

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 3/21/17

Place: DNR office, Vernal, Utah

Present: Jim Brown (UDAF), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Stephanie Tomkinson (QEP Energy), Terrell Thayne (UDAF GIP), Greg Todd (Duchesne County), Bob Christensen (USFS), Josh Easter (USFS), Karl Fleming (USFWS), Michael Asch (USFWS), Jared Reese (BLM), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Andrew Dutson (State Engineer's Office), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Nathan Hall (DEQ), John Spencer (Simplot), Brian Maxfield (UDWR) and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Population and grouse movement report

Brian Maxfield updated the group on new sage-grouse movements this winter with the birds in the northeast region. The collars have been purchased by the Forest Service and BLM, and also by Simplot, which is interested in bird movements and habitat usage also. UDWR (Brian) is doing the tracking and data management. The plan for this spring is to add another 37 collars. (22 new plus some reused and refurbished). About 8 will be just north of the town of Vernal.

Three Corners:

- Birds wintered on Goslin despite deep snow
- The only place they are avoiding on the top is an area with PJ slated to be removed
- One hen with summer range in Utah used a large area in Wyoming for winter range

Diamond:

- There is one hen remaining on Diamond. The movement data there shows how ridges are used in the winter – it becomes really useful behavioral data, not just locations.

Blue Mountain:

- 2 birds made it into the winter
- One hen went really far north and is still in Moffatt County
- Another Utah bird used a Colorado area for wintering that had not been observed being used by Colorado birds but looked like good habitat.
- No strutting yet this season on Blue Mountain

Little Mountain:

- The male on Little Mtn spent the summer along the sagebrush edge of a center pivot field

Anthro:

- A male stayed on Anthro all winter, hopping from ridge to ridge probably looking for

sagebrush above the snow

All this data is very useful for understanding travel corridors and timing of movements, and to see possible future projects as well as how birds use past project areas.

Brian noted that he is starting lek counts, but snow is making access difficult and probably will continue to into the spring. Counts will likely be down a bit this year for several reasons, including the hard winter, the expected natural drop from the recent peak, and the counting difficulty with deeper snow.

Wet meadows, shallow water wells, and sage-grouse

Andrew Dutson, from the state engineer's office (water rights), gave a presentation to the group about the basics of issues related to water and wet meadows, from a water rights standpoint. The topic had been suggested because there was some concern about wells near wet meadows that theoretically could help protect the meadow, but might also impact the water supply to the meadow. Andrew was asked to come provide the group with basic information to start off any conversations on the right foot and with good information.

Andrew started with some basic explanations about how water rights work in Utah. Key details included the fact that all water is the property of the public, and that all water is assigned one or more "beneficial uses" that determine how it is managed. He provided a list of the elements of a water right in Utah, which includes many items, but some of them are point of diversion, beneficial use, period of use, etc.

He also explained how one can get information on specific water rights. They are numbered by "office," like area codes. The Utah water rights website (www.waterrights.utah.gov) has many tools that can be used to search for water rights information by location and other data. There is documentation there on ownership, well depths, casings, and many other aspects of the water right. In some cases, the location data may not be exact, based on how and when the data was digitized. There are also older documents available for viewing on the site (the original hydrographic maps) that may provide more detail.

Andrew then turned to wet meadows specifically. He is not an expert in these areas hydrologically, and they are very complex, so he only provided general information about what kinds of things to think about when trying to understand a wet meadow area. Different agencies may have different definitions of what constitutes a wet meadow. For example, Forest Service considers a "wet meadow" one with a water table at 30 cm deep or less, a "mesic" meadow at 55 cm, and a "dry meadow community" at 120 cm water table depth. Other agencies may have very different thresholds or descriptions.

There is no single hydrologic situation that creates a wet meadow. In essence, however, a wet meadow exists because something in the underlying rock and soil creates a situation where water is held near the surface. It could be because of overall high water tables in an area, or specific,

localized rock formations that trap water closer to the surface. Because water is closer to the surface, different vegetation grows there than in surrounding areas. Some considerations include:

- Stratigraphy
- Hydraulic conductivity of soils nearby
- Water source
 - o is it local or regional?
 - o It is diffuse or discrete?
- What is the relationship between groundwater and stream channels locally?

With regard to shallow water wells specifically, he provided additional basic information. Shallow water wells are also sometimes called “sumps.” They are usually small wells drilled to pull the water out of the ground for stock watering. Sometimes, depending on the local situation, the difference between a shallow water well and a spring development might be a very fine line. All water developments need to have an associated water right and permit, but the amount of documentation available online or associated with that permit may vary. For all wells deeper than 30 feet, professional well-drillers must be used. Professional drillers have specific requirements to document their activities, so there is often more detail in those situations.

If a water right is intended to serve more than 10 head of stock (animal units), the development of that right needs to be advertised publically for two weeks. The assumption is that one animal unit uses .028 acre feet. All new applications are online, and can be found under the “lists” section of the water rights website noted previously.

As the group moves forward with any discussions about wet meadows, it is important to understand that each situation is different, in terms of where the water comes from and what the impacts of a well close to a wet meadow might be. Andrew suggested always talking to the agricultural producer in the area to understand it as best as possible. Also, water dowers provide very critical information about water flows and can be very helpful in understanding local situations.

Round-robin updates

We went around the room and provided everyone with the chance to give any pertinent updates or information to the group.

- GIP received 19 applications and has funding for 13 of them. Many are water development related.
- Mike Asch introduced himself as Jay Martini’s replacement, the USFWS sage-grouse contact person for the whole state. He will try to make LWG meetings as much as he can. He is based in West Valley City. Anything sage-grouse, or sagebrush related ends up on his desk.
- There is a new NRCS SGI biologist, Alisha Mosloff. She was unable to attend today but

- will be at future meetings. She is based in Vernal at the NRCS office (not Roosevelt).
- Jared Reese introduced himself. He replaced Renee Chi at the BLM state office. He is the sage-grouse contact person there. He updated the group that the adaptive management process (hard and soft triggers) has been done for the state. It looked at both population data and habitat data. The Uintah population is in good shape and did not hit any triggers. They are also doing Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) assessments as mandated in the RMP amendments. They are trying to work between agencies so that everyone is using the same maps and quantifying and labeling things similarly.
 - USFS is also doing HAF assessments. Bob noted, as per Jared's comment, that the interagency coordination is critical to make sure that habitats that cross jurisdictional boundaries have compatible management maps and information.
 - Simplot noted that they are interested in tracking birds, and look forward to the data from Brian's work tracking collars they have purchased.
 - Stephanie noted that the short video sent out recently by Rae Ann was very useful for her to be able to send to others at QEP who do not normally work with sage-grouse, to give them a basic overview of the issues and what she is working on. The video was very helpful for that.
 - John Simpson noted that Simplot, in collaboration with DWR, will be planting 2000 Wyoming big sagebrush seedlings as part of a restoration effort. Anyone interested in helping with the plantings, which will take place on April 6th, can contact John for more details at (435) 781-3348.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will send Terrell Thayne (and anyone else who asks) Andrew's presentation
- Lorien will work on field tour planning to visit some wet areas related to sage-grouse, possibly in conjunction with the WRI/UPCD tour if those interests match.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be the field tour, date TBD.