

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 4/16/19

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), Chris Perkins (BLM), Natasha Hadden (BLM), Boyd Kitchen (USU), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Population and research updates

Brian Maxfield presented to the group on the collared sage-grouse that DWR, BLM, and USFS are jointly tracking in the Basin.

- Most leks are still unavailable due to snow levels, and accessible ones don't have much activity yet. This makes them also inaccessible for trapping: they have tried twice but not seen any birds. It feels similar to the last time there was a population dip, and we saw lots of hens but no males. It has been ten years since the last trough in population, so this is relatively expected
- At the Paradise Park Junction, however, 40 birds were on the road, pecking around in the dirt.
- The birds with transmitters this year showed very poor survival.
- Some interesting information is appearing despite this.
 - One adult male, caught last winter on the Taylor Mountain lek, went all the way into Colorado – 39 miles! – and passed through where other grouse winter.
 - Another male is using windswept limestone slopes to winter
 - A female caught on Taylor Mountain nested near a pond, then went down to Steinaker dam, spent a dam, and came home. She made big movements, possibly connected to the big snows, even making it to Maeser, for about 26 miles of movement in three days.
 - A male caught on Little Mountain hung out on a center pivot for summer, went to Little Mountain briefly in the winter, then has been down on near the SGMA boundary.
 - In summary: lots of movements from the GPS birds this winter.
- There are two active collars left on Blue Mountain. These two stayed close to home: the female stayed on Blue Mountain, and the male goes up to Colorado in the winter.
- All 7 on Anthro have died. The grouse there spent time in ravine bottoms.
- There are around 87,000 point locations from this study.

Jamie reported that there were over 100 birds on the Towanna Flat lek (i.e. road) two weeks ago. The Little Water lek may have moved this year. The snow on John Star is gone, and at Mud Springs is melting.

State plan update

Lorien provided a PowerPoint on the Utah state sage-grouse plan revision. Content below:

Overview:

- New 5-year plan signed by the governor on Jan 1 of this year
- It is a PLPCO (Gov's office public lands folks) plan, so really a State-Level plan
- As such it is less like the normal Utah wildlife plans, like elk or turkey
- Large focus on stakeholders and partnerships
- All fancy looking!
- All appendices on line, not part of the formal plan, so they can be updated as needed
- Maps are included in this category. Maps are online.

Basic content:

- Core concepts are the same
- SGMA boundaries are the same
- Habitat improvement goals are very similar (75,000 acres)
- Habitat protection acre goal changed from 10,000 to 5,000 annually to shift focus from reaching the acre goal to preserving most valuable habitat; allows dollars to be spent on more expensive ground

Notable changes:

- Opportunity areas remain a concept, but are no longer mapped. Rely on the on-the-ground assessments exclusively
- Mesic area restoration is now included
- The population goals have moved from using a 10-year rolling average to a 20-year trend. This helps capture two population cycles.
- This new 20-year approach will be used for adaptive management: did it decline this year? Address why, and monitor it
- This will be used for statewide and SGMA populations

Mapping

- As noted, maps are on line, under appendices: <https://wildlife.utah.gov/learn-more/greater-sage-grouse.html>
- Seasonal habitat maps have changed. Maps currently on the website are based on VHF collar data, modeling data, in colored pixels, rather than the original past polygons
- The maps will be changing again; The future incarnation, known as "one map to rule them all" will be used by BLM and USFS for their plans as well. These new maps will be brought back to regional biologists for review before finalizing. This will happen later this summer.

Not everything is complete

- Disturbance cap details not fleshed out yet
- Will require coordination with BLM, USFS, and State of Utah/DWR to address:
 - Whether to use 3% or 5% disturbance level caps
 - How fire will be treated
 - What counts as disturbance

Brian noted that Simplot has been the test case for using the new plan for mitigation, as they were mid-process when the plan was released, and so they have incorporated its processes and requirements into what Simplot will be doing.

BLM updates

Natasha provide an update of the new BLM plan amendments, which were just signed.

- GHMA is gone
- Exceptions are available in non-habitat
- Mitigation will be considered at the landscape scale
- They will be allowing density and disturbance cap exceedances if it improves conditions for sage-grouse
- The habitat objectives in Table 2.2 have changed/updated to reflect more recent and more local information
- Lek buffer flexibility reverts back to 2008 management
- A more formal process for mitigation is being developed but has not been finalized yet
- BLM cannot touch mitigation dollars, but can work with others handling those exchanges

The Record of Decision has a table of what changed between the 2015 amendments and this new 2019 document.

BLM's final EIS was just released December 6th. Major changes include the removal of Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) as well as the general habitat designation (GHMA). The boundary areas of Priority habitat will now match closely with the state of Utah's sage-grouse management areas (SGMAs). It is in the protest period right now.

USFS updates

Lorien's presentation slide presented the current USFS plan amendment revisions status: It should be coming out very soon (end of April). Likely features include:

- Removal of GHMA and SFAs
- Changes to the seven-inch stubble height requirement
- Use of Utah-based data (Dahlgren) for habitat requirement
- Not sure how Anthro Mtn will be designated (might be PHMA, might be removed like GHMA)
- Use of the "One Map to Rule Them All" habitat data

It was noted that Anthro's situation has changed since 2008. Some leases are done and some wells have been capped.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will share the BYU sage-grouse data link with the group
- Lorien will connect Jamie with the BYU team as the tribe is considering putting collars out on birds in the Hill Creek extension.
- Brian and Jamie will connect with Michel Kohl to see how the tribal portions of the map will be handled, and if it is cut out, whether the data can be shared at least with the tribe.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be the field tour. The group decided to join with the Strawberry and Carbon sage-grouse groups to visit the Dollar Ridge Fire area in late June or early July. Lorien will coordinate the combined tour. Derrick Ewell would be the ideal person to lead it.