

Minutes

UINTAH BASIN LOCAL WORKING GROUP

Date: 3/20/12

Time: 10:00 am – 12:15 pm

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Diane Coltharp (Uintah County Public Lands), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Mike Tamlos (USDA-WS), Brian Maxfield (DWR), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Paul Betts (Moon Lake Electric Association), Pat Rainbolt (DWR), Mark Ewell (NRCS), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Daniel Emmett (BLM), Dan Abeyta (USFS), Stephanie Tomkinson (QEP), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Updates

Natasha Gruber has been hired as the new Sage-grouse Initiative biologist (jointly working for Mule Deer Foundation and NRCS). Her job will be to find private landowners interested in sage-grouse projects, and facilitate those projects. The group brainstormed some potential project areas and landowners she might approach.

Pat Rainbolt reported that there will be a meeting April 4th and 5th in Salt Lake for the TransWest and Gateway South transmission lines, both of which have alternate routes over Diamond Mountain. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss sage-grouse issues.

Stephanie Tomkinson provided an update on the ongoing “Energy by Design” process that QEP and The Nature Conservancy have been using to jointly develop maps that will assist with improved siting of energy development and mitigation measures. The focus area for QEP is the Red Wash field but the analysis area is the BLM Vernal Field Office boundary. A detailed effort has placed wildlife and vegetation concerns on a map that can help inform project placement in an effort to avoid, minimize or mitigate if necessary. Although the maps being developed are specific for QEP, TNC is willing to work with other companies on similar processes. The TNC Salt Lake office contact is Joe Kiesecker.

As discussed in the previous meetings, the BLM will be amending land-use plans across sage-grouse range to ensure that clear conservation measures and regulations are encoded in Resource Management Plans. Interim guidelines have been issued to guide decisions until the plans are amended. On a related note, the State of Utah has convened a group to develop recommendations that could be turned into a state plan, similar to Wyoming’s plan, which establishes guidelines for development in core (priority) sage-grouse areas. The state is interested in developing a plan that FWS can sign off on, which would preempt the interim guidelines from BLM and potentially form the basis for a possible alternative in the EIS being developed as part of the BLM plan amendment process. Lorien presented about the UBARM group’s work at the most recent meeting of the State group on March 14th. Commissioner

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McKee is on the group, in addition to representatives of agencies, industry, and conservation.

Several LWG participants are watching a proposed wind-power project on the rim of Diamond Mountain that relates to both BLM and SITLA land. A company called Energy of Utah is involved in the proposals. Currently, between 4 and 13 “met towers,” or meteorological station towers which help determine wind potential, are proposed for an area of about 1500 acres which also has about three leks. In addition, the area is a travel corridor for grouse as they move between seasonal habitats. Although eventual wind tower proposals are of concern in the area, the guy-wires on the met towers alone can be lethal for grouse that run into them, similar to the danger with sage-grouse and fences.

Research Updates

Brian Maxfield updated the group on current research efforts. This winter, Brian followed BYU’s birds that were collared on Diamond Mountain, as well as birds collared during USU studies on Anthro Mountain. The very light winter was a sharp contrast to last year’s harsh, snowy winter so much of the habitat available this year was probably not available last year. This winter, the Diamond Mountain birds were scattered widely throughout the winter and summer ranges. The Anthro birds also scattered widely. Some birds went to Twin Knolls, 18 miles from Anthro. Another went to Nine Mile. All the Anthro birds returned to Anthro, and have been using the new lop & scatter project areas extensively. One particularly unusual and wide-ranging hen nested on Anthro Mountain, then was located on Nine Mile, Tavaputs, Moon’s ranch, and then nested in a juniper area. Many birds overall wintered in the Twin Knolls and Sand Wash areas. For now, that is a quiet area, but new GasCo wells may be relevant in the future. The study overall has been useful to understand where the birds from Anthro are wintering.

New trapping and collaring has already happened on Anthro this year due to the light winter. BYU is also trapping more birds this spring on Diamond. However, both studies only currently have funding to continue through the spring nesting season. If we want to continue to track the birds’ movements (about 80-90 birds total) beyond the current research plans, which would be good for understanding the local populations even more, Brian would need help in the form of a technician. Currently, there is no funding for a technician, although if some funding could be found, Brian could arrange to have someone use existing equipment, so the additional costs would be very low. A technician would cost about \$2200/month. In addition to the USU and BYU studies, DWR will be collaring about 25 birds on Taylor Mountain, and Brian would like to collar, if possible, on Little Mountain, to improve our understanding of local population movements. In addition, having recent local observations helps better define occupied habitat in the area. Brian will contact the two counties (Uintah and Duchesne) present at the meeting to follow up with ideas for funding that were discussed during the meeting.

Brian also noted that DWR is participating in a sage-grouse genetics study run out of Fort Collins and partially funded by NRCS. It involves gathering feathers at leks. Past blood samples will be included in the analysis but for now only additional feather data will be gathered (picking up feathers on leks).

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Next Field Tour

The group would like to focus on some Forest Service projects on the next field tour. It was agreed to combine the UBPCTD and UBARM field tours again this summer. Project areas on Antelope Flat and on Taylor Mountain are potential visit locations. Dave Olsen may be able to attend now that he works for USFS. Stephanie noted that stopping for lunch at a local café would be a nice gesture and provide a good lunch stop. Diane will follow up on that suggestion.

Updating the UBARM Plan Strategies and Actions, and Threats Table

The group reviewed the current draft of the sage-grouse plan's strategies and actions. Lorien revised the document as the discussion progressed. Most questions were resolved and the group was comfortable with the strategies and actions as revised.

Key conversations included:

- It was decided to not make any substantive edits to the energy development strategies section until there was further guidance from the current State of Utah group process.
- The group discussed how best to address the action about perch deterrents on power lines. A comment from Rocky Mountain Power and the FWS indicated that perch deterrents generally do not serve the purpose intended. However, there was some debate about whether the discussion was about perch deterrent spikes on poles (which deter perching but may provide raven nesting sites, or about deterrents intended to prevent raptor electrocution, which may prevent eagle perching but are less effective for smaller raptors. The group slightly revised the action in the plan but did not remove it, and may revisit the discussion if further information is understood.

Additional minor updates discussed during the strategies review included:

- The tribe is currently mowing the lek above Altona. Although the timing isn't great, and they are leaving some juniper trees, it may help lek vegetation conditions and help keep birds off the road. Although there may be sage-grouse and leks in the southern portion of the tribal land, there is no access there.
- BLM has plans to focus on follow-up treatments for juniper so that previously treated areas are maintained.
- The proposed Berry Petroleum wells are being done in three phases, and only the first phase has been approved.

There was not enough time to thoroughly review the threats chart, so the group asked to do that at a May meeting rather than rush through something so important. Several points to be addressed at the upcoming meeting include potentially confusing terms, such as "lek habitat" and whether that referred only to the lek itself, or to a buffer (and if so how much buffer) around it. Lorien will send the current draft of both sections out via email for any comments before the next meeting.

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Follow-up Needed

- Brian will follow up with counties regarding funding for a sage-grouse technician
- Diane will follow up with ideas presented for the field tour (including lunch and forest service locations). More details can be finalized at the next meeting.
- Lorien will ask Darrell Gilman if the Conservation Corner in the newspaper is still active
- Lorien will follow up with Rocky Mountain Power and others to understand the perch deterrent issue better in time for the next meeting.
- Lorien will send the current draft of the strategies and actions, and the threats chart, out via email.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 22nd, at 10:00 am. There will likely be a UBCPD meeting on the same day at 1:00 pm.