

**UINTAH BASIN  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date:** 10/22/19

**Place:** DNR office, Vernal, Utah

**Present:** Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Charlie Holtz (Pheasants Forever/SGI), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Jamie Arrive (Ute Tribe F&W), Terrell Thayne (UDAF GIP), Karl Fleming (USFWS), David Allison (Consultant), John Spencer (Simplot), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Michael Hawley (Jones & DeMille Engineering), Greg Todd (Duchesne County Commission), Boyd Kitchen (USU), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

*Federal planning updates*

Lorien and Dixie briefly explained that the Ninth Circuit Court recently placed a temporary injunction on implementation of the BLM's sage-grouse plan amendments, which were finalized with a Record of Decision in March of this year. Since the injunction was only done last week (Oct 16<sup>th</sup>), it is not clear how exactly it will impact the wide range of ongoing activities, including improvements to interagency process and coordination that were implemented as part of the plan. The lawsuit was focused on changes to how lek buffers are handled, and oil and gas leasing restrictions that were changed in the amendments, among other things. Dave Allison read a few of the main points from the injunction to the group. Right now, BLM in Utah has been asked to submit a list of projects internally that might be impacted by this injunction, to see how the agency might need to respond in specific cases.

The USFS plan amendments, which have paralleled the BLM process with several months lag time, were released in a final EIS in August 2019. Among the major changes are the elimination of SFA and GHMA, the change of Anthro Mountain habitat areas from its own local designation to priority (PHMA) designation, and the use of mitigation primarily as a tool to be used in conjunction with exceptions, but not required. The protest period has just closed. The next step is a meeting with the parties who protested, which will also include other interested parties such as the state. That meeting has not been scheduled yet to our knowledge.

It is unclear how, or if, the BLM injunction might impact the USFS plan amendment changes. However, many of the same groups involved in the BLM lawsuit are also involved in the USFS process, so similar concerns are likely to be raised. For example, both BLM and USFS plan amendments have proposed elimination of GHMA and SFA habitat designations.

*Uinta Basin Railway proposal*

Mike Hawley, from Jones and DeMille Engineering, provided the group with an overview of the Uinta basin railway proposal.

- The Community Impact Board (CIB) approved \$27.9 million to fund the exploration and

feasibility studies for a railway link between the Uintah Basin and the Wasatch front. Private funding is available for actually building the railway if and when it is approved.

- The main industry interest in the railway would be oil transport, although other things could also be shipped on the railway.
- The Surface Transportation Board, a little-known federal agency focused on railroads, is the lead agency.

Mike explained the history of consideration of a variety of routes over a number of years. The scoping process required by NEPA was conducted this summer and identified challenges and possible alternate routes. Currently the agency has three routes that will be included in the draft EIS, including one that goes through Whitmore Park, which is the currently the proponents' (a seven-county infrastructure group) preferred alternative. Whitmore Park is in the Carbon SGMA, but there are many sage-grouse leks along the proposed rail path, which is in the current road transportation corridor. In the Basin, the proposed routes go through some of the wintering habitat used by Anthro Mountain sage-grouse.

Lorien will notify the group when the Draft EIS is available for comment, likely in spring of 2020. The project timeline calls for a final EIS in fall of 2020, and design and construction in 2021-2023.

### *Habitat mapping efforts - update*

USU, with funding from BLM and support from DWR, has been working to create new habitat maps based on combining two pieces of information in a model: known sage-grouse locations (with associated vegetation data), and vegetation characteristics of the larger landscape. The goal is to produce a model that predicts other places that might have sage-grouse use, based on vegetation characteristics, in addition to those areas that are known to be used, based on data from collared birds.

The current maps, released with the Utah state plan and available on the website under appendices, are based on VHF collar data. The new versions of the maps, which are still in progress, will incorporate GPS collar data. The draft maps have been created and sent to regional biologists (both DWR and BLM) for feedback. Briand Maxfield has commented. He explained that a major concern is that the pixel size is too large for on-the-ground project planning. The GPS data, particularly for winter, is much better than what anyone had before, but the vegetation layer pixel size is still creating some difficulties. Another concern is that non-sagebrush vegetation types (like greasewood) are sometimes confused with sagebrush by the model.

The maps will be revised based on the comments already received; Brian noted that they are not requesting additional comments until they have a chance to do more work on it. The original timeframe for having final maps ready this fall is no longer realistic and will be extended.

## Round robin

- Dave Allison noted that:
  - It might be time to revisit key sections of the UBARM local plan.
  - He also recommended that we all watch the USU webinar by Thacker and Brunson on conifer treatments coming up next week. Lorien sent it out to the full listserv last week.
  - What is going on with co-chair responsibilities? Lorien manages the group but is grateful for any advance info on local topics that we should discuss.
- SGI/NRCS: SGI applications for projects are being accepted. There is not a formal deadline yet, but it might be around the end of the year.
- BLM: a variety of projects are under way, many over by Blue Mountain, including some fire rehab work.
- DWR:
  - Brian hopes that we have seen the last of the low winter counts for a while. The large numbers of juvenile birds being taken by hunters this season (based on wing barrel data) bodes well. Hopefully lek/population numbers will begin their cyclic climb again this coming year.
  - Following up on the success of the sagebrush drill seeding on Grassy Bench, another similar project is going to be proposed this year. The Grassy Bench project sagebrush drilling was very successful, despite the crested wheatgrass being almost completely unaffected by the initial Round-Up phase of the project, probably because the grass was dormant from such a dry year, when sprayed.
  - There are still birds with GPS collars out there, and there are additional collars coming, so the tracking project will be continuing for some time in the future.
- GIP applications are due by Dec 31. They can work on private or public lands, and would be happy to work with the tribe if they are interested.
- Simplot has recently had its 58 year plan approved, which takes them all the way to Brush Creek.
- Jamie noted that the Towanta Flat project – a sagebrush mowing to clear the lek area – looks great. Birds are using the area. Jamie is also very interested in getting some GPS collars out on birds, and asked for recommendations on manufacturers that others have worked with successfully, given the array of options out there. Brian Maxfield will follow up with Jamie. Lorien will also forward the question to USU researchers and get their suggestions or experiences.

## Future meeting topics:

- Railroad NEPA process updates, if any
- Using the new probability maps (considerations for projects and research)
- Sections of the local plan that could be updated (objectives, threats, etc. (possibly))
- How the federal plans and other projects will be impacted by the injunction

**Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will notify the group when the Draft railroad EIS is available for comment.
- Lorien and Brian will connect with Jamie about GPS collar recommendations.

**Next Meeting:**

The next meeting will be December 3, after the UPCD/WRI meeting.