

**UINTAH BASIN
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 10/28/20

Place: Virtual meeting via Zoom

Present: Charlie Holtz (Pheasants Forever), Tyson Todd (SITLA), John Spencer (Simplot), Jared Reese (BLM), Jim Spencer (NRCS), April Abate (DOGM), Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Cjay Buttars (USDA-WS), Heather Talley (UDWR), Ethan Hallows (SITLA), Annelyse Matzinger (SGI biologist: PF/NRCS), Terryl Thayne (GIP), Greg Todd (Duchesne County), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Natasha Hadden (BLM), Boyd Kitchen (USU), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

BLM planning updates

Jared Reese gave the group updates on BLM's policy and personnel situation at the moment.

- Christine Fletcher has been hired to replace Mellissa Wood as the statewide sage-grouse implementation coordinator.
- Tyler Nelson is no longer working on the sage-grouse GIS; Jake Sleibe will be the contact.
- The mapping effort is almost complete, and the maps are out for review. They are shooting for a December final version. Habitat suitability will be based on regional conditions: suitable, marginal, and unsuitable, as that differs throughout the state based on elevation, precipitation, etc.
- The supplemental EIS is nearly complete, and the final should be out in about a month.

DWR and sage-grouse population topics

Heather Talley presented the statewide lek count information in a PowerPoint. The report with the equivalent data is available; Lorien can send it out to the group or it can be accessed online.

Regarding difficulties in counting during harsh winters, which was a challenge in the previous year, Jimi asked if thermal sensors on drones have been, or could be, used for counts. Heather explained that they have been used on flights, but not drones.

Brian updated the group about the counts on Blue Mountain (up, as in 2019 they did not get up there until April), Diamond Mountain (an increase, which drives the SGMA numbers as it is big), Little Mountain (saw a decrease), and Three Corners (also a decrease), as well as Anthro information (which is not in the SGMA, but went up). He noted that there were no counts in the Book Cliffs. They are seeing birds, but don't know where they are lekking. Lek counts this year were done on an iPad, which meant very helpful quick results.

Brian also provided GPS project updates. Because of covid, no new captures were done this spring. They will start in spring 2021 to put more transmitters out, with a focus on Diamond Mountain. They will be trying out smaller transmitters, which are anecdotally easier on the birds. Brian is working on a report on the whole project, which has over 100,000 points in five years. It has been able to show use of habitat areas in winter, as well as use of project areas.

Brian also noted that the Richards Mountain Fire will summer, about 9000 acres in the 3-corners area, burned a lek. Richards Flat was black sage and some big sage, but PJ also burned. This might mean a temporary (short-term) negative impact on grouse, but possibly a long-term positive. Most of the fire on the side of Goslin Mountain was stopped due to valiant fire-fighting efforts. It is really good for grouse that the top of Goslin Mountain did not burn. Goslin is scheduled to be Plateaued (for cheatgrass control) this fall. The other large fire in the Uintas did not have as much impact on sage-grouse, and crews did a good job of saving the sagebrush.

Railroad

Lorien noted that the draft EIS for the Uintah Basin Railroad project will be out next week. Lorien will send a notice to the group when the comment period opens.

Mining updates

April Abate provided an update on mining happening in the area that might be of interest to the group. She explained that there is lots of interest in frac sand sourcing – a few companies have purchased property to explore mining it. Ramsey Hill Exploration is one of the companies pursuing mining permits in Uintah County. DOGM doesn't regulate "unconsolidated sands." However, mining that goes into bedrock, which at least one company is also interested in, does. So that company applied for a larger permit to cover it all. Permits that are in SGMAs will include consultation with DWR. Pat Rainbolt was the contact for this last August when it came up, and it was determined that the areas was in an "opportunity area." At the time, DWR recommended at 4:1 mitigation (because avoid/minimize was not feasible). This would be offsite mitigation projects funded (at least partially) by these mining companies and would include habitat improvement projects/treatments in other areas deemed appropriate by DWR.

Another company, Uinta Mining, has the same parent company as Alton Coal, is also interested in two frac sand projects in Uintah County. They are focused on a project on SITLA land near Jensen. Because they are only working with unconsolidated material, SITLA, not DOGM, is the regulatory body. The second project called "Playa Project" on BLM land would be regulated by both BLM and DOGM. There is no sage-grouse habitat on the mesa, but there is habitat directly adjacent below the mesa. Pat had a concern that truck traffic might disturb nearby grouse. For both of these projects, the same 4:1 mitigation for off-site projects is the action being proposed by DWR.

Simplot has been doing ongoing reclamation as they move into new areas. They are hopefully improving the habitat, and re-establishing sagebrush in areas that are being reclaimed. John

Spencer explained that they are mining about 5-60 acres a year, right now all east of the highway. 240 acres has been reclaimed and released (finished mining) on the west side of the highway, and has been regraded and reseeded. Right now the direction of new mining is moving primarily into PJ areas. Brian noted that Simplot is really trying to do good things, and it would be great if we were able to document grouse use of reclaimed areas.

Projects

There are lots of NRCS projects in the works this year. Scott Chew has PJ work planned on Blue Mountain, and there are some PJ projects on Diamond as well. The tribe is also looking at BDAs and cheatgrass projects on the Ute ground. Nov 20 is the NRCS application deadline for EQIP/SGI funds.

The group discussed how to improve ponds on Blue Mountain, and considered rock dams. Terryl noted that pond cleaning is possible with GIP funding. The funding Terryl has available generally has to show an increase in water availability for livestock or wildlife. Lorien noted that the NRCS low-tech wet meadow restoration techniques may be of interest in some situations. Charlie explained that it has been hard to get landowners to sign up for them, possibly because they aren't familiar with them. He is hoping to get some demo projects in that would make it easier for landowners to see what kind of results and impacts they would be signing up for. Terryl noted that the GIP application deadline for project is Dec. 31 this year.

Future meeting topics

- Mapping updates
- Pollinator presentation, if available

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will ask the Red Butte gardens folks if they have an updated pollinator presentation they could give to UBARM.
- Lorien will send a notice to the group when the railroad EIS comment period opens.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in January or February, set by doodle poll.