

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 11/19/13

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Diane Coltharp (Uintah County), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Scott Chew (co-chair, rancher/landowner), Darrell Gilman (UACD), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Jim Brown (Conservation District), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Stephanie Tompkinson (QEP Energy), Mark Raymond (Uintah County), Mike McKee (Uintah County), Dean Richens (American Gilsonite), Ryan Clerico (Enefit American Oil), Rikki Hrenko (Enefit American Oil), Garrick Hall (Farm Bureau), Bob Christensen (USFS), Alan Clark (UDWR), Tamara Naumann (NPS – Dinosaur National Monument), Paul Betts (Moon lake Electric), Terrell Thayne (UGIP), L’Dee Curtis (Deseret Power), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Merlin Rasmussen (XTO Energy), Ritchie Anderson (Ziegler Chemical, Rancher), Chip Ziegler (Ziegler Chemical), Mary Bernard (Vernal Express), Randy Clower (Rough Neck News), Lincoln Brown (KUEL), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Upcoming Events

After introductions, Lorien announced two upcoming events in Utah related to sage-grouse:

- 1) Utah Sage-Grouse Summit, to be held February 18-19, 2014, in Salt Lake. Discussion and presentations will focus primarily on implementation of the state plan, including updates and the role of the LWGs.
- 2) National Sage-Grouse LWG Forum, in November 2014. This will also be in Salt Lake City, and will involve individuals from all states with sage-grouse. It will be an opportunity to learn from other states’ experiences, and discuss range-wide issues and strategies.

More information on both of these events will be sent to the LWGs over email.

Federal Planning: Draft EIS from BLM and USFS

Lorien presented the basics of the Draft EIS released by BLM and USFS in early November. This document outlines the possible sage-grouse stipulations that will be used to amend Forest Service and BLM Land Management Plans in Utah. There are five alternatives presented. Chapter 2 of the DEIS compares these alternatives.

- Alternative A is “no action.” This would mean that existing regulations and processes would not change. We know that this does not meet the USFWS’s requirements for

“adequate regulatory mechanisms,” but it is useful as a point of comparison on specific strategies within the document, such as how many acres are currently open or closed to certain uses now, as compared with the other alternatives.

- Alternative B is based on the National Technical Team (NTT) report. This report was an addendum to the BLM’s Instructional Memorandum 2012-043. It presents suggestions for conservation measures to protect sage-grouse, based on science. Alt. B incorporates those suggestions into proposed regulations for the BLM and USFS.
- Alternative C is the most conservation-focused alternative. It is based heavily on public input from environmental organizations such as Western Watersheds Project and Wild Earth Guardians. It is split into two sub-alternatives, C1 and C2. One major difference between those sub-alternatives is how grazing is suggested to be regulated. One alternative proposes reductions, while the other proposes elimination of grazing in sage-grouse habitat.
- Alternative D is the alternative proposed by the BLM and Forest Service. It covers every topic that must be addressed. In many cases, it goes into more detail than the other alternatives.
- Alternative E is based on the Utah Governor’s Sage-Grouse Plan. Because the Utah plan also addresses issues outside the jurisdiction of the BLM and USFS, only aspects of the state plan that are relevant to federal lands are included. There are two sub-alternatives for E as well. E1 is based on Utah’s plan. E2 is based on Wyoming’s plan, because several small pieces of federal land managed out of Utah are within Wyoming’s borders.

The Alternative preferred by both the BLM and the USFS is Alternative D. (Although the two federal agencies are working together, each agency must make its own decisions.) The final decision will probably incorporate elements from several alternatives. The Draft EIS explains that “though Alternative D has been identified as the preferred alternative, aspects of Alternative E, which is based on the State of Utah and Wyoming’s GRSG conservation plans, may also meet the purpose and need of this effort and fulfill the BLM and Forest Service’s ‘statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors’ (NEPAs 40 Most Asked Questions 4a). As such the proposed plan could include aspects of Alternative D, Alternative E, or other alternatives.” This language can be found on page 2-163 of the DEIS.

Some of the key differences between the plans include:

- what maps are used (Alternative E uses the SGMAs and does not include Anthro Mountain or West Tavaputs, while the other Alternatives are based on the occupied habitat maps which cover more area and differentiate between primary and general habitat),
- the percentage of disturbance allowed (ranging between 3% and 5%, with various stipulations and what will count toward those percentages)

There was not time during the UBARM meetings to go over many details in the DEIS, but anyone wishing to have help interpreting the document may contact Lorien for assistance. The purpose of the discussion at this meeting is just to make sure everyone understands the big

picture of the document, and knows where to look to find information that is of specific interest to them.

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS. At the next UBARM meeting (January 21), Lorien will collect any comments that people would like to submit via the working group.

An informational meeting will be hosted by the BLM to provide more information on the draft EIS. The meeting in this area (there are others elsewhere in the state also) will be held on December 4th, at 5:30 pm at the Vernal City Office.

Blue Mountain Presentation and Discussion

Scott Chew, UBARM co-chair and rancher who runs sheep on Blue Mountain, gave a presentation to the group. He reviewed some of the discussions from the field tour in September, when about 20 people from both Utah and Colorado met on Blue Mountain to showcase projects, discuss changes, and identify opportunities to improve habitat and work together on conservation and research efforts. Highlights of the presentation included:

- Being in the field with NRCS and DWR biologists provided an excellent opportunity to think about understory vegetation and shrub condition from both a sage-grouse and a livestock perspective.
- The Daniel's Canyon allotment has 6 leks, 4 of which are active.
- Blue Mountain has seen some notable changes from 35 years ago, particularly in the loss of wet meadows that have either shrunk in size or completely converted to sagebrush.
- Scott undertook a substantial vegetation mapping project this summer to identify areas where projects could be done to improve habitat for sage-grouse. These include pinyon-juniper projects, wet meadow recovery, and grazing-related improvements.
- Working with SGI, the Chews are proposing a project that includes PJ removal, fence markers, fixing of fence, a water trough, grazing management changes, and chain harrow in pockets where sagebrush canopy cover is greater than 45%.

Scott's presentation generated a varied and useful discussion. Brian Maxfield mentioned the huge value is having someone with historical perspective identify areas with potential for wet meadows, particularly since many of those areas do not obviously look any more like they would be good areas for that. Scott Chamberlain agreed that he has seen the disappearance of a lot of wet meadows in the areas he works over the years, and it is much easier to think about addressing the problem when we know where the wet meadows used to be. Scott Chew then explained that wet meadow areas are also very useful for sheep, because they provide an open space where lambing ewes can see each other, be calmer, and take time to bond with their lambs, instead of running too quickly after giving birth to catch up with a herd that they can't see in thicker sagebrush areas. At the end of the discussion, Natasha explained how PJ removal can help an area recover for sage-grouse, and how PJ removal is one step in improving the area on Blue Mountain for both sage-grouse and sheep.

Utah State Plan Updates

Alan Clark provided updates on the implementation of Utah's Governor's state sage-grouse plan.

- Scott Chew's work, with both mapping and projects, is a great example of how the LWGs can help implement the state plan
- In the first full week of January, the Governor's office will be coordinating a meeting with all interested counties to discuss sage-grouse planning efforts, answer questions, and coordinate regarding the BLM's draft EIS
- In the future, fire teams should meet with sage-grouse LWGs to develop fire management strategies and plans
- The LWGs will be critical to documenting projects that are happening for sage-grouse, including both public and private projects. WRI projects will be a big part of that.

Several updates and ensuing discussion relate to mapping needs:

- The State Sage-Grouse Plan currently has general maps of SGMAs, but will need more detailed mapping input from the LWGs. The state has contracted with USU to develop a baseline layer of disturbance, which will be based on a date of April 1, 2013. This would benefit from LWG assistance ground-truthing the newly developed GIS layer when it is available in draft form. Tamara explained that Dinosaur has very detailed GIS vegetation layers that could be made available, but that Dinosaur no longer has the staff capacity to do GIS work anymore. Lorien and Tamara will make sure that Eric Edgely at DWR, who is coordinating with the GIS team at USU, connects with Dinosaur's data.
- Additional help identifying areas of PJ that could be targeted, as well as local internal boundaries, will be one area that the LWGs can really help with. For example, delineating where the non-habitat areas are at a finer scale should be done at a local level, although course-level areas are shown on the SGMA maps. Alan indicated that that would be very helpful. GIP also has a database that might be of value to these efforts.
- NRCS at a state-wide level is working to map all PJ areas across land ownerships, in order to be able to develop a more landscape-level PJ reduction strategy. Results of this effort should also be available in the spring. Several individuals at the meeting expressed an interest in having the LWG see that and help make strategic planning suggestions.

Alan also noted that the Plan Implementation Council, a high-level team tasked with helping facilitate the implementation of the state sage-grouse plan, is interested to know if any of the sections of the plan are difficult to implement, and if so what could be done to address that. Alan emphasized that the LWG role in implementing the state plan should be whatever makes most sense. Projects, products, or something else might be relevant.

Upcoming meeting topic planning

The January meeting will be on January 21, as a combined meeting with the UPCD. It will start at 10 am and Alan will provide lunch. The UBARM business will be done at the beginning of the meeting. At the January meeting, the group would like to:

- Have Brian Maxfield present the Little Mountain PJ project (mapping, project planning)

- Discuss proposed projects in the WRI database relevant to sage-grouse

At the spring meeting, the group would like to make sure to:

- Review baseline disturbance maps
- Review NRCS PJ maps

For the summer field tour, we may want to focus efforts toward a tour similar to one that happened in Box Elder in fall of 2013. The tour allowed members of the state plan's Plan Implementation Council, as well as USFWS decision-makers and others, to become more familiar with the areas occupied by sage-grouse in that area of Utah. They would be interested in seeing many of the areas in the Uintah Basin. Someone noted that a May 1 tour would be well-timed to see the big lek on Diamond Mountain, and a tour bus could access it. Lorien will be in touch with Terry Messmer, who would be involved in developing a tour like that. We will be able to discuss more specifics at the January and the spring meeting, as it would take a lot of planning.

Pinyon-Juniper Projects and Landowner Buy-in

Dixie noted that some landowners are very confused about why a PJ treatment is useful. Others agreed that there may be a need for more education, or easy ways to explain the benefits of PJ projects to landowners. The group had a good discussion about getting landowner buy-in, particularly on Diamond Mountain, for PJ projects. It needs to be clear that voluntarily doing something for sage-grouse does not create any landowner obligations.

Scott Chew suggested that a landowner event might be very appropriate, particularly if food was available and there was a clear value to landowners and livestock producers who might attend. Natasha, with assistance from USU Extension, the local conservation districts, and many others, put on a workshop last winter in Roosevelt that was very well attended.

Natasha will work to pull something together for this year. In addition to PJ information specifically, there will hopefully be additional detail available about "landowner assurances," based on and MOU between NRCS and USFWS from some time ago.

NRCS Updates

Natasha provided NRCS updates.

- She has been working with the Tribe. (Unrelatedly, the tribal council signed off on a sage-grouse plan.)
- There is no deadline yet for SGI (sage-grouse EQIP) signups, but signups can be taken now. That funding was provided for in the Congressional continuing resolution and is not contingent on the passage of a new Farm Bill.
- There are at least 3-4 landowners potentially interested in GRP, but it is not clear whether that money will be available this year or not.
- Fence marking has been actively going on. Across the area Natasha works (which included several LWGs) 8 miles have been marked so far, and 55 dedicated hunters have

been involved in both marking fences and making the markers. The Utah Falconers have expressed interest. There will be 250,000 markers from NRCs available statewide, so in spring when fence marking is more possible again, Natasha will be coordinating volunteers. Boyd noted that he knows of Boy Scouts who need projects. Alan confirmed that the shipment of fence markers should be coming very soon. Natasha does ground-truthing for fence markers, since it is important to confirm the need on the ground, and the condition and location and density of fences in an area, before sending volunteers out to place markers on the wires. (Bob Christensen noted that he still plans to go mark fences on Anthro.)

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will provide the group with more information on the February sage-grouse summit in Salt Lake City
- Anyone wishing to have help interpreting the DEIS may contact Lorien for assistance. Lorien will collect comments at the January meeting for anyone wishing to comment through the LWG instead of separately.
- Updates on wet meadow projects will be of interest to the LWG in the future
- In the future, fire teams should meet with sage-grouse LWGs to develop fire management strategies and plans
- Lorien and Tamara will make sure that Eric Edgely at DWR, who is coordinating with the GIS team at USU, connects with Dinosaur's data.
- Lorien will also see if GIP has data that might make sense to connect with the disturbance mapping.
- Brian Maxfield will present the Little Mountain PJ project (mapping and project planning) at the January meeting
- Lorien will contact Doug Ramsey to plan how to present the baseline data to the LWG.
- Lorien will coordinate getting draft PJ maps from the NRCS mapping effort at the spring meeting.
- Lorien will be in touch with Terry Messmer, who would be involved in developing a major field tour in May for the PIC and USFWS personnel.
- Natasha will take the lead on a winter landowner workshop to address PJ treatment needs/confusions and landowner assurances.
- Alan will provide lunch at the January 21 joint meeting with UBPCD.

Next Meeting:

January 21 at 10 am: joint all-day meeting in association with UBPCD. The date for the spring meeting was not set yet, and will depend on the availability of draft mapping products that UBARM is interested in reviewing at that meeting.