

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 5/22/12

Time: 10:00 am

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Jean Dickinson (Vermillion Ranch), Diane Coltharp (Uintah County Public Lands), Susan White (Office of Energy Development), Charles Chase (Anadarko), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Rex Sacco (Carbon County), Mike Tamillos (USDA-WS), Brian Maxfield (DWR), Pat Rainbolt (DWR), JC Brewer (landowner), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Daniel Emmett (BLM), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Brownie Tomkinson (private citizen), Mary Bernard (Vernon Express), Shon McKinnon (NFX), Stephanie Tomkinson (QEP), Lowell Braxton (Western Energy Alliance), James Kohler (Brack Capital Energy), Paul Betts (Moon Lake Electric Association), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Darlene Burns (Uintah County), Mark Raymond (Uintah County), Rikki Hrenko (Enefit), Jon Stearmer (Uintah County), LDee Curtis (Deseret Power), David Allison (private consultant; UBARM co-chair), Bill Stringer (BLM), Ken Secrest (XTO Energy), Scott Chew (ranch landowner, UBARM co-chair), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Paul Hacking (Uintah Impact Mitigation Special Service District), Misty Roberts (XTO Energy), Bob Christensen (USFS), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Alan H Chew (Rancher), Jim Brown (UGIP), Scott Hacking (DEQ), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

The meeting was held in the county council chambers in anticipation of large attendance, and co-facilitated by Commissioner McKee. After introductions, Lorien welcome newcomers and explained that the meeting would include both research and population updates, as well as explanations of and feedback/questions about the current draft map from the group convened by the governor to write a new sage-grouse plan for Utah.

Research Updates

Brian Maxfield updated the group on current research efforts. Leks counts are starting to come in for the season but are not official yet. The Three Corners area is holding steady. This part of Utah had a drop three years ago (unsurprising, as sage-grouse populations are cyclical), and they seem to be starting back up again. Diamond Mountain accounts for the majority of birds in the areas. It also went up from last year, with good production. One lek had over 150 males counted. With little snow, counting was easier this year. On Taylor Mountain, birds move back and forth between there are Diamond. In Halfway Hollow (low desert by Hwy 40, up through Deep Creek) numbers are relatively steady though one lek lost numbers. Deadman's Bench is

low but steady. Blue Mountain saw a huge drop a few years ago, but has held steady this year and may be on an upswing. In the Book Cliffs, south of White River, East Bench: The populations are hanging on at low levels. The East Bench population only had one male on the Sand Wash lek, though there were a few hens in the vicinity. A camera there indicated that males only came to the lek for 9 of 56 days. Desert populations don't seem to cycle as much as higher elevation ones do. They flew Winter Ridge with a helicopter, and did not locate birds this spring. Leks numbers on the south slope of tribal land seem to have increased. On Anthro Mountain, active leks all seem high. There have been translocations to bring in birds. A total of 60 birds were moved from Parker Mountain. The translocated birds had low survival. Two research projects are ongoing: one on Anthro and one on Diamond.

Brian also answered several questions and provided additional information:

- Not every male comes to the lek every day. Younger (juvenile) males may not appear in early counts because older males chase them off until later in the spring.
- Q: Is there research on whether males visit multiple leks? A: all we have is information on the collared birds. However, Taylor Mountain males do not appear to mix. Some other leks see small shifts.
- Q: regarding birds in Willow Creek? A: some birds who nested on East Bench took broods to Willow Creek to raise them.
- Q: how hard is it to re-establish birds in areas where they have gone? A: very difficult. The only successful translocations have been when there are still local birds there to show the new birds where to go and maybe keep them from leaving.
- Q: Do our birds exchange with Colorado and Wyoming? A: Yes. The 3-corners population moves between here and Wyoming. One male who was collared with a GPS collar in Colorado is now on Diamond Mountain.
- In general, winter movements are harder to determine because it is harder to get to the areas to track collars. There are no collars on any birds in the 3-corners area. All Diamond Mountain collars are on hens, not males. Continued ability to monitor collared birds depends on funding and time. GPS collars require less personnel effort but are much more expensive.

State planning update and review of proposed map boundaries

Commissioner McKee and others presented the draft maps provided by the state sage-grouse task force group (Governor's sage-grouse working group). The group is comprised of high-level representatives of federal, state, and local government, as well as a landowner representative, energy company representatives, conservation interests, and a university researcher. They have asked for local feedback on the maps. Commissioner McKee emphasized that the maps need to represent where the grouse are, because the Fish and Wildlife Service will not buy-off on maps that do not represent populations. Any population areas that are excluded need to be justified with a biological reason for why they do not need to be included. Specific stipulations that will accompany mapped versus non-mapped areas are not yet available.

Individuals in attendance at the meeting made the following suggestions. Not everyone agreed with every suggestion. Comments/concerns/suggestions will be passed along to the state team.

- Exclude Vernal city, Ashley Valley, etc. Brian noted that the intent as he understands it is that non-sage-grouse habitat – like cities – in these core areas will not be included in management stipulations even if they are inside a mapped core area. Although Buckskin Hills (and areas north of Jensen, Naples, and Vernal) were suggested for removal from the core area, Brian noted that there are wintering areas there.
- With all the energy development going on (and likely to go on) in the southern basin, in will be very hard to improve those birds' habitat. Excluding those areas would exclude about 10% of the Basin sage-grouse.
- It would be unfortunate if BLM were hamstrung by having to go NEPA for sage-grouse in non-grouse habitat. More detailed GIS work would be very valuable. SITLA could help with this.
- The Hwy 40 corridor is also an oil and gas corridor, and might need to be excluded. A suggested new line was to follow Cliff Creek as a boundary until Musket shot springs, then follow the transmission corridor.
- Fragmentation of habitat was a listing factor, so we need to make sure to not cut little holes in the habitat maps as that could increase the problem for sage-grouse.
- Everyone generally agreed that Diamond needs to be included in the core area.
- Not everyone was comfortable making map decisions without knowing the associated stipulations.
- We should focus most on the core areas where the populations can truly be helped.
- We need to grapple with corridors, and mitigation, as well as looking carefully at actual habitat to make sure we have an accurate map.
- Near Anthro, the GasCo EIS dealt with winter range specifically, and that document should be consulted for what they wrote and agreed to. The Berry EIS has also addressed sage-grouse issues and should be reviewed as well.
- There was interest in cutting off a corner of the map near Wilkin Ridge. Brian agreed that the birds are generally south of Wilken. They go to the head of Big Wash. The group suggested trimming the map north of Wilken Ridge.
- The little private land holdings in tribal, north of Anthro, are unnecessary little fragments.
- The (UBARM) group strongly recommended getting real occupied habitat and GIS files rather than only pdf maps. The more detailed the mapping can be, the easier it will be to handle on-the-ground decisions later. Specifically, delineating habitat and non habitat within the mapped areas is important. Knowing how those will be identified, mapped, and handled is important. The group would like to be involved.
- The farthest east tip of the Fruitland area map was discussed briefly, and it was suggested that the map boundary be moved west. That may be in the Strawberry Valley group's area. The maps should include the current LWG boundaries.
- The suggestion was made in the Daggett county area of the map to take out the West side of the reservoir (i.e. move the line to the west shore), removing the municipality from the core area.
- Lodgepole pine and ponderosa forests are not sage-grouse habitat and should not be included in the map.
- In Clay Basin, from the road, north, there is salt shrub. Brian can help determine where best to move the boundary line so that non-habitat is not included at the edges of the map.
- The line could follow the Colorado-Utah border in the Crouse canyon area.

Brian made many alternations to the provided GIS files during the meeting and will provide them as suggestions to the state team. The state team will consider the suggestions when finalizing maps. They are working toward a late-June deadline for finishing the maps/plan.

The state team also requested that the Local Working Groups provide input on the most important local threats. After some discussion, the group identified the following top threats:

- Wildfire (particularly in Daggett)
- Predation (ravens, primarily)
- Pinyon-juniper encroachment
- Land use change (this includes many things, from cabin development to roads and energy development)

Additional concerns, comments, and questions to be passed along to the state team include:

- There needs to be specific guidance on how to prevent an Endangered Species Act listing: what exactly should be done, or what numbers of birds need to be maintained?
- There needs to be much more clarity on what the local working groups' role can be, and how we can help. The group is interested in further opportunities for feedback, particularly when there is more information available about potential stipulations for the core areas.
- The group is concerned that blanket regulations might make flexibility – which is critical to responding appropriately to dynamic habitat situations – more difficult.
- There has been a great deal of work, in past energy EIS's, done for sage-grouse in the Basin. That work needs to not be forgotten. No need to reinvent the wheel. This includes Berry, GasCo, and Anadarko for mitigation suggestions.
- Clarity on how tribal areas will fit in to the plan, since they are going to be excluded from the map, would be useful.
- Connections between other counties and other states should make sense – similar map lines, for example. (Commissioner McKee is starting to work on this with Bob Budd, the facilitator for the state group.) Energy companies specifically appreciate consistent regulations across jurisdictions.

Follow-up Needed

- Brian will send the revised GIS file (developed during the meeting) to the state team.
- Lorien will provide recommendations and concerns from this meeting to the state team.
- Anyone interested in state team can speak with Mike McKee, who is on that group.
- Anyone interested in attending the state team's meeting can go to the next meeting on May 30th in Salt Lake, at the capitol.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be scheduled so we can comment on any updates to the state sage-grouse plan or maps, likely sometime in mid June.