

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 2/9/21

Place: Virtual meeting via Zoom

Present: April Abate (DOGM), Danielle Johnston (Colorado Parks and Wildlife), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Boyd Kitchen (USU), Jared Reese (BLM), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Heather Talley (UDWR), Terrell Thayne (GIP), Ethan Hallows (SITLA), Bob Christensen (USFS), John Spencer (Simplot), Annelyse Matzinger (SGI biologist: PF/NRCS), Natasha Hadden (BLM), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Presentation on habitat restoration lessons learned

Danielle Johnston, with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, presented information from a 12-year project studying reclamation of oil and gas disturbances in the Piceance Basin in Colorado. The 12 study sites represented three elevations. The project, although it did not set out to focus on cheatgrass, ended up with a lot of relevant information about it.

Some of the information presented included:

- Because of the timing of cheatgrass seed setting (May/June), the timing of when a disturbance happens matters a lot. A fall disturbance is much better than a spring one (just before seeds set) in terms of being able to reduce cheatgrass.
- The experiments looked at Plateau, a common herbicide used to combat cheatgrass, but also indaziflam (Rejuvra) – a general herbicide that binds closely to the top of the soil – which is useful if you have existing rooted plants, but it will be over a year before you can successfully seed in the area. Additionally, NutraFix, which is high in boron (which cheatgrass does not like) may be effective, but less is known about its other effects.
- Cheatgrass seed dispersal:
 - o wind is important, especially at the site scale. This means that treating buffer areas is very important, so cheatgrass doesn't come in from close-by locations.
 - o Isolated cheatgrass plants produce nearly 40 times the seeds as a cheatgrass plant in dense stands of cheatgrass, so being aware of those single plants can be very important
 - o Ground texture matters: if cheatgrass seeds are stuck in a little pothole instead of on a flat area, then the seeds have to compete with one another, so a rougher surface may reduce cheatgrass spread.
 - o Counterintuitively, the end of a really awful dry year may be a great time to plant.
- They also looked at seed mixes. She recommends putting much less grass seed out there than is often included in mixes.
- They seeded sagebrush at every site. Some of their findings point to the idea that very locally gathered sagebrush seed may be much more likely to germinate and survive due to being adapted to the local conditions. She recommends, if possible, collecting local

seeds just using a 5-gallon bucket. There will of course be less pure seeds as a result, but it may be worth the effort in terms of survival. Smaller site scales would make this more feasible.

- Sagebrush skeletons (as long as they are not full of weed seeds) also helped seeding success.
- Different elevation zones have different vulnerabilities (decreasing vulnerability as elevation increases) to cheatgrass and other restoration challenges.

There is a report written on this, which Lorien will distribute to the group. Jimi suggested getting Danielle to present at the WRI meeting in Richfield next time it is held, as this information is very pertinent to lots of WRI projects.

Railroad EIS

After a second extension, the Uinta Basin Railway EIS comments are now due February 12. Natasha noted that the BLM submitted comments, including the concern that the detail in the EIS was often lacking in specificity.

HAF map updates

Jared noted that the maps will soon be rolled out to BLM and DWR. Lorien read a few key points from the presentation that Michel Kohl gave to the West Desert local working group:

- Overall, this is a mapping of habitat suitability of the landscape for sage-grouse, not a map to show exactly where birds are.
- The pixel colors represent where sage-grouse *could* live/nest/etc. The model does not know whether birds are actually there or not – that is for local biologists to determine on the ground.
- There are values for suitable, marginal, and unsuitable habitat. What that looks like on the ground varies somewhat by region.
- “Nesting” isn’t a time frame (i.e. where birds would be during a season), but rather the likelihood that a sage-grouse would put a nest somewhere, based on past data.

There will be training for BLM and DWR soon to make sure everyone knows how to use the map. We will also discuss it at the LWG meetings once it is generally available on DWR’s site.

Brian noted that this is by far the best map we have ever had with regard to winter habitat.

Round Robin

- John Spencer noted that Simplot is making very good progress on reclamation on the west side of the highway. There are about 100 acres which have yet to hit three years of stability, but otherwise things are essentially complete. He noted that Danielle’s local-seed-gathering recommendations might be very interesting to try.

- NRCS: (Annelise, with SGI) is working mostly on previously planned projects for now.
- USFS: Bob will be ready to help with the lek counts as needed. He mentioned that there have not been any updates with regard to the forest plan amendments, to date. The Forest Service is working with Wyoming to put some new GPS collars out near Flaming Gorge.
- GIP: just working on projects
- BLM Vernal: Natasha is working with Brian this spring to trap more grouse, and will help with lek counts. The BLM has a seeding project on Shiner schedule for this fall. An AIM/HAF crew will be coming out in the spring to start monitoring for the HAF project.
- Heather said she expects the solo-biologist plan to keep lek counts on track for the spring and not affected by covid. The new lek count app, which allows real-time submittal of the count data to Avery, will be used again this year.
- Brian is just ramping up to start lek counts, and will be using the app. Anyone who wants to help should let Brian know. They will also be trapping, as Natasha noted. They have 33 or 34 collars to get out, and will start as soon as possible. This year, the focus will be on Diamond Mountain, mostly.
- Jimi asked whether thermal imagery was an option for lek counts; heather noted that pilots do some infrared counts from planes as a way to look for new leks, which is done around the state on a rotating basis, different locations in different years, and the infrared means the pilots can go by themselves without someone watching. However, because it is harder to differentiate males from females, there are no immediate plans to use it for lek counts. Brian noted that there are no flights in the UBARM area this year.
- SITLA is awaiting a WRI project proposal decision but didn't have much new to report
- April/DOGM: There are 4 mining projects in Uinta County, of which 2 are active (Simplot and the HREx mine) and 2 are proposed. HREx is not currently regulated by DOGM because they are still in loose sand, but once they hit hard rock, DOGM will work with them and DWR on mitigation. Of the two proposed projects, both by Uintah Mining, the Playa Project is in the island park area, and will be obligated to avoid major construction between Dec-Apr and also a 4:1 mitigation ratio would be required. The other project is on SITLA and is not regulated.
- Stateside BLM: The new SEIS has been signed and sent to the judge in Idaho. BLM is still waiting to see if they can move forward with implementation of the 2019 plans; for now they are still working based off the 2015 decision. BLM is also working to hire a new monitoring coordinator.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will continue to explore getting a pollinator presentation to the group.
- Lorien will send the report on Danielle's research to the group.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in April or later, set by doodle poll.