

**STRAWBERRY
VALLEY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: November 1, 2016

Place: Wasatch County Health Building

Members Present: Anthony Gray (USFS), Jim Percy (USFS), Terri Pope (UDWR), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Chelcey Larsen (NRCS), Matt Howard (UWDR), Jared Baxter (BYU/UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

[Note: the spring meeting was scheduled for April 21, but cancelled when all planned presenters had last-minute conflicts. The summer field tour happened on August 2, 2016.]

Agency staffing changes

There were many staff changes to report since the last meeting.

- At the Forest Service, Jeff Schram has left the Heber-Kamas District Ranger position. Jess Clark is currently filling that position on detail. Traci Allen also left, and the position will hopefully be filled in the coming months. Evan Glenn, who worked on recreation topics on the Heber-Kamas, is now the BLM's lead recreation manager at the state office (replacing Dave Jeppesen, who is now with BLM's Washington office and will remain based in Salt Lake City, working on sage-grouse and recreation issues nationally for BLM).
- At NRCS, Renee Chi is now the Utah state biologist. The SGI biologist (jointly NRCS and other funders) Leah Lewis has left to join the BLM in Vernal. Hopefully that position will also be refilled.
- Jared Baxter will be defending this month at BYU, and will likely be moving to Nevada. He is interested in staying in touch with the SVARM group. Randy Larsen will still be at BYU, although it is not clear whether there will be future graduate students involved with Strawberry or not.
- At the Ute Tribe, Roland Cook switched jobs. Jamie, the biologist, is now our contact.
- At DWR, Robbie Edgel has replaced Allison Whitaker as the Restoration Biologist.

Forest Service plan implementation updates

Jim Percy and Anthony Gray provided updates on how the Forest Service plan implementation is developing.

USFS contracted with USU to conduct Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) fieldwork for the Heber-Kamas Ranger District. Those vegetation assessments have been done on all allotments in the Strawberry area. (Also Vernon.) Those assessments include grass height, sagebrush canopy

cover, and forb component measurements. These measurements will tell us if the area will or should be able to support sage-grouse. The analysis of that data is in progress now. Other (non-grazed) areas will be assessed in the future (summer 2017). This coming spring (2017), the guidelines from the USFS plan amendments for sage-grouse will be incorporated into grazing agreements such as Annual Operation Instructions (AOIs) and allotment management plans. After a few years of analysis, the need for any grazing management changes will be assessed based on existing data. The group briefly discussed that the current grass-height measurement metric included in the plans' sage-grouse amendments is being examined in light of conflicting studies about the importance of grass height. It is unclear right now how much flexibility USFS will have if the grass heights do not meet the 7-inch standard, but Jim noted that in Strawberry particularly, there is not too much concern about that as the precipitation is usually relatively high.

Jared asked whether USFS is comparing the habitat data that USU has just gathered with existing long-term habitat data collected by BYU studies in the same areas. Jim noted that it would be useful, if Jared could send him more information or the data so that comparisons might be made when possible. So far, USFS has not asked BYU for that data, to the knowledge of those at the meeting.

In addition to the HAF field work on allotments, Forest Service and DWR will be meeting soon to make sure that the maps that USFS uses are as accurate as possible with regard to current understandings about sage-grouse habitat use.

Habitat improvement project updates

Anthony is still working on the NEPA for the series of habitat projects that have been being discussed. He currently has an internal proposal in within the FS to get the NEPA done. The first project (probably Co-op Creek or the south side of Strawberry) will likely be proposed for WRI funding in Dec 2017/Jan 2018.

There might be weed-specific funding through FS this upcoming year to spray musk thistle. The group discussed the possibility that several years of musk thistle control might be appropriate before treating co-op at all, so starting on the south side project as the first habitat improvement phase might be wise. The group wondered how much musk thistle it takes to actually outcompete sagebrush. It was noted that although musk thistle is a weed, it is also a forb, and controlling it also reduces other forbs. Chain harrow might be a good option for keeping the weed release relatively manageable, versus other treatment options.

Chelcey noted that the landowner in the Wildcat area is putting in several wells with solar pumps and troughs, and possibly a storage tank, to address water distribution and availability issues in the area. It should help disperse the livestock use in the area as well as provide more consistent water availability. The landowner is concerned about elk taking available water. DWR is also putting guzzlers on DWR land to help keep elk on state property. Where possible, DWR is

asking for water storage tanks to be buried so they do not provide additional predator perches.

The group briefly discussed escape ramp requirements for water troughs. Brian Maxfield noted that he has seen multiple instances of sage-grouse drowning in water troughs. Sticks or easily movable “ramps” are not as effective for helping animals escape the tanks when they fall in; the ramps need to be installed permanently.

Developments update: Strawberry Cove, Strawberry Highlands, and an oil well

Two ongoing development proposals near Strawberry Reservoir are on the agenda for the November 10th Wasatch County Planning Commission meeting in Heber.

Strawberry Cove

One item is an extension for preliminary approval of the Strawberry Cove development near Soldier Creek Marina. The SVARM group has discussed this project previously, but reviewed the map and overall plan. It is for 87 single-family lots in a large development. The project was conceived and given original approval before the zooming of that area existed. An original stipulation was that some land would be traded to the Forest Service. Lorien will contact Doug Smith in the planning office to inquire as to the exact location of those lands and the current status of the trade.

Strawberry Cove is within the state's Strawberry sage-grouse management area (SGMA). Within the SGMA it is also in an area of sage-grouse habitat (as opposed to opportunity-area or non-habitat designations). Therefore, any disturbance in that area will be counted by the state as contributing to the disturbance percentage, which is capped by the state sage-grouse plan. The state (through DNR) is responsible for making sure that permanent disturbance to sage-grouse habitat in the SGMAs is mitigated at a 4:1 ratio. Alan Clark, with the Department of Natural Resources, has been working on developing a mitigation program for how the state will handle that. Because Cove is on private land, there are no regulatory requirements for the landowner or county based on disturbances that happen, but the state has a draft rule that will direct how the state handles that situation. Once that rule is finalized, we'll know exactly what the options will be for mitigation of the Strawberry Cove-related disturbance.

Also, although it isn't part of the same development, the SVARM group discussed that any development of the private parcels further south of the Cove development would be of much greater concern for that particular sage-grouse population, as it is an area the grouse locally use very actively throughout the year. The Cove area is habitat, but the areas farther south get considerably more use.

Strawberry Highlands

The group also looked at maps of the Strawberry Highlands development. The SGMA overlaps a small corner of the larger Strawberry Ranch Resort area, but none in the area where Phase 1A,

which is being considered for conditional use, site plan, and final plat approval by the Planning Commission on Nov 10th. Jared noted that last time he was in the Twelve-Hundred Dollar Ridge area to the south of the Strawberry Ranch Resort, there was a new fence at the ridgeline.

Energy Development

Brian Maxfield noted that there is continued progress toward an oil well on Coleman's property. DWR (Ben Williams and Randall Thacker) has been involved in conversations about routing the access road away from the lek. Other discussions about reclamation strategies have also taken place. The well is far away from other producing wells, so it will be interesting to see how successful it is.

Follow-up Needed

- Jared will send Jim Percy information on the vegetation data collected by BYU.
- Lorien will send Anthony, Chelcey, and Matt the links to the developments
- Lorien will summarize the conversation for Doug Smith and follow-up after the meeting
- Lorien will ask the county what areas are part of the USFS swap with Strawberry Cove
- Final information on the new state mitigation rule will hopefully be available at the next meeting; Lorien will work on scheduling a presentation on that topic.

Next Meetings

The next meeting will be scheduled for around February, using a doodle poll. An idea for the summer field tour: calibrating our sense of what, for example, 15% sagebrush cover really looks like.