

**STRAWBERRY  
VALLEY  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date: November 13, 2013**

**Place:** Wasatch County Health Building

**Members Present:** Jim Spencer (NRCS), Natasha Gruber (SGI/NRCS), Anthony Gray (USFS), Kim Hersey (UDWR), Alison Whittaker (UDWR), Chelcey Holbrook (NRCS), Keith Covington (UACD), Jared Baxter (BYU), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

*Upcoming Sage-Grouse Summit*

There will be a Utah Sage-Grouse Summit on February 18-19, 2014, in Salt Lake City. The meeting will focus on the implementation of the State Sage-Grouse Plan, as well as providing updates on recent research. In addition, USU is organizing a national Forum for sage-grouse local working groups that will take place in November of 2014. Details on the February meeting will be emailed out soon.

*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. 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 meeting for the SVARM group will be in Salt Lake City on December 10<sup>th</sup>, at 5:30 pm at the library.

### *Transmission Line Updates*

There are two transmission lines that have had proposed routes through the Fruitland area, where many sage-grouse in the higher elevation SVARM population winter, in addition to leks in that area. Lorien showed maps that outline the current preferred routes presented by the companies.

One line, TransWest, had its comment period during the summer (2013). Many of the stakeholders, according to a USFS report, are in favor of the route proposed in the alternative preferred by the Forest Service and BLM. That route goes through the Fruitland area.

The Gateway South line will have a draft EIS coming out soon for comment (as of September 2013, the predicted timeframe was February 2014). The "applicant-proposed" route follows almost, but not exactly, the same path through the Fruitland area as the TransWest preferred alternative does. Both proposed transmission lines follow existing defined energy transmission corridors. Lorien will keep the group apprised when the comment period begins next year.

### *NRCS and SGI Update*

Natasha provided updates on NRCS work for sage-grouse. Tammy Koldyke is moving out of the SGI position. Natasha will be expanding her position to cover the SVARM area. Lowell

Gardner's position has now been filled, by Chelcey Holbrook, who was in attendance. Also, NRCS will sometime soon be consolidating from three Areas to just two, but the boundaries of the new regions are still undetermined.

The Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) is currently taking applications for projects. The deadline has not yet been set. The current funding for GRP and WRP expired and will need to wait for the next Farm Bill until we know what the situation with those programs will be. Right now, NRCS is not taking applications for those programs. Other SGI funds, under EQIP, are funded under a continuing resolution. There is one application so far in from the SVARM area, from someone around Fruitland. If funded, that project could include fencing, grazing management, and lop and scatter of PJ.

The statewide fence marker project, although delayed at the state level for some time, has regained much of its momentum, and markers will be coming from NRCS's state office soon. In addition, however, Natasha has mobilized many Dedicated Hunters, many of whom have made fence markers, and some of whom have put them up on fences. About 55 hunters have been interested in the program this far. They have dedicated 500 hours, 3700 markers, and marked 8-10 miles of fence so far. Natasha still has some extra markers available that need to be put up on a fence somewhere. Natasha is also working closely with Anthony and Kim to get markers on appropriate fences on Forest Service land. Lorien will put Natasha in touch with the NRCS office in Coalville, which has volunteers but no fence markers.

### *Research Updates*

Jared Baxter provided research updates. He is now a new graduate student at BYU. Riley Peck graduated some time ago, and Matt Westover did a GIS analysis on brood habitat.

Jared reported that 2013 was a good year, with 100% nest initiation and 1/3 of hens recruiting at least one chick. New collars were put on this spring and fall, and they will trap again to add more in the spring of 2014. Anthony Gray helped with trapping.

At least one chapter of Jared's thesis will relate to sage-grouse use of the habitat treatments in the Strawberry area. Other research in the works includes chick survival across the 15-year period that this population has been monitored.

### *Predation Issues*

Red foxes are being seen more frequently in the area. There are lots of ravens in Co-op Creek. The group recommended that research on predators be available on a table at the February conference, so people can pick it up and read it for themselves. Lorien noted that the Southern Rockies LCC has put a sage-grouse research database online. Lorien will send the link to the group.

## *Energy project update*

The small company that was proposing to drill several exploration wells in the area has been in discussions with local landowners and the UDWR about possible road routes. One route would have gone through sage-grouse areas. The drilling proposed would not be in sage-grouse habitat. At this point it looks unlikely that the project will cause any concerns for sage-grouse.

## *Role of LWGs in State Plan Implementation*

The group discussed possible projects for the future that would help implement the state plan. PJ and other habitat enhancement projects discussed include:

- PJ treatments in the ring around Tabby Mountain. A huge amount of Phase I PJ removal has already been done in the Fruitland area particularly. There may be opportunities to do some light maintenance that would keep the winter range free of small whips and save money in the long run.
- The majority of opportunities in the area involve habitat diversification (i.e. knocking back crested wheatgrass) and weed management.

Miles, with DWR, is focused on these kinds of projects. The Wasatch Conservation District could also be more involved. Chelcey will help define the need, and involve Natasha if a CD event in the area could use a speaker or info pertaining to sage-grouse. The UDWR and the Forest Service are working on a new NEPA for a next round of treatments for sage-grouse in the area. Considerations include mowing instead of harrowing in silver sage areas to get the treatment to last longer. The Sage Creek Bay treatment is the last phase in the pre-approved NEPA that covered the successful sagebrush treatment projects Trout Creek, Chicken Springs, etc. The group is very supportive of further efforts.

The LWG noted that participating in the state plan implementation will be easier to document once we know what tracking system we are using and how to document sage-grouse benefit.

## **Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will tell the group when the comment period begins for Gateway South.
- Lorien will put Natasha in touch with the NRCS in Coalville, which needs fence markers.
- The group recommended that research on predators be available on a table at the February conference, so people can pick it up and read it for themselves.
- Lorien will send the link to the Southern Rockies LCC' online sage-grouse research database to the group.
- Chelcey will help get the Wasatch CD more involved in habitat work for sage-grouse, define the need, and involve Natasha if a CD event in the area could use a speaker or info pertaining to sage-grouse.

**NEXT MEETING:**

The next meeting will be January 13, at 1 pm in the Heber County Health Building.