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.

WDARM met four times this year. 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.

The group focused this year on expanding PJ treatments, particularly in areas where encroachment on sage-grouse habitat is of particular concern. The WDARM group coordinates closely with the Central Region UPCD team, by proposing and designing sage-grouse specific projects, as well as providing comments on others' proposed projects to maximize the benefit to sage-grouse habitat. This is particularly important in an area where substantial fire and fuel management projects intersect sage-grouse habitat. WDARM members have increased the depth of coordination between multiple entities as well: based on information provided to the group by a private landowner in attendance at the group meeting, a plan to address weed concerns near one of the leks was developed with shared leadership and resources from BLM, Tooele County Commission, weed managers from NRCS, and DWR. WDARM also stepped up its efforts to better understand the social and ecological complexity of recreation impacts to sage-grouse habitat. This will be a focus in the coming year.

Conservation Strategies and Actions

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.

Coordination continues between many entities, including increased involvement with Tooele County this year, and joint project conversations and field tour planning with the Central Region WRI. For example, UDWR, BLM, and Tooele County held a small site tour to develop a project area for squarrose knapweed infestation treatment near the Government Wash lek. Regarding public awareness and sensitivity to issues identified in the sage-grouse plan, it was determined that previous verbal communications with sheep herders on the Pony Express Road have been insufficient to keep sheep out of the area near the lek during the nesting season, and the group may need to explore formal signage options. Increased coordination with the Tooele County Trails group included providing them with sage-grouse shape files to help their planning be more sensitive to sage-grouse habitat areas. NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative funding for private lands projects that benefit sage-grouse was renewed in 2011. This information was taken to all Conservation Districts in the area.

2. Strategy: By 2010, reduce PJ stands from sage-grouse use areas.
2.1. Action: Remove PJ trees from priority areas where action is warranted.
2.2. Action: Revisit and retreat PJ removal sites, as needed.

Several PJ removal projects occurred in the area, including Winter Springs (WRI project #1528) south of the Government Wash lek, that treated 698 acres. Rockwell Ranch bullhog (WRI project # 1630) has been planned as well. The Sharps Valley Project (WRI project #1594) was done (both bullhog and lop and scatter), which wasn't primarily for sage-grouse benefit but did occur on the edge of range and may benefit sage-grouse. WRI Project 1927, Shearing Corrals Bullhog, has been proposed and funded for upcoming implementation in the resource area. Planning discussions and a field tour have taken place to plan for a BLM juniper removal project in the South Onquis area south of Vernon. Also, West Government bullhog and lop and scatter (WRI project #2024) is being flagged for treatment summer of 2011.

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.

Discussed a sagebrush thinning project to improve habitat for the Look Out Pass lek 3-4 miles south of the area in the South Onquis area south of Vernon. The Benmore Pastures 2009 project was monitored for sage-grouse in 2009, and some sage-grouse and sage-grouse sign were detected in the area. WRI Project #1928, Ibapah Sagebrush Treatment Phase 4, has been proposed for 2011 to improve brood-rearing habitat. Previous Ibapah treatments were also likely beneficial for sage-grouse.

4. Strategy: Through 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.

GIS shape files for sage-grouse statewide were updated in the past year to better reflect habitat use areas. The Sharps Valley Project has been completed. PJ projects in the area, mentioned earlier, should improve winter habitat.

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.

The Sheeprocks joint project is on hold this year due to lack of funding. During a recent WDARM meeting, group members from several agencies teamed up to design a project to treat squarrose knapweed infestations near the Government Wash lek. The project has included state, federal, county, and local participants to date and will probably be proposed to WRI in the next funding cycle.

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.

The LWG continues to need specific information on the impact of powerlines on increasing

predation of sage-grouse. WS continued early-season raven control efforts, and conducted as-needed "targeted" (near leks) control efforts when necessary. USDA-WS also does more general predator work on foxes and coyotes in the area, although not specifically for sage-grouse benefit. Several raptor nesting posts were also recently removed from the vicinity of the Benmore Lek.

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.

No projects to directly decrease potential impacts of grazing on sage-grouse were undertaken. The landowner of potential concern on the satellite lek may be interested in managing the area to increase forage in ways that are less compatible with sage-grouse management. NRCS staff will try to address the issues, and other working group members are trying to stay apprised of the situation, the landowner can chose what he does with his property, so the group can only make recommendations. More generally, NRCS/UDWR staff continues to work with landowners. NRCS and the USFS consider sage-grouse needs in grazing management plans and allotment criteria.

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.

As noted last year, UDWR conducts the majority of lek monitoring in the area, with additional monitoring help from the WDARM chairman. A recent UDWR study near Tintic Junction collared and tracked birds in that area to learn more about the population. No new leks have been found. West Nile is not a significant concern in the area.

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 members are actively involved in Central Region WRI meetings, work with Tooele County to address recreation planning concerns for sage-grouse. The group wrote a collective letter to BLM encouraging use of the sage-grouse plan in a future travel management plan for the Resource Area, and plan to continue conversations next year.

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 concerns in the area related primarily to potential power line impacts. The group needs research on the effect of power lines on sage-grouse. To date, no sage-grouse monitoring efforts have identified specific major concerns with power line routing.

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, as no development-related issues have arisen that need specific attention.

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.

No sage-grouse specific water projects were done this year.

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.

As mentioned in an earlier strategy, BLM is looking at several possible projects, including potential sagebrush thinning to improve brood-rearing habitat conditions for the sage-grouse population that uses the Look Out Pass lek that is 3-4 miles to the south.
Jason Robinson placed fence reflectors, provided by BLM, near two sage-grouse leks in the area (Benmore and Government Wash). Although additional weed monitoring work was planned for the same trip, blizzard conditions prevented observations from being made.
BLM is working to develop a use plan for a 10-mile buffer near the Pony Express route, which should provide opportunities to restrict some activities in sage-grouse brood-rearing habitat.

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.

Conversations have continued between Tooele County, UDWR, and other working group members. As noted previously, GIS shapefiles of sage-grouse habitat were provided to the Trails Committee to help identify sensitive sage-grouse areas that could be protected with a recreation management or trails plan. The Forest Service has taken steps to make sure that dog trials that occurred near one lek in the area do not happen near the lek again. WDARM also wrote a letter to the BLM expressing the importance of having a travel management plan for the area so that sage-grouse population impacts can be reduced and enforcement stepped up in key sensitive areas. The BLM has limited funding to begin a travel management process, but is working on a response to WDARM's concerns.

Major Needs and Concerns

As in past years, habitat and other work continues in support of the goals in the WDARM plan. Recreation impacts to sage-grouse and sage-grouse habitats, as well as weed management concerns, are likely to be key issues during the upcoming year. The WDARM plan is being reviewed and will be updated in 2011-2012 to specifically address conservation threats identified by the USFWS (2010).