

**STRAWBERRY
VALLEY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: November 29, 2017

Place: Wasatch County Health Building

Members Present: Terri Pope (UDWR), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Chelcey Larsen (NRCS), Matt Howard (UWDR), Leah Lewis (BLM), Jim Spencer, NRCS), Charlie Holtz (NRCS/Pheasants Forever), Richard Mingo (Mitigation Commission), Eric Tacker (USU), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Brief updates

- There were several fire starts around Strawberry Reservoir this fall, on the first day of the deer hunt. Two of the four starts were in Co-op Creek, and burned together for a total of about 800-900 acres in the Trout Creek area. The fire was stopped by some large aspen patches. The resulting area will probably be improved for brood rearing.
- A private stock water system is being proposed to SGI for next summer.
- USFS was not in attendance; Lorien will ask Anthony about the status of the NEPA on possible habitat projects, including the previous idea that weed treatment on Co-op should precede any other habitat work there.
- BLM has a scoping period that ends at the end of this week, looking at whether changes should be made to the plan amendments that were put in place in Sept 2015.
- The private landowners in the Fruitland area have recently reengaged in sage-grouse conversations and are making progress. They received a national CIG grant. They will be putting in a new fence to restrict ATV access, an ongoing issue for them. The “fence to nowhere” on DWR will be removed. DWR has access to do lek counts—there are 3 active leks on the lower areas, and flights have seen birds higher up as well. The family is interested in making it good for sage-grouse on their property. Charlie will be working with the family as they are interested in potentially getting a herd and a management plan.
- Strawberry Cove is on the agenda for a December Wasatch Planning meeting, requesting final approval for a 8.75 acre subdivision for 6 lots. Lorien will stay in touch with the county. The group wondered about the exact location of any land-swap lands, as originally associated with that subdivision approval. Lorien will heck with the county and with Anthony to see where those lands would be.
- Lorien asked the group if anyone was familiar with the FOSV group and if it would be of interest to merge the sage-grouse group with them. No one present at SVARM attends those groups regularly and no one was sure of the extent of their focus or interests.

Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) and Grazing Presentation

Eric Thacker, from USU range extension, gave a presentation on the USFS use of the sage-grouse habitat assessment framework monitoring, as well as information on what is known about

the relationship between livestock grazing and sage-grouse. The HAF is a system developed because BLM and the USFS needed a vegetation monitoring system to implement the plan amendments that were approved in 2015. There are four “orders,” or scales, of HAF:

- 1st order (rangewide)
- 2nd order (regional)
- 3^d order (seasonal habitat)
- 4th order (quality of seasonal habitat: what it actually looks like on the ground)

Dave Dahlgren and Terry Messmer are currently working on models to improve the 3rd-order maps. Their work will produce a map with probabilities of occupancy in a certain area, based on habitat characteristics. This will be very helpful in the future for project planning. This work is being paid for by BLM.

Eric has a contract with the Uintah-Wasatch-Cache National Forest to work on 4th order HAF in specific areas. His crews have now collected two years of data at the pasture level, including in the Strawberry, Vernon and Cache-Rich areas. This detailed 4th-order analysis involves sampling from 5 random points per pasture. Because it is being done per pasture, it can be used for individual pasture management. But because the points are random, it can also be rolled up into higher-level analyses. The Forest Service has not funded any third-order HAF work. Instead, 3rd-order revisions are being done by hand locally, to some degree incorporating knowledge from the 4th order. The 4th-order data is largely being used to answer questions like “are we currently meeting brood-rearing habitat quality in areas designated as brood-rearing?” USFS will use the 4th-order HAF data to 1) assess whether seasonal habitats are generally meeting the requirements for those habitats, and 2) assess whether management changes are needed in given pastures based on the HAF data. It is not clear yet how this data will actually be used to inform decisions.

The USFS standards of habitat quality are based on the Connolly guidelines. It includes evaluating grazed pastures based on whether the grass height has a seven-inch stubble height.

Not much is actually known about the direct relationship between grouse and grazing, although more studies are working on the issue now. Some of the past assumptions about grouse and grazing were based on indirect effects (for example, when grazing management practices removed sagebrush that the birds used, without taking the birds’ needs into account). There has also been a bias with how grass height has been measured by grouse researchers over the years, because grass height at failed nests were measured when they failed (earlier in the year), while successful nests were measured much later, after grass had had more time to grow. The Record of Decision that the Forest Service used to implement the HAF did allow for consideration of the plant community during assessment (so it would be okay to say “it couldn’t possibly meet that 7-inch standard here for site-specific reasons” at the pasture when that was the case).

More recent studies have found no relationship between nest success and grazing. Cover is important to the birds, but it is not as clear that grass cover is actually a selection criteria for nests, particularly since grass is not very tall when the female grouse choose their nest sites.

There is some research to suggest that moving grazing off in the late seasons at low elevations is good for grouse. Eric is currently interested in the importance of perennial bunch grasses in the sagebrush ecosystem.

State sage-grouse plan revisions

Ben Nadolski called in to the meeting to provide an update on the state sage-grouse plan revision. Most of the individuals in the room had been at previous discussions, so Ben invited anyone with additional comments to contact him directly. He shared some of the topics that had come up over the course of many previous meetings.

- There will not be huge changes from the current plan, but valuable improvements
- There will be improved communication about what is in the plan
- A process exists to accommodate boundary changes, that will now be included in the plan
- Maps have been updated over the years, but the hard copies were not. For the new plan, they will be moving to online maps only. The plan will reference the website where the most current version of the plans are located and accessible.
- Population objectives will remain but be reworded
- Viability concept will be revisited, so there's a tool to tell when a population is in trouble, so management actions can be taken
- It will be reformatted and there will be no appendices (those will be just available online). The main plan will be shorter and cleaner to read.
- The Governor's Executive order will be incorporated into the plan
- The two habitat objective acreage numbers will be combined
- The habitat preservation objective will be refined to focus on quality over specific quantity
- A mesic goal will be incorporated somehow, directed toward wet meadows and BDAs

The draft plan will be presented to the Plan Implementation Council (PIC), ideally before the start of the legislative session. The group noted that the only change of known potential interest to SVARM would be to consider grouse that go to Tabby Mountain.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will ask Anthony about NEPA and Co-op Creek weed treatment next steps.
- Lorien will check with Wasatch County and with Anthony to see where those lands are that would be part of the USFS swap with Strawberry Cove

Next Meeting

At the next meeting, discussion of the finalized mitigation rule could be of interest. The next meeting date was not set. A meeting in January might make sense if there are WRI projects to discuss in person before the Springville ranking meeting; otherwise the next meeting will be in February or March 2018.