

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 2/19/13

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Jim Spencer (NRCS), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Diane Coltharp (Uintah County), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Tyler Thompson (UDWR), Alan Clark (UDNR), Scott Chew (co-chair, rancher/landowner), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Garrick Hall (Utah Farm Bureau), Rikki Hrenko (Enefit American Oil), Brian Wilkinson (Enefit American Oil), Dan Abeyta (USFS), Gary Wieser (UACD), Tory Mathis (DWR), L'Dee Curtis (Deseret Power), Paul Betts (Moon Lake Electric), Mark Raymond (Uintah County), Jon Stearmer (Uintah County), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Joan Degiorgio (The Nature Conservancy), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

NRCS updates

Natasha Gruber presented several projects being done by NRCS for sage-grouse. A workshop for ranchers will be held on February 28th to discuss the Sage-Grouse Initiative and encourage sign-ups for next year, as well as provide information on several other topics of interest to ranchers in the area. This will be similar to the early January workshop sponsored by NRCS, the conservation districts, and others.

The SGI biologists statewide are working toward marking all the fences that may be high-risk for sage-grouse collisions, by the end of this field season. This will require extensive volunteer hours. Materials will be provided by NRCS. The logistics of that are still being worked out. Tyler mentioned that he could potentially help with funding. Suggestions for possible volunteer forces included the sheriff (could inmates help with production?), local FFA or boy scouts groups. Ashley National forest has already started making some as part of a separate effort. Anyone with ideas or interest in helping should contact Natasha.

Lorien mentioned that a sagebrush pocket guide has recently been released. USU and many others have copies available.

Planning Updates

Both the state and federal sage-grouse planning efforts are moving forward. The BLM/USFS is working on an EIS that will hopefully be ready for public comment in mid-summer.

The majority of the meeting focused on the current state planning effort. Alan Clark, whose position with DNR involves implementation of the state sage-grouse plan, was in attendance and helped answer many of the group's questions. Alan has replaced Rory Reynolds and now has two major components of his job: aside from the sage-grouse plan, he is in charge of administering the Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) that funds UBPCD projects.

Alan explained that the state plan is still in draft form, but the most updated (hopefully final) copy was submitted to the U.S. FWS on Friday, Feb. 16th for review. Utah is one of three states currently working with FWS for approval of their state plans. The Utah plan emphasizes the improvement and creation of sage-grouse habitat, not just the protection of existing habitat.

The following points were discussed:

- The plan will be voluntary and incentive-based on private and SITLA lands
 - o NRCS will have a major role
 - o Fence marking project is a big part of this
- Pinyon-juniper removal from sage-grouse habitat (on public and private lands) will be a major component. NRCS and UPCD both have this as a focus, and a statewide strategy will be discussed at the upcoming April 30th UPCD statewide meeting
- Nine appendices for the state plan, which were not available at the time of the most recent public draft of the plan, have been completed. They are not yet available publicly until the FWS has had a chance to review them. They include an appendix on grazing, one on research done in Utah that may better inform Utah-specific strategies, and others as noted in previous drafts of the state plan.
- It is difficult to predict whether FWS will approve the plan as is or require further changes. The governor is waiting to release the plan until more is known on this front.
- There are five specific objectives in the current state plan, which include acreage for enhancements of habitat, easements and other legal instruments, statewide population goals, etc. NGOs will be a critical player in the easements goals, as well as NRCS.
- Mitigation is a big part of the plan, including a mitigation bank. It will, however, take some time to finalize the details. A mitigation bank will help us get ahead of the curve.
- The goal is to first avoid potential impacts, then minimize disturbance onsite, and then mitigate if necessary. The LWG offered to assist and be involved in this discussion, since there is a great deal of expertise in the Basin; people have already thought a lot about mitigation, and what works/what doesn't.
- Mapping: The group was concerned that their exact recommendations for set-backs from Highway 40 do not appear to show on the pdfs of the maps Alan passed around for the group to see. He explained that "what is on the ground" will be of greater importance than the exact line on the map, because maps needed to have boundaries that were easily identifiable. A very detailed, on-the-ground mapping exercise was conducted as a test case in one county, and was very challenging and time-consuming. How the local mapping will take place, and to what level of detail, is still undetermined. Because it is such a large task, it will require separate funding. The local working group expressed an interest in assisting with that effort.

- The map polygons will be added to the WRI database.
- At appropriate intervals still to be determined, the maps will need to be adjusted as conditions on the ground change or information becomes available.
- We will need to track permanent disturbance all across the state. Putting this system into place will be challenging.
- Although the focus on all sage-grouse conservation in Utah will be inside the sage-grouse management areas, it will still be important to stay aware and be responsible outside those boundaries, because if the bird ever gets listed, those populations will be included in analysis. Energy producers and others outside the SGMA boundaries should stay aware of that.
- Several individuals at the meeting who represented power line companies expressed concerns and questions about how the local-level power grid might be affected. Currently, all the information seems to be focused on huge transmission lines, but the local operators are uncertain how they may be impacted when small requests, like a power line to a remote cabin, come into play.

Alan emphasized that his role is to keep greater sage-grouse from being listed.

The group also reviewed – and Alan provided input on – five questions that were posed at the Uintah Basin Oil and Gas Collaborative Meeting in January, regarding the state plan.

1. Is there or will there be consistency between the UT state plan and adjacent state plans?

Mapping is being coordinated with neighboring states. Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Nevada, and Idaho have all been talking. States are still in charge, which means that any coordination between them is not required. States are taking somewhat different approaches to conservation measures, though, so not everything will be consistent.

2. Who will regulate mitigation if a company needs to develop in a priority sage-grouse area?

Mitigation will be regulated by whatever agency manages the land (e.g. USFS, BLM, etc.). This is one of the reasons that consistency in the Utah plan will be very valuable, so everyone can use the same system.

3. Are we going to quit hunting sage-grouse?

If the sage-grouse is listed, hunting will stop. However, as long as it remains under state management authority (i.e. not listed), sage-grouse will continue to be hunted in the very strictly controlled way that currently happens: only very large populations with the ability to handle the small impact are hunted. Continuing to hunt them allows access to funding sources that are not available for non-game species. This funding has been critical to much of the past effort to improve habitat and research the species.

4. What regulations will be in place, if any, if there are development activities on or near a lek in a non-focal area?

The only regulations outside SGMAs will depend on what separate land management agencies do. They (BLM and USFS) may adapt the Utah plan – the Utah plan is one of the five possible alternatives in the EIS mentioned previously – but we cannot predict at this point what regulations the federal land management agencies will require outside SGMAs.

5. Will grazing be regulated if greater sage-grouse are listed?

The state of Utah believes that good grazing is compatible with sage-grouse. There will be more specific details in the plan appendix, which is not yet available.

Follow-up Needed

- Natasha will follow up on the suggestions for fence marking project.
- Lorien will continue to update the group on planning processes

Next Meeting:

Not confirmed yet.