

**STRAWBERRY
VALLEY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: December 18, 2018

Place: Wasatch County Health Building

Members Present: Chelcey Larsen (NRCS), Shane Hill (UWDR), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Teri Pope (UDWR), Tyler Nelson (BLM), Jared Reese (BLM), Randy Larsen (BYU), Ryan Howell (BYU), Mary Stewart (Moon Lake Electric), Curtis Miles (Moon Lake Electric), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Population research updates

Randy Larsen provided the group with background on the sage-grouse research in the area, which began in 1998 when the Strawberry Reservoir flooded out many sage-grouse leks and other habitat. The mitigation Commission funds sage-grouse research and local habitat protection as a result. Randy joined the project at BYU in 2008, and has been working with sage-grouse in the Strawberry area for ten years. Ryan is Randy's masters student. He will be likely be looking at seasonal habitat selection and also doing 3-D modeling of sagebrush.

Randy and Ryan updated the group on local research efforts. The first GPS collars deployed in the area are returning data, and another 20 are planned for the spring. The goal is to eventually reach 40 collars out in the field. Ryan demonstrated the publicly available website where the birds' movements can be seen. The data are somewhat scrambled so exact locations are not available, but it is still a great tool to see where different birds are spending time. Lorien will share the website with the group. Randy noted that his recent sabbatical with DWR showed him how wildlife managers use research ad data in real time, and made the development of the website more important to him.

The data from the last month shows that birds are either wintering down in Fruitland, near Current Creek, or near the shores of the reservoir.

Randy also explained that 18 clutches of sage-grouse eggs from the 1930s were found in the BYU museum, so his team has been able to research comparative genetic diversity, and see how successful the translocations were in raising the diversity back to levels from nearly a century ago.

Randy noted that Strawberry birds have low adult female survival, likely due to predation, (the fall raptor migration corresponds to high mortality rates) and are also on the low end of normal ranges for number of eggs per clutch, and brood survival. As a result, brood-rearing habitat improvement projects may make a difference in the area.

Projects and fire updates

The Dollar Ridge Fire caused the loss of about half the sagebrush on Wildcat. However, it was starting to fill in with green in the fall, and may not pose too much of a problem for the sage-grouse in that area. Some places were scorched badly, but there are still pockets of sagebrush and the area is in a relatively high precipitation zone, so it hopefully will recover well and provide more open habitat.

Robbie explained that the project planning in Co-op creek has been advancing. Forest Service will spray the area for musk thistle in the spring, while WRI applications are being reviewed. Then the treatment of sagebrush to improve the area for sage-grouse brood-rearing will be a WRI proposal which, if funded, would take place later in 2019.

A wildlife fence (tall, for deer/elk) will be going in along the road at Trout Creek and elsewhere in the area. The group discussed fence markers and whether it seemed like it would impact sage-grouse. Randy noted that they have two records of sage-grouse which apparently ran into overhead power lines and broke their necks.

Federal and state planning updates

Lorien provided an overview of the ongoing planning efforts by BLM, USFS, and the state of Utah. All have been working on revising sage-grouse plans over the past year. Everything being revised at once has provided a lot of opportunity for working to align the plans, as well as making for a challenging planning task. The primary reason given for the federal revisions was to align more closely with state plans, so overall the three plans will work together more efficiently.

- BLM is farthest along, with a final EIS that was just released at the beginning of December.
- The state of Utah plan will likely be finalized in the coming month.
- USFS is currently in a comment period which ends January 3.

Major changes in the BLM plan include the removal of Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) as well as the general habitat designation (GHMA). The boundary areas of Priority habitat now match closely with the state of Utah's sage-grouse management areas (SGMAs). Mitigation will be handled differently, but leaves room for use of the state's new mitigation tracking tool. The Record of Decision is likely to happen around late February.

Major changes proposed in the Forest Service draft EIS include similar options, although the preferred ("management alignment") alternative proposes that Anthro Mountain become priority habitat, while the Utah alternative proposes that GHMA be removed entirely, as well as formal habitat designations for Anthro Mountain. The plan may mix and match those alternatives in the final decision. Other changes proposed for the Forest Service plan include changing from the 7-inch stubble height requirement, and more stringent grazing permit renewal considerations, to a

set of desired conditions based on research from those areas in Utah. All agencies will also soon be using a habitat map developed by Utah State University, using data from around the state and many GPS collars funded by federal and state partners. Comments on the USFS plan are due January 3, and then a final EIS will come out later in 2019.

The State of Utah plan has also been under revision. Many elements are the same as the previous plan, such as the voluntary nature of it, the use of SGMA and habitat improvement and creation goals. The plan will be much more professional looking, easier to connect threats and actions, and have an executive summary that is all most people will likely take time to read. Appendices, including detailed maps, will be available on line so that necessary updates for new science, boundary changes, will be able to be always the most updated.

Changes and updates to the plan include more transparency and detail on interagency MOUs (state and federal), processes for using the mitigation plan, changing SGMA boundaries, and revising the plan in the future. Threats in this plan are more carefully tied to either statewide issues (fire, invasive weeds, and conifer encroachment) or local issues (which vary by area). Opportunity areas remain in the plan as a concept, but will not be drawn on maps as the previous maps were at too coarse a scale to be useful, and all decisions about planning projects happen at the ground-level anyway. Habitat improvement goals remain similar. Habitat conservation goals are now 5000/acres year, a reduction to allow more targeted efforts on higher priority areas, rather than spreading limited funds out to achieve higher acreage goals. Population goals are slightly adjusted also to be easier to calculate. The final version of this plan will hopefully be signed around January 1, 2019.

Agency updates

NRCS provided a brief update: the project in Fruitland has been moving along. The pipe fence has been installed to help reduce recreationist impact on private lands in the area. The landowners may be interested in an easement, but decisions have been delayed until we see what the new Farm Bill going through congress has in it. The landowner also did a number of acres of lop and scatter on junipers himself, as part of a multi-year PJ and weed project through SGI.

Conference save-the-date

There will be a conference in Salt Lake from February 5-7, 2019 with updates on Utah sage-grouse research and policy, as well as speakers from other states. Info coming soon via email.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will share BYUs grouse website with the group.

Next Meeting

- The next meeting was not set but will coordinate with Randy's teaching schedule if possible. Getting more USFS attendance will also be a goal.