

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 5/21/13

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Jim Spencer (NRCS), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Diane Coltharp (Uintah County), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Scott Chew (co-chair, rancher/landowner), Darrell Gilman (UACD), Mark Ewell (NRCS), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Pat Rainbolt (UDWR), Ben Williams (UDWR), Bob Christensen (USFS), Ted Donaldson (UDWR/NRCS), Terrell Thayne (UGIP), Jim Brown (Conservation District), Don Cloward (UDWR), Amanda Taylor (QEP Energy), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

NRCS Update: Grazing Reserve Program and Fence Marking Efforts

Natasha Gruber updated the group on opportunities with NRCS for sage-grouse. The Grazing Reserve Program (GRP) is an easement program with a lot of money statewide to support rangeland easements specifically for sage-grouse. Most of the money is for permanent easements. The ranking criteria include location (higher points for being in certain Sage-Grouse Management Areas, of which the Uintah/Diamond area is one), proximity to other protected lands, areas that are coming out of CRP, size, contribution to landscape-scale continuity, condition (for sage-grouse), past maintenance of grazing records on the property, etc. Jeff Williams at NRCS in Salt Lake can be contacted for more detailed questions. The SGI biologists (Natasha Gruber, for this area) can also assist. Wetland Reserve Program also has some sage-grouse-focused dollars this year. Properties with both sage-grouse range and wetland areas may be able to have both programs working together. Someone asked if there is extra priority given for having a lek on the property under consideration. Lorien will inquire about this.

The deadline for signing up in May 31. Signing up is just an expression of possible interest, and is not binding. Lorien will send out a reminder next week to all the LWGs via email.

NRCS is still aiming to mark all high-collision risk fences on private land. As soon as materials are available, Natasha will coordinate with the numerous volunteer groups who have expressed interest in marking fences. It has also been listed on the Dedicated Hunters website.

Brian Maxfield noted that he has seen a change in fence collisions on Diamond Mountain with a recently marked fence. Last year, we saw several grouse strikes along the fence, whereas so far this year he has not seen any on the fence with markers.

The Forest Service representatives reported that the Ashley National Forest has been marking fences. Dave Olsen, who did much of the marking, may also get to Anthro Mountain soon.

WRI Update

Almost every proposed WRI project was funded this year, including many that will benefit sage-grouse.

Planning Updates

The state sage-grouse plan has now been released. It is available on the DWR's sage-grouse website, along with interactive maps. The group reviewed several of the major elements of the plan, including the five objectives for population and habitat in Utah.

The following points were discussed:

- Efforts on private and SITLA land will be voluntary
- The plan includes ambitious goals for pinyon-juniper removal and other habitat improvement ("enhancement") or increases across the state. WRI funding will be focused on this. Many agencies are involved in these efforts. At least in the short term, NRCS will be focusing on Phase 1 (lowest density PJ) and Phase 2 (lower density) PJ sites in order to have the greatest possible impact on habitat that sage-grouse could most easily move into. There are different acreage goals for opportunity areas and sage-grouse habitat. Some questions remain about exactly how the accounting for the different projects will work.
- Grazing appendix: several individuals had read the full grazing appendix, and concluded that it essentially says that responsible grazing should be beneficial for sage-grouse, and overgrazing is not good. Grazers should not be alarmed by the content of the appendix, but should focus on maintaining appropriate grazing systems. Anyone interested in getting help improving grazing management can contact NRCS.

The link between the state plan and the ongoing federal efforts is not clear at this point. An original goal of the state planning process was to create maps and stipulations in the state plan which could be approved by USFWS and subsequently adopted into the federal (BLM and USFS) plans. However, because the USFWS cannot provide "concurrence" at this time (in part due to the lack of mechanisms in the plan to carry out the objectives), it remains to be seen how the state and federal processes will work together.

For now, both the Forest Service and BLM will be working from their interim guidance documents. Lorien provided hard copies of those documents at the meeting.

Work continues on the federal sage-grouse planning effort. A draft EIS is being written which will explore alternatives for how BLM Resource Management Plans and Forest Service Forest Plans will be amended to include regulatory mechanisms for sage-grouse protection. The State sage-grouse plan will be one of the five alternatives in this EIS. The Draft EIS will be out for public comment probably around September 2013.

Several counties, including Uintah County, have recently passed language in support of the state plans goals and objectives. Commissioner McKee will provide the language as passed by the

Uintah County Commission to Lorien.

Regarding mapping, Scott Chew offered to begin a finer-scale juniper and sage-grouse habitat mapping effort on Blue Mountain to help guide future habitat improvement (or increase) efforts there. The group was strongly supportive and felt that such an effort might become a template for future mapping exercises. Jim Spencer and Natasha Gruber from NRCS will provide Scott with a map on which he can draw polygons. Natasha, Brian, and Scott will spend time in the field to ensure that everyone is working with similar definitions of Phase 1, 2, and 3 juniper, and similar characterizations of understory condition. Ideally, the lessons learned from this pilot project could be used to train other landowners to identify areas in need of treatment for sage-grouse benefit.

A concern was expressed that the current planning process has made energy companies in the area feel as though they do not need to participate. At the moment, there is no clear incentive for them to participate. However, several individuals in attendance felt that it will be important to still address sage-grouse concerns outside the SGMA. This is because, in the event that sage-grouse are listed in the future, sage-grouse outside the SGMAs will also be considered. Also, many companies have useful experience with mitigation, restoration, and other sage-grouse considerations, and are important partners in the regional effort to conserve sage-grouse and avert a listing. The UBARM group will try to re-engage energy companies in the process. This is particularly important given the uncertainty with how federal and state planning efforts will be coordinated in the near future, including whether the SGMAs will be included with the same boundaries in the final EIS.

One person suggested that energy companies might be interested if they could do mitigation for development outside the SGMAs by enhancing or increasing habitat inside the SGMAs, and help provide funding to those interested in doing projects inside.

Several individuals also expressed concern that the tribes are not engaged, by their own request. Brian Maxfield will reach out to the tribe and ask if they are interested in participating in any LWG activities. Lorien will also reach out to the BIA contact in the area.

In sum, Lorien gathered the following questions to pass along to the state team which will be in charge of resolving some of the more detailed “how to” for the state plan.

- How will the accounting for pinyon juniper and other habitat treatments be done? For example, will there will be areas for habitat “increase” within the delineated “habitat” areas, or are the only “increase” areas in the delineated “opportunity” areas? There is a need for a finer-scale mapping at the local level which will help clarify what qualifies as “increase” vs “enhancement” of habitat. An upfront effort to clarify those details would make the efforts of the LWG to track progress much more straightforward.
- Will LWGs be able to contribute to the finer-scale mapping needed at the local level?
- Will energy companies (or others) be able to fund projects inside SGMAs in order to do mitigation for development outside SGMAs, even though currently the plan only requires mitigation for development inside SGMAs?

Brian provided several encouraging updates: several new leks were found this spring, including one with 20 males and one with 15. They will need to be confirmed next year to be added to the list of birds. This year, Diamond Mountain had about 80 more birds than last year, not including the new birds found at the new leks. The group appreciated this good news.

Field tour planning

At the UBPCD meeting prior to the sage-grouse meeting, it was suggested that a tour of Anthro Mountain, given the somewhat contentious exclusion of it from the state SGMAs, would be a good idea. The UBARM group suggested an alternate idea (or perhaps just separate, as both ideas seem viable): a Blue Mountain field trip. It could include a discussion of areas where habitat projects could be done. In addition, it would be a great opportunity to engage the Colorado part of the mountain, and share ideas with that working group, wildlife managers, and landowners. Some work has been done on easements in that area that would be interesting to learn about. Brian Maxfield will contact Brian Homes in Moffett County to explore the idea of a joint field tour, probably in September. Lorien will follow up.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will ask how sage-grouse lek locations (and other known actively used habitat) will be considered in SGI-GRP applications.
- Lorien will send reminders to all groups about the May 31 sign-up deadline for NRCS for sage-grouse easement programs for sage-grouse.
- Commissioner McKee will provide the language as passed by the Uintah County Commission to Lorien.
- Lorien will continue to update the group on planning processes
- Scott, Brian, and Natasha will work together to develop a fine-scale map for Blue Mountain, and track lessons learned to share at a future meeting.
- Lorien will pass along the groups' questions on the plan to individuals who will be able to address the steering committee (state working group) in charge of deciding plan implementation details.
- Lorien and Brian will both reach out to tribal (Brian) and BIA (Lorien) representatives.
- Lorien and Brian will work together to discuss Colorado and Blue Mountain field trip opportunities.

Next Meeting:

Field tour, either in coordination with UBPCD, date tentatively set for July 11, or a later date in September for a Blue Mountain field tour. [Post-meeting note: the UBPCD tour was rescheduled for July 31].