

**STRAWBERRY
VALLEY
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: March 14, 2019

Place: Heber-Kamas Ranger District office

Members Present: Chelcey Larsen (NRCS), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Patricia Musser (USFS), Charlie Holtz (NRCS/Pheasants Forever), Terri Pope (UDWR), Ryan Howell (BYU), Richard Mingo (Mitigation Commission), Anthony Gray (USFS), Steve Smith (Wasatch Co Weed Board), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Projects and fire updates

Anthony showed WRI projects on the database. Last year (in July) USFS sprayed milestone in 3 areas close to or in sage-grouse habitat: Strawberry River (largely for Canadian thistle), Co-op (musk thistle) and Horse Creek (musk thistle, dyer's woad, and others). All locations will be hit again in the spring, to get two seasons of spraying out of the one project (#4618). In addition, Trout Creek has been sprayed every year and is looking relatively good considering its proximity to the gravel pit seed source.

A proposed project on Horse Creek (#5002) includes future dixie harrow and mowings to improve brood rearing habitat around the reservoir. The area has one small corner that is grazed, but the project will be done after the permittee has left for the season. It will not be seeded, so no rest is planned.

The long term plan is to conduct a sage-grouse habitat improvement project every two years (hopefully starting with Horse Creek this year; it was ranked high enough that it will likely be funded). Some of these will be retreatments of past projects and others may be new treatments, like Horse Creek. Anthony said that the NEPA should be straightforward, and will likely just require a letter added to existing NEPAs. New project areas will need archeology, which is being planned.

Steve Smith noted that weed treatments can be done using targeted livestock use, such as sheep, cattle, or goats, and asked if that was a tool the Forest Service would be able to use. It might be possible but would need to be looked into. It would need to be done in early season before seeds come out, to prevent further dispersal by the animals.

An SGI project on the Ellis property includes 100 acres of PJ removal and the removal of an old sheep fence. Charlie is also looking at other projects the landowner might be interested in, such as stream stabilization in areas where wet meadows and streams are becoming eroded/incised near a lek.

Other projects taking place in the area include two sections of wildlife fence going in near Daniels Summit and Trout Creek, with underpasses utilizing modified existing culverts.

Population research updates

Ryan provided updates on bird movements in the area, via the online map. They are still tracking 7 collars, and plan to put out 13 more this spring. Estimates of the population, based on last springs' counts, is that there are likely 350-400 birds using the area.

The group discussed the movement of at least one bird to near Starvation Reservoir, which is farther than previously we knew they moved from Strawberry, as well as proof that birds are also using Tabby Mountain for wintering, as was suspected previously but just from pellet counts. We will be interested to see how winter movements differ in future years with less snow cover.

Dollar Ridge Fire

The Dollar Ridge fire, on Twelve-Hundred Dollar Ridge, has seen some regrowth already. The grouse habitat area that was burned was quite small, and relatively low intensity. One male spent time in the low-intensity area while it was burning.

Federal and state planning updates

The Forest Service plan updates are still in progress; the comment period ended on January 3rd but processing those comments was delayed until after the shutdown ended. The RoD should be available near the end of April. It is expected that SFAs will be removed, GHMA will likely be removed, and Anthro Mountain may get a formal status of PHMA. Habitat guidelines are also being revised to reflect more local (Utah) habitat data. Maps will also likely be based on habitat mapping and resource selection function models currently being finalized at Utah State University by Dahlgren, Kohl, and others.

The Utah State Sage-Grouse plan was finalized on January 1, 2019. It is similar to the previous plan in many ways, but is easier to read and will be easier to report against from a threat-reduction standpoint. Highlights include:

- Reduction of the 10,000 acre protection goal to 5000, to allow for a focus on higher priority lands rather than acreage totals
- Similar 75,000 acre annual goal for habitat improvement or creation
- Statewide and local threat breakdowns (statewide includes invasive weeds, fire, and PJ)
- Opportunity areas remain in concept but are no longer mapped and will rely on on-the-ground assessments exclusively
- All appendices and maps are available on line, and will be updated as needed without having to revise the plan.
- Some sections of the plan (appendices) still need details, such as the disturbance cap
- The maps are currently revised versions of older habitat maps based on radio collar data,

but by this summer (2019) the aforementioned resource selection function map, which is meant to be shared between all agencies, including USFS, BLM, and the state of Utah, will be available. It is based on newer data as well, including all the GPS data from collars in more recent years.

Field tour ideas

The group would like to see the Dollar Ridge Fire burn area this summer. Brian recommended we go up to Wildcat. Best times will be early July, so we will not set a date until we see how the snowpack recedes. Derek took pictures during the fire from a ridge across the highway, and may have something to show us.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will coordinate with Brian to plan the field tour in July.
- Anyone interested in getting on Ryan's regular update emails about the research efforts can contact Ryan directly or ask Lorien

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be a field tour in late June or early July, depending on accessibility, to the Wildcat area to look at the Dollar Ridge fire impacts and recovery.