

**MSARM
LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: March 10, 2010

Time: 6:30 pm

Place: Wanship, Utah, Fire Station

Members Present: Michele Devaney (NRCS/Uinta Headwaters RC&D), Lorin O. Fawcett (landowner), Keith Covington (UACD), Scott Nielsen (landowner), Craig McKnight (NRCS), Thomas Hoskins (NRCS), Dave Bates (NRCS, landowner), Bill Battersby (landowner), Arlin Judd (landowner), Brad Hart (landowner), Rick Danvir (Deseret Land and Livestock), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Clint Brunson (UDWR), Scott McFarlane (UDWR), Ron Greer (UDWR), Scott Walker (UDWR), Renee Chi (USFWS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Renee Chi from the USFWS gave a presentation about the recent listing decision. She explained the listing process, including what is taken into account during the decision, the current status of sage-grouse (warranted but precluded) and discussed how this decision differed from the previous decision of “not warranted” made by the Service several years ago. Currently, the status of sage-grouse is a “Candidate Species.” This means that the state wildlife agency still retains full regulatory authority over greater sage-grouse, but the USFWS will conduct annual reviews to determine if the status of the bird has changed or not, and whether its priority for listing, with respect to other Candidate species, has changed.

Some things that have changed for sage-grouse in the past several years are: 1) an increase in West Nile Virus and a greater understanding of the severe impact that can have on sage-grouse populations, 2) greater problems with fire and cheatgrass in the western part of the range, 3) increased understanding of how energy development in sage-grouse habitat affects the birds, and several other factors. In Utah, the goal moving forward is to continue working on good projects and expand efforts. It will be particularly important to track what we do so that the annual status review for sage-grouse can account for projects that are good for sage-grouse and new things we learn.

She then took questions, which were jointly answered by Renee and Jason Robinson of the Division of Wildlife Resources.

Q: Will it change how the BLM deals with sage-grouse?

A: BLM will probably put more focus on priority areas for sage-grouse. It may also mean more consistency as Resource Management Plans come up for renewal. Oil and gas regulations may have more stringent restrictions as a result as well.

Q: Will there be required changes for grazing on BLM?

A: Possibly, but the bulk of the focus will probably be on energy development impacts.

Q: What about the impact of predation on sage-grouse?

A: Although I didn't mention it in the presentation, predation was also discussed in the FWS finding as an influence on sage-grouse. One factor this year with predation is the reduced rabbit populations, which mean greater impacts to sage-grouse. Jason also mentioned that ongoing raven control does happen in targeted areas around the state. Funding for that control has recently been cut, however, so it is hard to do as much as is necessary. Government trappers (USDA-APHIS/ Wildlife Services) do a lot of work to control predators for sage-grouse. Rick Danvir mentioned that on Deseret, it appears that red foxes have a much greater influence on sage-grouse populations than coyotes, and that in fact having coyotes may keep down red fox populations. If one coyote pair is replaced by ten red fox pairs, sage-grouse may suffer more, so the predator relationships are complex. Dedicated hunters or other volunteers can help control some predators, but ravens can only be killed with poisoned eggs that require a handler's license only held by Wildlife Services.

Q: Are fences a problem for sage-grouse?

A: In certain areas, such as near leks, especially when fences are hard for grouse to see, they can be a problem. Most fences are not a problem, however.

Q: Are raptors a problem for sage-grouse?

A: they are a sage-grouse predator, and are a bigger problem when there are nearby tall structures, like power poles, for them to perch on and watch for grouse.

Q: Are sage-grouse migratory or not?

A: It depends a lot on the population. Some populations summer and winter in small areas close to each other, while other populations move long distances (sometimes 50 or more miles) between summer and winter. Because it is important to understand where a population spends its time in order to help improve habitat, radio telemetry studies are very valuable but need to be done individually for each population to get a very good picture of sage-grouse movements throughout the year.

Q: Are there priority areas in Utah?

A: Yes, there are key important areas for sage-grouse. But more importantly we need to know population by population what the limiting factors are, so we can help address that concern.

Q: We need more outreach to housing developments that are moving into sagebrush.

A: We agree. MSARM can discuss strategies and places to focus during the next meeting.

Q: Does DWR need more telemetry work in this area?

A: Yes. We need more information on nesting and wintering areas. Clint Brunson and Scott Walker are working on telemetry funding. Radio collars cost about \$180 each, and then we need to follow them throughout the year to find where they are. A good study can cost about \$50,000

for time, travel, and equipment. One challenge in the MSARM area is that access to private land can be difficult, to follow the grouse where they are going. Telemetry studies are great also because they frequently lead to the realization that there are more grouse out there than we thought.

Q: There is a new pipeline currently slated to go within 200 yards of a lek. How will that affect the grouse?

A: It could be a major problem. We should approach the pipeline company, as they may be willing to provide money to fund a study of impacts. There may also be mitigation money available to help the population in other ways.

Jason noted that NRCS is about to announce that \$16 million dollars will be put into the EQIP and WHIP programs to help sage-grouse. It will be 75% cost share, up to 90% in some cases. Utah will get probably about \$1 million of that money. More details will be announced soon once it is official. Signups will take place from the announcement date through late April.

Strategies and Actions Review

The group reviewed each of the strategies and discussed work from last year as well as upcoming work. The updates will be recorded in the annual report. Action items or other items of discussion include:

1. Michelle Devaney will get in touch with Scott Walker regarding seed mixes
2. The group should engage the Department of Agriculture (GIP, Bill Hopkins) to ask about benefits or detrimental effects on sage-grouse from 2-4D spraying of sagebrush
3. John Jauzzi (pron. Yazi) from the abatement district may be interested in getting involved in the working group regarding West Nile Virus.
4. It would be good if the group could discuss lek etiquette for the many groups that come through to view the birds on the Henefer lek especially
5. NRCS will be getting a substantial amount of money to invest in sage-grouse projects. More information should be available soon.
6. We may want to get the Summit Land Conservancy more involved in meetings.

Actions Taken

-None

Follow-up Needed

- Future meeting agendas will address several issues brought up here: educating people associated with housing developments about sage-grouse issues, upcoming telemetry studies, and other upcoming actions.

- Also see the six items above under “Strategies and Actions”

NEXT MEETING: Summer field tour, date to be determined. We may try to coordinate with the weed management area. We could advertise through NRCS and QRM. One possible location would be Deseret. June would be a good time.