

**MSARM
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: November 4, 2015

Place: Summit County Courthouse, Coalville

Members Present: Brandon Flack (USU), Lisa Yoder (Summit County), Travis Mote (NRCS), Pam Kramer (UDWR), Erin Bragg (Summit Land Conservancy), Wendy Fisher (Utah Open Lands) (*by phone*), Anthony Gray (USFS), Traci Allen (USFS), Bill Cobabe (Morgan County), Lorien Belton (USU Extension; MSARM facilitator)

Discussion and Updates

Intros and Updates

- Since the group last met the USFWS determined that greater sage-grouse was not warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act. There is still a lot of implementation to do, though. The working groups will continue to meet.
- Thomas Hoskins left his position with NRCS in Coalville. Travis Mote will fill in on some of those duties until a replacement is found. It sometimes takes a long time for the NRCS hiring process.

Research Update

Brandon Flack, USU graduate student, presented the initial data from the first season of sage-grouse tracking in the MSARM area. He has 11 GPS collars and 25 VHF collars currently on birds. The nesting and brood-rearing data suggest that the birds stay very close to the leks where they were captured. Winter data will provide a different and important view on whether the birds are completely dependent on these areas, or if they move elsewhere for winter. Several additional points from the research discussion:

- Although there is interest in knowing whether there is connectivity between DLL and Ensign Ranch populations, there is only one collar in that area, so there is not enough data to tell anything.
- There have been several instances of “creching,” (like playgroups), or “babysitting.” As the season progressed, chicks were seen either with multiple females or possibly with females that were not their mother.
- The population estimate in that East Canyon area is estimated to be 240 before the chicks, and 280 now in the fall including recruitment (new chicks). The property around the Henefer Divide lek does seem to be critical summer and fall habitat.

Brandon explained that several additional research questions have arisen out of this initial data, and he asked for the groups’ input on what might be of most interest.

- It appears that the grouse from the Henefer Divide lek use very particular areas, and appear to observe the county line, suggesting that there might be differences in vegetation quality in the immediate area that are not apparent visually. The group, after discussion,

was very interested to learn more because it might contribute to ideas for habitat management or improvement that could be implemented in the area.

- The Henefer Divide lek birds are clearly very comfortable with disturbance. Brandon explained that there might be a possibility of an entirely new research question studying the stress hormones left in fecal droppings, and comparing it to traffic or visitation levels. The group agreed that although it was a very intriguing question, it would not help us know how to better manage for the birds' success, since the stressors in question are both 1) not very possible to change, and 2) not apparently impacting the birds' ability to persist in the area. Therefore, that was a lower priority for future research.
- In the future, putting additional collars in other areas, by working with additional landowners, to help understand the larger scale bird movements and connectivity of populations is another option for more research. Additional collars that still need to be deployed, or those which may need to be redeployed, could be added to the same sites or to new sites. The group agreed that expanding the reach to other sites as much as possible was desirable.

Brandon also noted that there are likely other leks, particularly between the known leks at Henefer Divide and on Ensign Ranch. There is likely good habitat in that area and there may be lek we do not know about. Knowing about any other leks could help determine connectivity between the known leks. Winter birds movements may also aid in discovery of new leks as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are probably not sage-grouse between Ensign and Coalville, however.

The research presentation was of tremendous interest and took considerably more time than anticipated due to the large number of questions and the discussion that followed.

Wendy Fisher (who attended the meeting via conference call) suggested that she would be willing to help fundraise for additional research work if needed.

Easements conversation

The group discussed progress toward a general easement strategy for the sage-grouse habitat in the MSARM area. A small group met this summer to discuss how to create a comprehensive strategy that those pursuing easements could use to better understand what lands are highest priority for sage-grouse, either for connectivity or specific seasonal uses. Wendy noted that there is a great deal of interest in the area about easements, but not enough money to fund all of them. She noted that she is currently discussing easement options with several landowners in the East Canyon/Henefer Divide area.

A brief discussion of land/development values in the area followed. Bill noted that, at least on the Morgan side, most of the area allows only for quarter-section development, which impacts the possible development value (which is what is purchased in an easement). There are various possible funding sources, both private and public, but it would be useful to have a strategy and clearly expressed need for easements in the area before the upcoming legislative session.

One question was posed: how can Brandon's data help refine the data that NRCS uses in this area with regard to easements, habitat use areas, etc.? His data will need to be added to state-level NRCS information in order to be included in maps distributed by the state office. Once winter data is available, that information will also be useful for helping make decisions about where sagebrush treatments would be potentially good or highly problematic. It would be useful to have a presentation or other way for NRCS in this area to learn from the Strawberry sagebrush treatment projects done in Strawberry by USFS and DWR. Wendy, Erin, and others involved in easements might also be able to benefit from additional detailed understanding of how to manage sagebrush landscapes to benefit sage-grouse. Lorien will add this topic as a presentation for a future MSARM meeting.

Landowner Appreciation Dinner

The possibility of a landowner appreciation dinner was discussed, and received strong support. Several dinners have been held in other sage-grouse areas, with support from the governor's Public Lands Policy office. It would be a dinner and an opportunity for landowners to learn about the new research, the state's sage-grouse plan, and opportunities for habitat improvement and other opportunities. The group felt that a dinner of this nature would be very timely. Lorien will work to schedule a date in mid-to-late January. Brandon will invite landowners who have allowed him to access their property, and it would be an opportunity to connect with other landowners as well. Lorien will coordinate with Loralie Cox, Travis, and others as needed to get invitations out to local landowners and producers.

Brandon has been updating landowners and DWR employees over email periodically throughout the field season. Travis would be interested in these updates also. Brandon also speaks with landowners directly to keep them up to date with findings and what he and his technicians are doing.

US Forest Service Land Use Plan Amendments

Traci Allen and Anthony Gray attended the meeting to provide updates on the Forest Service sage-grouse plan amendments. Traci explained that a group was going to meet the following Monday (Nov 9) and work out how to implement the new amendments. The Forest Service has about two years to implement, so some details may take a while before they have any impact on resource users. For now, she emphasized that particularly on grazing permits, there are no changes.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will schedule a landowner dinner for January and involve Brandon and Loralie in getting invitations out.
- Brandon will take the groups' comment on research suggestions back to Terry Messmer.

- Lorien will follow-up with Brandon, Terry, and NRCS regarding how best to use the new local data in project planning.
- Brandon will add Travis to the updates list.
- The easements subteam will continue to refine the draft strategy paper that was discussed so it can be used as a fundraising tool. Lorien will follow up with individuals who can address outstanding issues identified in the recent draft.

Next Meeting

A landowner appreciation dinner will be scheduled for January. [Post-meeting update: the dinner will be January 21st.]