

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 9/19/17

Place: DNR office, Vernal, Utah

Present: Nathan Hall (DEQ), Terrell Thayne (UDAF GIP), Dixie Sadler (BLM), Josh Easter (USFS), Quincy Bahr (BLM), John Spencer (Simplot), Leah Lewis (BLM), Charlie Holtz (Pheasants Forever/SGI), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Natasha Hadden (BLM), Greg Todd (Duchesne County), Ben Nadolski (DNR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Announcements

- Charlie Holtz is the new SGI biologist, based out of Vernal.
- The GIP signup date is the end of November. GIP is working with Lucy Parham on planning for upcoming 319 funding applications as well.
- NRCS signup deadline is also coming at the end of November

BLM Secretarial Order Update

Quincy Bahr, with the state BLM office, provided an overview of the work that BLM is doing to comply with recent orders from Secretary Zinke. Secretarial order 3353 addresses sage-grouse planning. A team, coordinating between federal and state agencies, had 60 days to compare state and federal sage-grouse plans and see where federal plans could do more to line up with state planning efforts. State coordination was done through the WAFWA sage-grouse task force. A number of recommendations emerged from the effort, and are summarized in a report from August 4th. The report is 13 pages with a number of appendices, prefaced by a memo from Zinke outlining a list of things which need to be worked on.

The items to do include “short-term” tasks, such as clarifying where existing flexibility exists in the federal plans, revising IMs to better align with state policies, entering into agreements with states (in Utah, for example, this would include working with the new Utah mitigation strategy), and training staff, partners, and stakeholders. It also includes longer-term items, such as potential plan amendments in areas where those make sense. There is still a lot of work to be done to determine the appropriate scale and content of such changes.

Currently, each state is providing feedback on the report to BLM. Ben Nadolski is the point person for any comments from local working groups or others who have feedback on whether the existing 13-page report 1) captures relevant concerns, 2) addresses key local issues, and 3) has appropriate priorities. Any input should go through Ben.

A key point that Quincy made is that this effort should not impede successful work being done,

but should provide an opportunity to address any concerns or areas where federal and state plans are out of alignment, or impeding economic activity.

Lorien will send out the report (or a link to it) and make Quincy's presentation available to the local working groups.

State sage-grouse plan update process and input

Ben Nadolski attended the meeting to provide the group with updates on the state sage-grouse plan revision process, and to gather input from the group on any changes they would recommend on objectives, implementation, threats, and other aspects of the plan. This effort to update the state plan is coming five years after the plan was first put into place. It will be part of what is examined during the USFWS status assessment in 2020. Ben hopes to have the plan updated this winter, but has a final deadline of June 30th.

For all elements of the plan, Ben asked the group to comment on what they would recommend keeping, what they would like to see changed, and anything else to consider.

The group had a lively and highly transparent discussion about many aspects of the plan. Ben recorded detailed notes for his follow-up. Key items of discussion included:

- Boundaries and mapping: several group members noted that the opportunity areas as mapped are not useful for on-the-ground planning. The group debated the utility of having them delineated at all, and expressed concern that if BLM used more of the state maps in future BLM efforts, the flexibility that the state currently has might be turned into more rigid and problematic boundaries and could cause problems when on-the-ground needed conflicted with mapped lines.
- Population objectives: the numerical population objective present some challenges, but no one had suggestions for improvements that had fewer challenges. The population units (viability) objective was similarly noted to be potentially unclear if interpreted by an entity with less flexibility than the state of Utah (such as BLM) but otherwise a reasonable intention.
- Habitat objectives: treatment objectives for PJ were supported, including support for codifying the current practice of reporting habitat "increase" and "improvement" in a single objective moving forward.
- Permanent protection objectives were discussed in light of the mitigation plan, as at least one entity in the room was supportive of allowing permanent protection to be part of the mitigation program. The original iteration of the mitigation program specifically excluded permanent protection of sage-grouse habitat as a form of mitigation, but comments received in the first comment period earlier this year may be changing that.

Ben is accepting comments on the plan revision this fall, and will be meeting with many different groups (local working groups, special interests, and anyone else with input on how to improve the plan). He would like to have information gathered this year so he can work on a draft before the legislative session begins in February.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will send Quincy's presentation and the BLM report to the listserv.
- Anyone with comments on the BLM report or the state plan should send them to Ben Nadolski

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be December 12th at 1 pm in the DNR conference room, following the UBPCD/WRI meeting in the morning.