

**STRAWBERRY
VALLEY
LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: February 1, 2012

Time: 10:00 am – 12:00 pm

Place: Wasatch County Building

Members Present: Robert Riddle (Wasatch County Public Lands), Mike Tamlllos (USDA Wildlife Services), Mark Farmer (UDWR), Dave Hales (private landowner representative), Randall Thacker (UDWR), Ron Lee (Epic Engineering), Anthony Gray (USFS), Ryan Thornock (Farm Bureau), Allan Sulser (USU Ext), Pam Juliano (Congressman Matheson's office), John Rice (Mitigation Commission), Lorien Belton (USU Extension: recorder/facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

BLM Updates

The group had an involved discussion regarding the new policy mandates from the BLM. During the discussion, the following points were clarified:

- The BLM received a mandate to update Resource Management Plans and other land use plans, because the 2010 finding by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) indicated that regulator mechanisms to protect sage-grouse were lacking, particularly on BLM land.
 - Scoping meetings held this winter were focused on the planning process that will eventually result in BLM (and Forest Service) plans being amended to include sage-grouse regulations.
 - Until those plans are revised, some interim guidelines were issued (IM 2012-043)
 - Plans are due to be revised by the end of 2014 so they are complete when FWS reviews the status of sage-grouse again in early 2015.
- The BLM's current actions (as seen in the two relevant Instructional Memoranda) are a response to FWS findings.
- BLM does not have any authority to make sage-grouse listing recommendations either pro or con.
- The U.S. Forest Service is also using the same process and will be adding sage-grouse regulations to Forest Plans as well.

Several group members were concerned that the guidelines were an attempt to reduce economic activity. The group was reminded that the BLM is reacting to FWS explanations of why the sage-grouse was given a "Candidate" species designation, and that the primary goal of the interim guidelines (and soon-to-be-developed plan amendments) is to make sure that BLM is taking actions that will help keep the sage-grouse off the endangered species list.

The group agreed that the scoping meetings lacked clarity on what kinds of comments were being solicited. Because the plan amendments are not yet drafted, it is difficult to comment. Also, oral comments were not taken at the meetings, which frustrated several individuals. Pam noted that she had heard concerns that the process feels political and that it is difficult to present local on-the-ground knowledge that has not been scientifically documented. Lorien will keep SVARM informed of any updates to the process, and to pass along the group's concerns to the individuals managing the BLM process.

The group agreed that it would be helpful to have someone from BLM come present to the group so it would be more obvious and transparent how comments will be used. A presenter would need to be someone with appropriate knowledge of the process, not just someone who works for BLM. Hearing from someone from BLM could help increase SVARM's trust in the process as valid.

The group would like to comment jointly by having Lorien gather individual comments and compiling them to send in from the working group. This is better than trying to find a watered-down version of comments that everyone can agree to every part. In addition, it will allow some individuals to make comments through a different mechanism than through agencies. Lorien will send out an email to the group to gather these comments before the scoping period ends.

The group went over several of the sections of the interim guidelines, with a particular focus the grazing section. There was concern that the grazing guidelines might have the effect of reducing grazing on BLM lands.

Project and General Updates

Lorien showed a map of the proposed routes for the Gateway South transmission line. It does not look like it will cause a problem for sage-grouse, since it is likely to go through the existing utility corridor. Although there are grouse there, there is also already a powerline there, so impacts are unlikely to be as dramatic for sage-grouse as a new powerline in a different area might be.

Mike Tamilos continues to manage predator populations, particularly ravens. Several group members expressed concerns that predation problems are not given enough attention. Mike explained that he does intensive predator control in the area, and that it is a big focus of this working group.

BYU was not represented at the meeting; there is no graduate student currently. Group attendees were not clear who is doing follow-up tracking. The group requested more information, possibly a formal presentation, at the next meeting.

John Rice noted that he is leaving his position at the Mitigation Commission, and is

unsure whether the position will be refilled.

A potential development on private land near Strawberry reservoir was discussed at length in a previous meeting. At this point, it does not appear that the project, if it happens, is likely to impact sage-grouse because of its location. If the development grows and causes an increase in winter recreation traffic, that may create concerns for sage-grouse in the future. For now, the group does not feel that any action or involvement in the process is necessary.

Weed Management Progress

The Wallsburg knapweed project has been very successful. After this year, the weed concerns should be able to be maintained with relatively little effort, after several seasons of intense work to knock back the weeds.

DWR and USFS, as well as Wasatch County, continue to coordinate on weed treatments in the habitat project areas and elsewhere. In the Fruitland area, Russian knapweed is treated every year. Of the maintenance budget for DWR in the area, nearly half goes to weed management. The Forest Service treats the gravel pit each year.

The group would like to reach out to the weed management folks in the Fruitland area. Lorien will make contact and invite them to future meetings.

Energy Development Potential in the Fruitland Area

One of the potential upcoming issues for sage-grouse in the Fruitland area is the increasing proximity of energy development, and the likelihood that energy exploration will soon come to mitigation commission and DWR lands. In most cases, the subsurface rights are not held by the surface landowner. In some cases, mineral rights are held by the UteTribe.

Six wells have been proposed on the Tabby Mountain WMA are are getting closer to critical breeding habitat. This is near the edge of Hwy 208). Also, Bill Barrett and Berry are putting exploratory wells in the area. In other areas, Bill Barrett has been very supportive of working to mitigate environmental concerns.

It is not clear what effect this will have on sage-grouse. One particular concern as oil and gas come in to an area is the associated increase in weeds along roads and on well pads. The group will continue to be aware and will work proactively with companies proposing development in the area to help them avoid or mitigate impacts. Randall Thacker will keep the group updated if there are concerns.

New Map

During the meeting, GIS staff from Wasatch County brought the group a new map with the updated shape files. The group jointly identified the location of several projects and areas discussed previously. It was agreed that landownership information should be added to the map still, but the group was very appreciative of the visual reference.

In particular, Randall Thacker discussed some of the local migration patterns, and what the collared birds have taught us about what populations are more connected.

Dave Hales expressed interest in getting a copy of the map as well.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will keep the group updated on the BLM process
- Lorien will pass along the group's concerns about the BLM scoping process to those involved with the process.
- Lorien will gather comments from SVARM members to submit to the BLM.
- Lorien will look into getting an appropriate-level BLM representative to speak to the group about the process.
- Lorien will ask BYU if the group can have a formal update on research progress and learning at the next meeting.
- Lorien will make contact with Duchesne County weed management and invite them to future meetings.
- Lorien will work with Wasatch GIS to update the new map to include land ownership and see if additional copies could be made available to SVARM members.
- Randall Thacker will keep the group (via Lorien) informed about any oil and gas development concerns for sage-grouse in the Fruitland area.
- Anthony and Lorien (and Bob if necessary) will identify a meeting location for the March 28th meeting.

NEXT MEETING:

The next meeting will be March 28th. The County Health building is entirely booked that day, so the Anthony Gray will assist Lorien in finding another meeting location in Heber. The first choice is the USFS station. If that is not available, Bob Riddle will help explore other options, such as the county building or the library.