

**MSARM
LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: July 6, 2010 FIELD TOUR

Time: 9:00 am

Place: Henefer, Utah, Rodeo Grounds starting point

Members Present: Steve Wilcox (NRCS/UDWR), Michele Devaney (NRCS/Uinta Headwaters RC&D), Danny McBride (NRCS), Derek Jackson (NRCS), Keith Covington (UACD), Craig McKnight (NRCS), Desiree van Dyke (UACD), Nathan Darnall (Audubon), Mike Welch (QRM), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Dave Rich (UDWR), Ron Greer (UDWR), Scott McFarlane (UDWR), Renée Chi (USFWS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension)

Field Tour Highlights

The MSARM group toured several spots up outside Henefer, then visited the Henefer-Echo Wildlife Management Area to discuss current threats to local sage-grouse populations, strategies for managing those threats, and both past and ongoing habitat projects.

The first stop was on Highway 65 above Henefer, at the Henefer-Divide lek. The lek is well-known and gets significant attention and traffic from birders during the lekking season. In some cases this human presence is very disturbing to the birds, and they do not stay long after sunrise on the lek. In addition, traffic mortalities are a concern as there is no signage on the road and birds frequently strut on the pavement (the highway partially covered the original lek site). One thing that may be happening here, which has been documented in Wyoming, is that male lek attendance stays roughly the same but recruitment into the population (breeding success) gradually declines with additional disturbance, so the effects of the compounded disturbance could be gradually impacting the population. Without brood success data, it is difficult to say.

The group discussed several ideas for handling the threats at the lek.

- Audubon is willing to fund and have volunteers install fence reflectors for the fences immediately around the lek, in order to decrease the likelihood of fatal bird strikes on the fence wires in the area. The funding is in place and volunteers are available; all they need is permission from the private landowners on either side of the road. Scott McFarlane agreed to help communicate to landowners about the project. The Richins own and graze the side of the road across from the lek, and would likely allow the fence reflectors.
- The road mortality issue would be greatly helped by seasonal signage indicating that drivers should slow down for wildlife. Apparently UDOT was uninterested in addressing the issue when similar concerns were raised several years ago and Audubon was willing to fund the signs. Lorien will work with UDWR staff to raise the issue with UDOT again, in the hopes that the recent USFWS finding may make the signs more feasible.
- It was noted that the lek is slowly becoming somewhat populated with sagebrush. The

group discussed possible mowing projects to make the strutting area more open and thus more appealing to the birds. Another option of mowing a new open space slightly farther from the road was also considered, although Jason Robinson noted that efforts to relocate leks has often been unsuccessful, perhaps due in part to the auditory quality certain locations have within the landscape. Regardless, any vegetation manipulation work would require landowner involvement. The topic will be raised in future discussions.

- Birder behavior can have a detrimental effect on the strutting sage-grouse, causing them to temporarily abandon the lek due to noise disturbance. The group discussed having a kiosk or other information available at the site to remind people to stay quiet, remain in their vehicles, and not disturb the birds. This could also be a venue to discuss other projects such as fence reflectors and any lek vegetation projects that might occur in the future. No specific actions were recommended but either UDOT or the private landowners would need to be involved in any discussion about signage of that nature.

Scott McFarlane explained some of the local population dynamics as far as they are known. On an average year, 38 birds can be seen strutting on this lek. There is another lek with several miles, known as the Pioneer lek, which used to be considered a satellite lek of the Henefer-Divide lek but is more likely a separate lek. The leks used to be counted together, with a range of between 2 and 120 birds counted over many years, but they are now monitored and recorded separately. Lek counts are conducted at least three times per season on these leks and the highest number is recorded. Some of the birds on the Henefer-Divide lek may relocate to the Pioneer lek if the birder disturbance is too high. This population has not been hunted since the 1970's.

It appears that this population, estimated to be just under 500 birds, is mostly non-migratory. The birds breed, summer, and winter in the immediate vicinity of the two main leks and one nearby smaller lek. The whole population is in the vicinity of the East Canyon Reservoir, which is mostly undeveloped and therefore unusual in this area. Jason Robinson noted that its isolated nature makes this population different than others in Utah that are connected to larger surrounding populations. It makes this population more vulnerable to a variety of factors, including weather and the other threats already noted. There one easement nearby but for the population to be secure, more of the area would need to be protected. Most of the area is privately owned and currently leased for sheep grazing; however, a crucial large parcel of land has been purchased by a developer. The area has been primarily sheep grazed for approximately 100 years.

Renee Chi noted that the Kern River Pipeline is slated to come through the area. Several individuals (Renee, Amy Defreese, and Pam Kramer) have been discussing mitigation options in the area. One possibility is that they could fund a study to radio collar and track sage-grouse in the area to have a better sense of what areas the population uses, and therefore how best to protect them. Terry Messmer at USU and several DWR employees are also working to find funding for a radio collaring project in the area. Additional knowledge on use areas would help target areas for possible conservation easement discussions.

The second stop was at the top of a hill overlooking the Pioneer lek, near the proposed pipeline path and on the private ground that has been purchased for development. It appears that the pipeline is likely to go within 400-500 feet of the lek. The area around the lek is likely to be critical brood-rearing habitat and would also be the flatter areas which would be most desirable for a developer to build on. Currently no development has occurred in the area yet. The campground across Hwy 65 is the primary use in the area other than hunting and grazing.

The group discussed the possibility of approaching the developers with information about sage-grouse, such as details about this population, the recent FWS finding of warranted but precluded, and ideas for how to mitigate development impacts to the population. The conservation district might be able to assist with this education effort. Other ideas included finding a conservation buyer for the area, although it was noted that the developers are likely hoping for a return on investment greater than a conservation buyer could provide. Lorien will look into options and discuss this with Joan at TNC and explore other possibilities. The developer could also be approached to consider a conservation easement on the property.

The group concluded that one key strategy for this and other future sage-grouse issues is to get information to the county commissioners and county planners so they understand sage-grouse issues. Mike Welch, Scott McFarlane, Steve Wilcox, Jason Robinson, and Lorien will work to develop a strategy and a presentation that would be helpful for the county. It was noted that Clare and Kay Richins may be supportive of conservation efforts in the area since the area purchased for development is their lambing ground in addition to a grazing area.

For the second half of the tour, the group drove to the Henefer-Echo Wildlife Management area on the other side of Interstate 80 from the town of Henefer. One of the management goals for the HEWMA is to increase sagebrush density for wintering big game. Many years ago, the area near the first two tour stops was burned. It was then very heavily grazed for approximately 15 years in order to decrease the crested wheatgrass dominance. Many pasture fences were removed as well. The sagebrush in the area is now relatively thick and the project seems to have worked well.

On the other end of the management area, much of which was purchased in a later transaction, sagebrush is not as thick and the area cannot support as many deer and elk as the DWR would like it to. The tour stopped at a project area near the other entrance where several different chemical treatments to reduce grass cover had been applied in recent weeks, with the eventual goal of increasing shrub density in the area to benefit big game. The lessons learned here may be helpful for landowners hoping to increase habitat for big game.

Sage grouse used the WMA historically, and these treatments may also benefit the grouse if sage-brush density improves in more areas of the management area as is hoped. There used to be sage-grouse use in winter on the bare knobs, but they have not been seen in recent years. Similarly, a nearby lek has not had birds on it for 5-6 years. The WMA would be good winter habitat but would need additional work to be valuable brood-rearing habitat.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will coordinate with Scott McFarlane, Nathan Darnall, and others to discuss the fence deflector project with landowners of the Henefer-Divide lek area.
- Lorien will coordinate with Pam Kramer and appropriate FWS staff to approach UDOT regarding road signage near the lek.
- Lorien will contact Joan at TNC, Amy at the FWS, and Carrus Land Systems folks (Sheldon Atwood) regarding conservation buyer information.
- Mike Welch, Scott McFarlane, Steve Wilcox, Jason Robinson, and Lorien will work to develop a strategy and a presentation that would be helpful for the county
- Lorien will include Michelle Devaney in discussions of any informational brochures or other educational efforts to see where resources could be combined to get the information to specific audiences.
- Lorien will make sure that several issues without specific action items, such as lek vegetation treatments and including the developer in conversations, are included on upcoming meeting agendas for additional consideration.
- Lorien will attempt to find the thesis that was done on the treatments in the WMA and send it to Scott McFarlane, Steve Wilcox, and Mike Quinn.