

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 5/27/14

Place: County Building in Vernal, Utah

Present: Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Paul Betts (Moon Lake Electric), Natasha Gruber (NRCS/Mule Deer Fdn), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Dixie Sadlier (BLM), Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Scott Chew (co-chair, rancher/landowner), Bill Stringer (Uintah County Public Lands), Mark Raymond (Uintah County), Stephanie Tomkinson (QEP Energy), Jon Stearmer (Uintah County), Kelsey Smith (QEP), Kelley Huemoeller (QEP), Eric Ellis (UDWR), Ryan Clerico (Enefit American Oil), Evan Guymon (Duchesne Co. Conservation District), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

QEP Comments Presentation

Kelley Huemoeller, from QEP, presented comments that QEP submitted during the comment period for the EIS for the BLM/USFS sage-grouse plan amendments. Key points included:

- General support for Alternative E, and concerns with B, C, and D
- Concerns about a perceived bias against voluntary conservation measures
- Concerns with closures, although BMPs may be voluntary
- Concern that the maps in several alternatives included general habitat as a category beyond the priority (approximately SGMA) areas
- Concern that the 5% disturbance limit included fire
- Concern that disturbance calculations for private and federal land were combined, leaving the possibility that federal lands might be forced to compensate for irresponsible actions on private lands
- Comments regarding temporary versus permanent disturbance
- Concern with the lack of flexibility with 4-mile buffers
- Incorrect assumptions about industry ability to use horizontal drilling in many circumstances
- Concerns that the economic analysis regarding reduction in production did not accurately represent dollar losses from oil, gas, severance taxes, etc.
- Lack of a monitoring plan. One was not included, and that will be a huge piece of what companies need to deal with
- Industry concerns with the economic figures in the DEIS.

There were several follow-up questions. Kelley explained that although the comments were public and can be obtained through the BLM, anyone interested in a copy can request one through her. Kelley will also send Lorien a copy in case anyone asks.

Federal Updates

Dixie Sadlier and others provided updates on new sage-grouse tracking efforts.

- In partnership with DWR, BLM will be putting collars in three areas, Three Corners, Blue Mountain, and maybe Little Mountain. The collars will be GPS tracking, so do not require as much on-the ground effort to find them. These solar-powered, backpack style collars are expected to last three years. USFS has also purchased some of these collars. They will be instrumental in identifying unexpected or currently unknown areas where the birds spend time. Brian Maxfield explained that there were some early difficulties as the biologists learned how best to put the backpacks on birds. Both BLM and USFS have provided funds for the collars and the airtime charges to download data every five days, which is how the birds' locations are tracked. Colorado recently collared a few Blue Mountain birds, so we already have some new information from that about where the birds in that area have been going.

Other federal planning updates:

- The Vernal office of the BLM also has been using a disturbance database. It has been used for 2 years now. It currently only tracks oil and gas, but the database will hopefully be able to be expanded in the future. The data comes from the companies themselves, in a good partnership.
- The status of the BLM/USFS draft EIS for sage-grouse is that the comments have been processed, and now cooperating agencies are waiting for a meeting to be scheduled and the subsequent opportunity to review the draft. That meeting was originally scheduled for early May, but was postponed, and as of this date (May 27) has not been rescheduled.

Utah State Plan Updates

Eric Ellis explained that Utah is close to having baseline (as of April 1, 2013) maps available, but only a three SGMAs are done so far. The local working groups' input will be important to ensure that the maps represent what is really on the ground. LWGs and counties will be given a password and asked to help identify areas and help ground-truth the maps, which will be online.

The state also anticipates that the soon-to-be-finished maps of pinyon-juniper trees will help in refining the internal and external boundaries of the SGMAs, particularly with regard to the definitions and boundaries of opportunity versus habitat areas.

We will schedule the next UBARM meeting once those are available.

Population and Lek Count Updates

Brian Maxfield provided updates on this spring's population numbers.

- At Three Corners, the birds are doing really well. The counts were up this year. We also flew east-west in a helicopter, looking for more leks. The Clay Basin lek seems to have disappeared – those birds could not be found.
- On Blue Mountain, the biologists located two new possible leks. They will need to be confirmed next year. The biggest lek was 31 males. Blue Mountain bird counts also went up since last year, with a total over 100 males this year. Colorado has also seen an increase.

- On Diamond, leks found last year were confirmed this year, increasing the number of known leks. A total of 708 males were counted on Diamond. The largest lek, which had 287 males, has normally been in the 100-bird range! The second biggest lek also went up over 100 males. Most leks in the area increase from last year's numbers. A few leks on the east side are empty or had decreasing numbers.
- On Little Mountain, just west of town (not in the SGMA), the three most southern leks do not see strutting any more. This is in a desert area. Some leks (e.g. Lazy M) on tribal have also disappeared. The increases this year were more modest, and the numbers are still lower than normal.
- On Anthro (not in the SGMA) there are leks on non-producing well pads. Anthro had its highest count ever, with around 60 total males. Only one lek had no birds. The winter was light, and more grouse may have stayed on top of the mountain than normal.
- Strawberry Valley is also doing very well. Although this is a different SGMA, Brian also monitors those birds. There were 55 birds on a lek in Fruitland, and a new lek also.

Upcoming National Sage-grouse Forum

Lorien reminded everyone about the Range-wide Sage-Grouse Forum to be held in Salt Lake City on November 12-13, 2014. She will send out an email with additional information.

NRCS Updates

NRCS has recently combined all its easement programs into one new program. June 6th is the deadline to apply. Lots of fence markers have been installed. Diamond has 20 miles of fence marked by Eagle Scouts in March.

UPCD project updates

The meeting ended and transitioned directly into the UBPCD group. All WRI proposed projects related to sage-grouse, as well as others, were discussed at that meeting.

Follow-up Needed

- The field tour will be coordinated with UBPCD on June 10th.
- Lorien will provide the group with more information on the November sage-grouse Range-wide Forum in Salt Lake City
- Kelley will send Lorien a copy of the QEP comments.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting is the joint field tour, which was previously scheduled by UBPCD for June 10. Details were discussed at the UBPCD meeting following the UBARM meeting. The date for the next inside meeting will depend on the availability of draft disturbance maps, but probably later this summer.