

**Utah's Adaptive Resources Management
Greater Sage-grouse Local Working Groups**

Accomplishment Report

2009-2010



Photo by Todd Black

November 2010

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Submitted to

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November 2010

Preface

This report summarizes the 2009 and early 2010 accomplishments of Utah's Adaptive Resource Management Greater Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*, hereafter referred to as sage-grouse) Local Working Groups (LWGs). These groups were facilitated by staff affiliated with the Utah Community-Based Conservation Program (CBCP). This report incorporates the information requested under 50 CFR Chapter IV, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE) When Making Listing Decisions (USFWS 2003). Specific topics addressed by the LWGs plans include:

1. Staffing, funding, funding sources, and other resources necessary to implement LWG's plans.
2. Legal authority of the partners to implement the plan.
3. The legal procedural requirements (environmental reviews) needed to implement the plans and how this will be accomplished.
4. Authorizations or permits that may or will be needed and how these will be obtained.
5. The type and level of voluntary participation (number of landowners involved, types of incentives used to increase participation).
6. Regulatory mechanisms (laws, ordinances, etc.) that may be necessary to implement the plans.
7. A statement regarding the level of certainty that the funding to implement the plans will be obtained.
8. An implementation schedule to include incremental completion dates.
9. A copy of LWG's approved management plans (These reports are available on our web site www.utahcbcp.org).

The conservation plans discuss the level of certainty that the management efforts identified and implemented will be effective. Specific topics addressed in the conservation plans include:

1. The nature and extent of threats to be addressed by the LWG's plans and how management efforts will reduce the threats described.
2. Explicit objectives for each management action contained in the plans and dates for achieving.
3. The steps needed or undertaken to implement management actions.
4. The quantifiable, scientifically valid parameters by which progress will be measured (e.g., change in lek counts, improved habitat conditions).
5. How the effects of the management actions will be monitored and reported.
6. How the principles of adaptive management resource management are being implemented.

The LWG sage-grouse conservation plans, previous annual reports, and meeting minutes can be accessed at www.utahcbcp.org.

Executive Summary

The Community-based Conservation Program (CBCP) encompasses the historical range of sage-grouse in Utah as identified in the 2002 (2009 revised) Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse (Figure 1). The plan, approved by the Utah Wildlife Board on 1 June 2002 (revised 2009), mandated the organization of local sage-grouse working groups (LWGs) to develop and implement sage-grouse conservation plans. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) in cooperation with Utah State University Extension (USUEXT), private landowners, public and private natural resource, wildlife management, and conservation agencies and organizations have implemented the CBCP.

In 2009-2010, Utah's Adaptive Resources Management Greater Sage-grouse (hereafter referred to as sage-grouse) LWGs continued implementation of their Sage-grouse Conservation Plans (Plan). The LWGs include representatives from state and federal agencies of land and resource management, non-governmental organizations, private industry, local communities, and private landowners.

In this report we summarize efforts of the LWGs to implement the conservation strategies and actions outlined in their Plans. Please note that if a strategy or an action number is missing from this report or no comments are reported under a specific strategy; it means that no action(s) were reported during the period towards its completion. These strategies meet the guidelines set forth by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in their Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE) standards. The conservation strategies and actions address the five USFWS listing factors as they apply to sage-grouse in each LWG area. Plan recommendations and guidance are voluntarily being implemented by all LWGs. The LWGs meet regularly to review actions and encourage adoption of Plan conservation strategies and actions. In 2009-2010, additional emphasis was placed on identifying population and habitat conditions and issues specific to each LWG conservation area.

Each LWG plan contains a table of ranked threats that currently or potentially affecting sage-grouse and sagebrush habitats in their area. This threat analysis, combined with recommended strategies and actions, provided a framework for LWGs to implement their Plans over the next ten years. Plans are being implemented using an adaptive resource management approach. As new information emerges from local and range wide conservation efforts, the LWGs are using it to update management strategies, and priorities in their area. All 10 Utah LWGs have completed sage-grouse conservation plans. These plans and summaries of LWG activities can be found online at www.utahcbcp.org.

In 2010, the USUEXT/UDWR LWG partnership (Utah Community-based Conservation Program) was recognized by the Utah Center for Rural Life at Southern Utah University with a 2010 Utah Rural Honors Award. The award was presented by Gov. Gary Herbert at the 2010 Utah Rural Summit, held in Cedar City, Utah on the SUU campus. The award recognizes the unique partnership for engaging Utah rural communities in proactive efforts to conserve sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species.

Staff

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Funding:

In July 2006, Utah State University entered into a 5 year agreement with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) to develop and facilitate the Utah Community-Based Conservation Program. This agreement provides up to \$136,000 annually in funding and in-kind matches through June 30, 2011, to conduct the program. Additional funding of up to \$160,000 a year is provided through by the Jack H. Berryman Institute through Utah State University Extension. Additional support in terms site and agency specific grants and contracts in the amount of \$300,000 were entered into in 2009-2010 to support local working group activities, project monitoring and evaluation.

Legal Authority

The LWG Plans implement Utah's Sage-grouse Strategic Management Plan (Strategic Plan) that was approved by the Utah Wildlife Board in 2002 (UDWR 2002, revised 2009).

Project Goals

1. Protect, enhance, and conserve Utah sage-grouse populations and sagebrush-steppe ecosystems.
2. Establish sage-grouse in areas where they were historically found and the current sagebrush-steppe habitat is capable of maintaining viable populations (Utah Sage-Grouse Management Strategic Plan 2002).
3. Protect, enhance, and conserve other sensitive wildlife species that inhabit Utah

sagebrush-steppe ecosystems.

4. Sustain and enhance socio-economic conditions in affected local communities.
5. Complete actions that make listing sage-grouse as threatened or endangered unwarranted and/or assist in recovery if the species are listed.
6. Increase local stakeholders and community involvement and ownership in the species conservation planning processes.
7. Increase LWGs awareness, appreciation, and the application of the use of science in making land use and population management decisions.

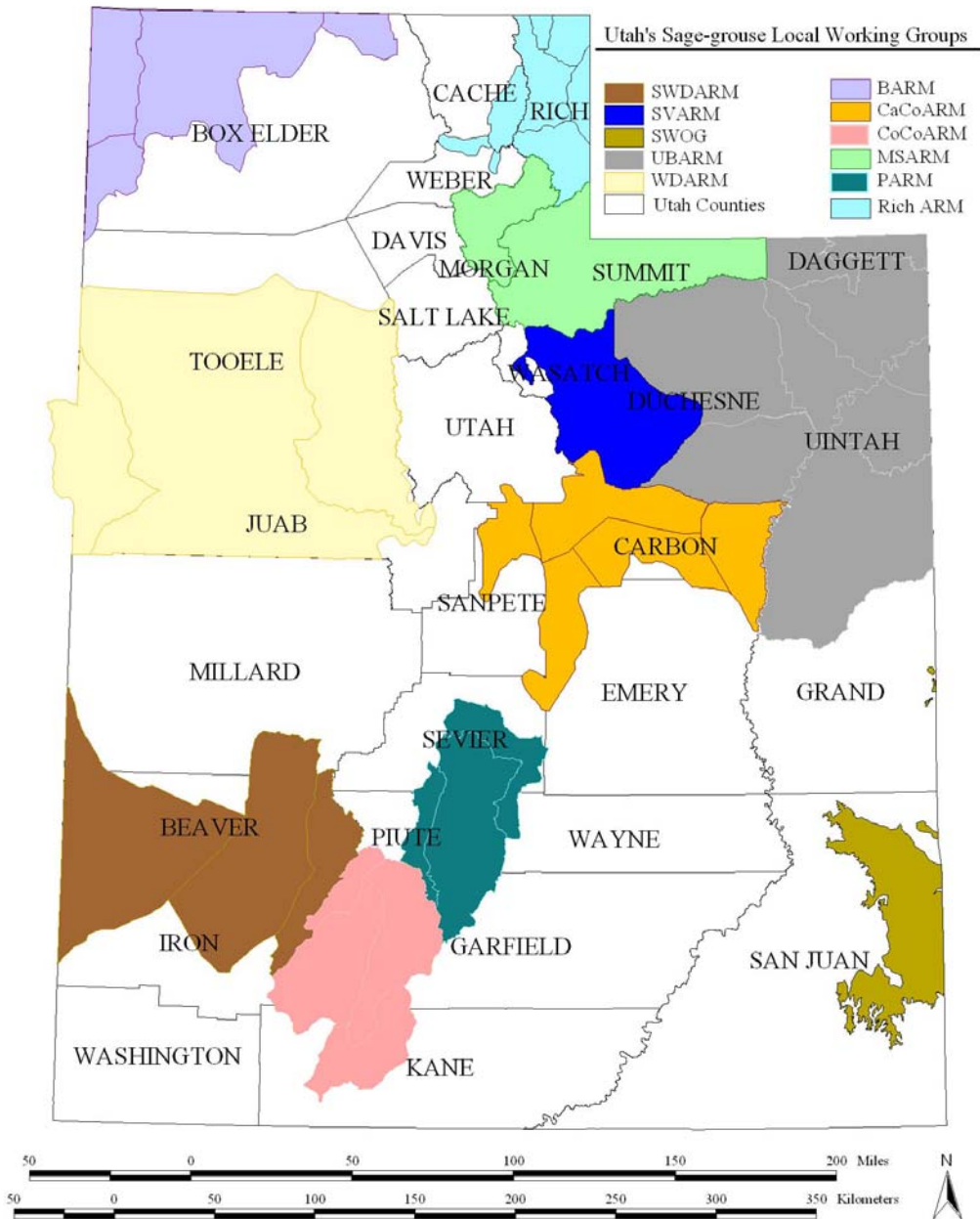


Figure 1. Utah Sage-grouse Conservation Areas, Utah Strategic Management Plan for Sage-grouse (UDWR 2009). (Note this report summarizes conservation actions completed to benefit greater sage-grouse. Thus it does not include Gunnison sage-grouse conservation actions. This species inhabits San Juan County).

West Desert Adaptive Resource Management Local Working Group

The West Desert Basin Adaptive Resource Management (WDARM) sage-grouse local working group is facilitated by Ms. Lorien Belton. WDARM meets three times yearly: a spring meeting, a summer field tour, and a fall meeting. The group may meet more frequently as the need arises. The following updates reflect the combined efforts of the group and individual agencies, landowners, and others on behalf of sage-grouse conservation in the West Desert.



Figure 11. The West Desert Adaptive Resource Management (WDARM) Sage-grouse Local Working Group Conservation Area consists of 5,137,991 acres located in western Utah.

Conservation Strategies and Actions: 2009-2010 Accomplishments

1. Strategy: Maintain and increase coordination and communication with agency and private partners.

1.1. Action: Participate with and coordinate with the Central Region UPCD, Tooele County Natural Resource Group, Deep Creek Watershed partnership, Goshute Tribe, Tooele and Juab County Commissioners, SCDs, UFBF, and any other groups, as necessary.

1.2. Action: Hold annual field tours to review projects, evaluate on-the-ground progress on the Plan, and share ideas.

1.3. Action: Develop educational material appropriate for a broad recreationist audience to develop sensitivity to issues identified in the Plan.

WDARM continues to meet regularly. A summer field tour in 2009 was well attended. In 2010, a spring field tour and lek visit was followed by a regular spring meeting. Instead of a summer field tour for 2010, WDARM members will try to attend other groups' tours to view other projects and coordinate outside the WDARM boundaries. County Commissioners attended a meeting in 2009 and discussed key road-to-trail conversion issues as well as other items. NRCS funding for sage-grouse projects will be increasing rangewide, and will provide additional resources for future private land projects in the area.

2. Strategy: By 2010, reduce pinyon/juniper stands from sage-grouse use areas.

2.1. Action: Remove pinyon/juniper trees from priority areas where action is warranted.

2.2. Action: Revisit and retreat pinyon/juniper removal sites, as needed.

The Sharps Valley lop and scatter, a UPCD project through the Forest Service, was proposed and approved for funding in 2010. NRCS participated in planning for 15 acres of juniper

removal and seeding on the south slope of the Sheeprocks (Juab county), and 120 acres of juniper removal in the Vernon area.

- 3. Strategy:** By 2016, increase brood-rearing habitat quality in the Resource Area.
- 3.1. Action:** Work with the NRCS and private partners to develop projects that would increase brood-rearing habitat quality in the Resource Area.
 - 3.2. Action:** Work with agency partners to develop projects that would increase brood-rearing habitat quality in the Resource Area.
 - 3.3. Action:** Work with private and public partners to monitor effects of habitat improvement projects on vegetation and sage-grouse habitat use.
 - 3.4. Action:** Where appropriate, reduce sagebrush canopy cover with mechanical or chemical treatments and reseed with ecologically appropriate seed mixes.

The Benmore Pastures project was completed in 2009, which created diversity in sagebrush cover, and reseeded for an improved understory.

- 4. Strategy:** Thru 2016, maintain and protect winter habitat distribution and quality in the Resource Area.
- 4.1. Action:** Promote protection of winter habitat from fire.
 - 4.2. Action:** Promote protection of winter habitat from OHV trail development and activities.
 - 4.3. Action:** Update maps of crucial winter habitat areas and monitor winter habitat use areas for presence of sage-grouse.
 - 4.4. Action:** In the event of fire, aggressively rehabilitate sites to prevent domination of invasive/noxious weed communities.

Considerable work has already been done to improve winter habitat, particularly P-J removal. The Sharps Valley project planned for 2010 will contribute to this effort.

- 5. Strategy:** Reduce the threat of conversion of sagebrush stands to invasive/noxious weed communities.
- 5.1. Action:** Seed green-strips and/or fire breaks in crucial areas (to be identified).
- Status:** WDARM partners treated sagebrush Ibapah west and east slopes, Rush Valley, (see table and Map)
- 5.2. Action:** Identify areas where fire suppression should be promoted to protect crucial habitat.
 - 5.3. Action:** Maintain and/or increase fuels reduction projects in crucial areas (to be identified)
 - 5.4. Action:** Work with agency and private partners to conduct vegetation treatments that restore functional plant groups to sagebrush communities.
 - 5.5. Action:** Coordinate with noxious/invasive weed Coordinated Weed Management Area (CWMA) personnel.

A subgroup of the Central region UPCD has been working to develop fuels reduction and other project plans (green stripping, etc) for the Sheeprocks area, which has the potential to improve sage-grouse habitat. WDARM provided comments to that subgroup in order to ensure that recommended projects are beneficial or at least neutral for sage-grouse. Knapweed treatments in the Tintic Junction area were completed in 2009 through UPCD. In addition, there are multiple other efforts in the area to combat weeds: the USFS has an ongoing program in Vernon; BLM and UDWR coordinate on weed issues, NRCS works with private landowners to address issues on private land, and USU Extension (Linden Greenhalgh) has recently obtained a grant to work with the Goshute Tribe on weed issues as well.

6. Strategy: Minimize the impact of excessive predation.

- 6.1. Action:** Modify power lines and wood fence posts (to remove raptor perches) in important sage-grouse areas, where feasible and where predator concerns have been identified.
- 6.2. Action:** Remove trees, remove/modify raptor perches, and maintain quality sagebrush habitat, where predation concerns on sage-grouse have been identified.
- 6.3. Action:** Maintain or increase site-specific predation management to consider all predator species (especially common ravens and red fox) where necessary and appropriate.
- 6.4. Action:** Initiate research on direct and indirect impacts of predation during each sage-grouse life history phase.
- 6.5. Action:** Coordinate management and research with USDA-WS.

As noted in last year's report, poisoned eggs were placed for ravens early in the year to increase effectiveness. The BLM and others continue to try to understand the impact of new powerlines on sage-grouse, particularly with respect to the increased predation risk for sage-grouse, so that appropriate mitigation measures can be recommended. Wildlife services also does fox and coyote control in the area.

7. Strategy: Work with public and private partners to implement livestock management plans that address seasonal needs of sage-grouse and livestock operations.

- 7.1. Action:** Incorporate appropriate livestock management in vegetation/habitat treatment projects.
- 7.2. Action:** Initiate research on the direct and indirect effects of livestock grazing on various aspects of sage-grouse life history.
- 7.3. Action:** Work with public and private partners to evaluate livestock management in crucial sage-grouse use areas.

NRCS (Steve Wilcox) continues to work with the Goshute Tribe to develop grazing management plans that are sensitive to sage-grouse. NRCS also incorporates sage-grouse information into local grazing management plans, including the plan for the McIntyre Ranch. The Forest Service incorporates sage-grouse criteria on allotments in sage-grouse habitat. More generally, habitat treatments with soil disturbance in areas that are normally grazed

are planned to ensure that reseedings are allowed to recover before being grazed again. One concern to be addressed in 2010 is a new landowner who may be grazing on a satellite lek.

- 8. Strategy:** By 2016, increase population and habitat monitoring efforts in the Resource Area.
- 8.1. Action:** Encourage public and private partners to use techniques from Connelly et al. (2003) “Monitoring of Greater Sage-grouse Habitats and Populations”
- 8.2. Action:** In 2007, UDWR biologists will coordinate with Goshute Tribe biologists to identify sage-grouse lek sites and count birds on Tribal lands.
- 8.3. Action:** UDWR to enlist and coordinate private volunteers and/or other agency biologists search for new leks and conduct lek counts on active leks.
- 8.4. Action:** Through 2016, test dead sage-grouse for West Nile Virus and any other parasites/pathogens of importance.
- 8.5. Action:** Secure funding to support additional research and monitoring on issue as identified in the Plan.
- 8.6. Action:** Increase outreach with private landowners to facilitate greater communication about sage-grouse distribution, ecology, and management.

UDWR continues to conduct the majority of monitoring in the area. In addition, the WDARM chairman also visits leks in the area periodically and assists with identifying potential concerns with populations. One area landowner is particularly active in the area with regard to sage-grouse habitat. Other landowners were educated about sage-grouse at Shambip Conservation District events in both 2009 and 2010. Additional population monitoring data may exist through BLM in association with monitoring for the Mona Pipeline, but the group has not been made aware of any new findings. A new DWR study near Tintic Junction collared and tracked several birds in the area in an effort to better understand migrations and track nesting success. That research has determined that birds are spending time in the Ferner Valley area. In spring of 2010, a potential new lek was identified but will need to be confirmed.

- 9. Strategy:** Encourage use of this Plan in local, county, state, and federal natural resources planning efforts.
- 9.1. Action:** Provide the Plan to all appropriate local, county, state, and federal natural resource agencies, departments, and personal.
- 9.2. Action:** Review local, county, state, and federal plans and projects with the potential to impact sage-grouse and/or sagebrush habitats in the Resource Area.
- 9.3. Action:** Participate in local, county, state, and federal natural resource planning efforts, committees, and working groups.

WDARM partners continue to promote the use of the Plan during UPCD Central Region meetings, particularly with regard to understanding how habitat manipulations may impact grouse. In addition, discussion between County Commissioners and biologists on ATV trail conversions, and the possible impacts to sage-grouse, began in 2009. Several members of the group also monitor proposed projects, such as powerlines, to determine whether grouse may be impacted.

- 10. Strategy:** Minimize impacts of oil and gas development on sage-grouse and their habitat.
- 10.1. Action:** Coordinate and communicate with BLM and USFS to ensure that adequate information/data is available for decision making process.
 - 10.2. Action:** Support recommendations that provide for temporal avoidance, minimization of tall structures, and avoid crucial habitat or use areas, where possible.
 - 10.3. Action:** Reduce fragmentation of sage-grouse habitat by oil and gas development activities.
 - 10.4. Action:** Minimize disturbance to sage-grouse associated with oil and gas development.
 - 10.5. Action:** Reduce cumulative impacts of oil and gas development.
 - 10.6. Action:** Share sage-grouse data with industry and encourage planning to reduce and/or mitigate for impacts.

Energy corridors continue to be the primary source of concern in the area, with regard to habitat disturbance and placement of tall structures. The group would like to have information on the impacts of tall structures on sage-grouse in order to provide appropriate recommendations, but peer-reviewed science on the subject is scarce. As of June 2010, the powerline is likely to be approved, and the LWG members will continue to offer comments on how best to decrease the impact to sage-grouse. UDWR, the BLM, and the company proposing the Mona powerline coordinate to monitor populations.

- 11. Strategy:** Minimize the amount of quality sage-grouse habitat eliminated by residential and commercial land development consistent with private property rights.
- 11.1. Action:** Participate with County land use decision makers in identifying key sage-grouse habitats.
 - 11.2. Action:** Maintain sagebrush environments of sufficient size and shape around developments in sage-grouse habitat.
 - 11.3. Action:** Encourage the voluntary use of conservation easements and other land protection vehicles with willing sellers in sage-grouse habitats.
 - 11.4. Action:** Educate rural residents about the importance of good grazing management in keeping small tracts weed free and capable of providing wildlife habitat.
 - 11.5. Action:** Work with public and private partners to maintain rural economies and viable ranching and agricultural enterprises.

No specific actions were taken by the group in 2009.

- 12. Strategy:** By 2016, maintain or increase distribution and quality of mesic sites available to sage-grouse during summer months.
- 12.1. Action:** Work with public and private partners to develop mesic sites for sage-grouse associated with existing or new water developments.
 - 12.2. Action:** Develop project planning tools (both printed material and on-the-ground examples) to illustrate successful, wildlife-friendly, water developments.

Planning is ongoing for several projects. Alan Mitchell, working with GIP, the Rush Valley

Conservation District, NRCS, and the USFS, has planned projects to bring additional water to the Vernon area. NRCS is also helping to develop springs on the west side of the Simpsons. Partners include the Richins family, NRCS, GIP, and UWDR. Although it is in somewhat marginal sage-grouse habitat, this project may help move pronghorn and other native ungulates up the bench, providing longer-term benefits for sage-grouse habitat in the area.

13. Strategy: Maintain or improve breeding habitat quality in the Resource Area.

13.1. Action: Where appropriate, conduct vegetation manipulation to maintain open areas on lek sites.

13.2. Action: Work with public and private partners to maintain nesting cover in crucial breeding areas.

13.3. Action: Work with public and private partners to minimize disturbance to crucial areas during lek and nesting seasons.

Spike treatments planned for McIntyre's land will assist with this goal. In addition, BLM is planning for brood-rearing habitat improvements on BLM land. Also, NRCS funded 100 acres of chaining and 50 acres of sagebrush mowing in the Lofgren area. The mowing was done in consultation with DWR/NRCS biologist.

14. Strategy: Minimize the negative impacts of recreation on sage-grouse populations and their habitats.

14.1. Action: Work with local, county, state, and federal planners and managers to minimize impacts of OHV trails and undeveloped roads on crucial sage-grouse habitat.

14.2. Action: Work with law enforcement agencies to enforce existing and new laws, ordinances, and regulations specific to hunting/poaching, OHV recreation, and trespassing.

14.3. Action: Work with OHV recreation groups to develop greater sensitivity and awareness to issues identified in this Plan.

14.4. Action: If appropriate, work with public and private partners to restrict lek viewing opportunities during crucial time-periods and in crucial areas.

14.5. Action: In a GIS system, evaluate where existing and proposed trails intersect crucial sage-grouse habitat.

DWR employees began conversations with Tooele County to discuss the impacts of road conversion to ATV trails, and determine if there are locations where roads should not be formally converted in order to protect sage-grouse from recreation traffic. The DWR tracks times when OHV or motor-cross races will occur in order to try to minimize impact to sage-grouse and provide recommendations for avoiding critical habitat. In spring 2010, unpermitted dog trials were held very close to a lek on Forest Service land. It is unclear who the offenders were and they claimed to have a permit which was not in fact granted to them. BLM is currently working on a Resource Area Management Plan, although progress may be slowed due to staff turnover.

Major Needs and Challenges

As in past years, habitat and other work continues to work toward the goals in the WDARM plan. Powerlines and other utility or energy rights-of-way will likely become a larger issue in the future, creating a need for more research on impacts to sage-grouse populations.