going to be enforced on private lands unless the counties make local decisions about how to do that.

Sage-Grouse Summit in February

USU will be hosting a Utah Sage-Grouse Summit on February 18 and 19 in Salt Lake City. The main topic will be implementation of the Utah state plan, but many other updates and new research will be presented as well.

MSARM Group and Challenges for Action

Several individuals in the room expressed frustration that this LWG has had a difficult time getting projects on the ground and moving forward. Several reasons were presented for the difficulty:

- Because little detail is known about where the local grouse spend time (other than the visible area around the Henefer-Divide and Pioneer leks), it is difficult to locate habitat projects that will definitely help and definitely not harm the birds' habitat. Knowing more detail about winter and summer ranges would be very helpful.
- Although the Sage-Grouse Initiative program got applications locally, the focus statewide

- was on pinyon-juniper treatments, and much of that went to Box Elder County
- Substantially more money is needed to purchase even just the known important areas for sage-grouse, such as land with leks which has been on the market for redevelopment for many years, much less surrounding areas to create a landscape scale impact.
- Some private-land projects for sage-grouse have been passed over for WRI/UPCD funding.

The group also noted progress and suggested several ways to move forward:

- NRCS is working with local landowners, just not as visibly as some other big projects, and improvements such as grazing management are under way locally.
- One project to improve habitat near the Henefer Divide lek was funded by SGI this year.
- If a landowner with an easement was willing to step forward and advocate for the benefits with other landowners, that might help move the easement discussions forward. It was suggested that Anita Lewis, who works for the county, would be a good first point of contact.
- More involvement with the northern region UPCD team can help get more sage-grouse projects done in the area, as noted earlier.
- Adam Brewerton is advocating internally at DWR for the research project which this group has been discussing for several years. With a new and improved structure for proposing research to be funded by DWR, there was optimism that the project might actually happen in 2014. That would provide information critical to being able to make progress on many other fronts.

Federal Planning Efforts: Draft EIS out for Comment

Lorien presented the basics of the Draft EIS released by BLM and USFS in early November. This document outlines the possible sage-grouse stipulations that will be used to amend Forest Service and BLM Land Management Plans in Utah. **In this area, this may be of particular interest to livestock operators who have allotments on either BLM or Forest Service.**

There are five alternatives presented. Chapter 2 of the DEIS compares these alternatives.

- Alternative A is “no action.” This would mean that existing regulations and processes would not change. We know that this does not meet the USFWS’s requirements for “adequate regulatory mechanisms,” but it is useful as a point of comparison on specific strategies within the document, such as how many acres are currently open or closed to certain uses now, as compared with the other alternatives.
- Alternative B is based on the National Technical Team (NTT) report. This report was an addendum to the BLM’s Instructional Memorandum 2012-043. It presents suggestions for conservation measures to protect sage-grouse, based on science. Alt. B incorporates those suggestions into proposed regulations for the BLM and USFS.
- Alternative C is the most conservation-focused alternative. It is based heavily on public input from environmental organizations such as Western Watersheds Project and Wild Earth Guardians. It is split into two sub-alternatives, C1 and C2. One major difference

between those sub-alternatives is how grazing is suggested to be regulated. One alternative proposes reductions, while the other proposes elimination of grazing in sage-grouse habitat.

- Alternative D is the alternative proposed by the BLM and Forest Service. It covers every topic that must be addressed. In many cases, it goes into more detail than the other alternatives.
- Alternative E is based on the Utah Governor's Sage-Grouse Plan. Because the Utah plan also addresses issues outside the jurisdiction of the BLM and USFS, only aspects of the state plan that are relevant to federal lands are included. There are two sub-alternatives for E as well. E1 is based on Utah's plan. E2 is based on Wyoming's plan, because several small pieces of federal land managed out of Utah are within Wyoming's borders.

The Alternative preferred by both the BLM and the USFS is Alternative D. (Although the two federal agencies are working together, each agency must make its own decisions.) The final decision will probably incorporate elements from several alternatives.

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS. The working groups will all meet before that deadline. Anyone wishing to make comments through the working groups will have a chance to do so.

The BLM is holding a series of open houses held around the state if anyone wants to ask questions or see larger maps of the DEIS. If you go to the meetings, you will likely get more out of it if you have read parts of the DEIS already and have specific questions for the people there. The closest meetings to this area will be Salt Lake and Randolph on December 10 and 11.

Other Updates

Two staff transitions within the group: Tammy Koldyke is leaving the SGI position; Talyor Payne will be taking her place in this area. Desiree Van Dyke is leaving her position with UACD also.

Follow-up Needed

- Mike will continue his efforts to encourage LWG review of UPCD-WRI sage-grouse projects in the Northern Region.
- Lorien will attend the Northern UPCD meeting on Dec 10 and also help the LWG identify particular projects on which to focus review efforts. Lorien will also contact Amy DeFreese to discuss how this could be facilitated.
- Lisa Yoder will check to see what maps the county has available that might be helpful for land trusts prioritizing easement acquisition opportunities.
- When the baseline disturbance maps are available, the LWGs should have an opportunity to provide feedback on their accuracy.

- The LWG will need to be involved in future fine-scale mapping of natural (undisturbed) non-habitat areas in the SGMA.
- Lorien will contact Anita Lewis, who works for the county, regarding a landowner easement advocate.

Next Meeting

The group chose a next meeting date of January 13, at 5:30 pm. It will be held at the Wanship Fire Station, with some kind of food provided. This will be a time to discuss the draft EIS and also any proposed UPCD projects relevant to sage-grouse. Additional agenda items include mapping of non-habitat areas (or at least defining a process to do so), and updates on the research funding, if any.