

**STRAWBERRY  
VALLEY  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date: November 18, 2015**

**Place:** Wasatch County Health Building

**Members Present:** Traci Allen (USFS), Anthony Gray (USFS), Leah Lewis (NRCS/SGI), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Chelcey Holbrook (NRCS), Alison Whittaker (UWDR), Jared Baxter (BYU/UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

This was the first sit-down meeting for the group since the beginning of the year. Two field trips, one in the spring to visit leks, and one in August to visit projects, occurred in between.

Main topics at this meeting were research updates from BYU, project planning for future habitat improvements, based on what we learned from past treatments, and how the new USFS plan amendments for sage-grouse would be implemented and how they might impact treatment planning and other decision-making in the future.

*BYU research update*

Jared Baxter provided an update on ongoing BYU research efforts in the area. Despite very high nest initiation and nest success, brood success for the collared hens at Strawberry this year was only about average, at around 25%. There are about 15-20 collared hens in the area. Birds are definitely using the past habitat treatments, although there is a huge edge effect. Most brood locations are within 60 meters of an edge. They were measured from June through September.

Someone asked if the type of treatment (mowing, dixie harrow, etc.) made a difference. Jared explained that there were too many confounding factors to be able to isolate the effect of treatment type. He also explained that although most treatments are in mountain big sagebrush, the Sage Creek site has more silver sagebrush.

The group reviewed the history of past treatments, including locations and treatment types. All were in areas that are not officially grazed, although a few have cattle intrusion issues occasionally.

In response to a question about how to best explain the benefits of additional treatments, based on what we have learned or accomplished from past treatments, Jared reminded everyone that linking any given year's sage-grouse population to treatments is really not possible to do. Sage-grouse are cyclical, and although the birds are certainly using the treatments, it is not possible to draw any direct causal inferences between treatments and population trends.

Jared did explain one clear pattern that is likely attributable to the treatments. Before the treatments, the main driver of sage-grouse locations was distance from trees. After the treatments, the major driver was the distance from the edge of the treatment.

The group also discussed what is known about winter movements. There have not been any GPS collars put on the birds in this population, however.

### *Future Projects Planning*

There is currently an effort to plan additional treatments in this high-elevation sagebrush to increase the diversity of the sagebrush landscape and improve forb and insect availability for brood-rearing. Alison Whittaker provided the group with several general areas proposed for future treatments. After considerable discussion about known bird movements, sage-grouse habitat usage patterns, location of wet areas, and the location of known weed issues, the group concluded that Co-op Creek was the highest priority treatment (to be considered as a first phase in a multi-year proposal). Among the reasons: there is already pre-treatment bird data there, and there would likely be two years of data before the project gets implemented. Also, the area is not grazed, so any possible complications due to the intersection of grazing management and new USFS plan amendments would not be an issue. Jared noted that because there is a lek in the area, treatments should stay west of the road. It will be important to be careful on the west side, as the lek is already very open. He also noted that going too far north might impact the wet area that grouse use, so to primarily focus on the areas west of the road and roughly south of the lek. There are also weed issues in the area which will need to be addressed in the NEPA and the project implementation.

Chipman Creek (also not grazed as far as the group was aware) might be a good second project. Additional areas considered, but not discussed in as much detail, were Mud Creek, Horse Creek, Indian Creek West, and Indian Creek East.

Leah noted that for areas that are grazed, such as some of the other proposed areas, the Sage-Grouse Initiative may be able to help with payments to grazers who could improve their management in sage-grouse habitat in conjunction with any treatment projects. Alison, Leah, Traci, and Anthony will work closely to make sure grazing plans are addressed far in advance to allow grazing permittees to adapt if rest is required after treatments.

Leah explained that there are also opportunities to work with the Ute tribe on projects adjacent to future or past treatments in the area. She will stay in touch with the tribe and work to coordinate any project planning that might be appreciated.

Traci, Anthony, and Alison will work together to pull together the NEPA for these proposed projects.

The group also discussed the idea of re-treating some areas, such as Trout Creek, if the original

NEPA allowed for that possibility. Anthony will look for the old NEPA document and if a retreatment makes sense, consider submitting it to the WRI database for this upcoming round of funding.

### *USFS Plan Amendment Updates*

Everyone at the meeting was familiar with the background of the new Forest Service plan amendments. Traci explained that the USFS was working to develop regional-level guidance on implementation of the new plans, particularly for topics like grazing and mitigation, to ensure consistency in implementation. However, the amendments are being integrated into the current Forest Plans. Tracy is leading this process for the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache. The process is somewhat complicated.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Anthony will look up the original NEPA and see if retreating Trout Creek or other areas in the future is covered in that document.
- Traci, Anthony, and Alison will work together to pull together the NEPA for the next set of proposed projects.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be scheduled for early February.