

**WEST DESERT  
(WDARM)  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date: January 15, 2014**  
**Place: Tooele Co. Health Building, Tooele, UT**  
**Members Present:**  
Traci Allen (BLM), Jerry Hurst (Tooele County), Bruce Clegg (Tooele County), Matt Phillippi (NRCS), Renae Bragonje (USFS), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Nathan Long (NRCS), Jeff Williams (NRCS), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Avery Cook (UDWR), Alan Clark (DNR), Eric Ellis (UDWR), Natasha Gruber (Mule Deer Fdn/NRCS), Loralie Cox (UACD), Matt Howard (UDWR), Mace Crane (BLM), Ashley Hansen (GIP), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

### **Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

#### *Upcoming Utah Sage-Grouse Summit*

Lorien reminded the group about the Utah sage-grouse summit in Salt Lake Feb. 18-19. Topics will include implementation of several of the key elements of the state sage-grouse plan, as well as research updates and information from USFWS.

#### *Next meeting*

The next meeting will be held in Ibapah. We would like to invite the Nevada folks to participate as well. The following coordination will take place:

- Matt Philippi will coordinate with the tribe and also explore holding other meetings the same day, as happened last year.
- Kim Hersey has moved to a different position within the Division. For now, lek counts are being managed by Tom Becker, so any coordination with lek counts should be done through Tom. Lorien will contact Tom about this.
- Nevada folks are interested in meeting with us, and bringing the Owyhee tribe into the discussions as well. Lorien will coordinate with Traci and Bruce to invite them. Bruce will get contact information for Grant in Elko County to Lorien.
- The Goshutes have a new tribal chairperson, Madeline Grey Mountain. Eric Ellis has contact information. Ed is still a manager.

#### *NRCS Update*

Matt is working on a landowner workshop, probably aiming for late February. Sage-grouse will be one of the topics, in addition to other speakers. Natasha is now the SGI biologist for Tooele County, so she will be involved also. This is as a result of NRCS consolidating from 3 to 2 areas (regions). A third SGI biologist to replace Tammy will hopefully be hired soon. [post meeting note: the new biologist started on February 3.]

Fence markers: Natasha is working with dedicated Hunters to make and hang fence markers. There will also soon be many more markers available free of charge, and without a contract, through NRCS. Anyone who knows of areas that need to be marked should coordinate with Natasha. Jason has been putting them out. There may be additional need in Ibapah.

The Farm and Ranchlands Protection program has \$1.5 million available this year for sage-grouse related agricultural easements. The deadline for signing up (indicating interest) is March 21. FRPP is available for 50% matches. At least 25% of the easement value has to be provided in cash in order for FRPP to be able to match it. There must be an external entity (e.g. a land trust or county) willing to hold the easement. (This is unlike GRP or WRP, which go directly to landowners with no intermediary. Until we have a new farm bill, GRP and WRP are not currently available easement programs.)

### *Population information*

Jason provided updates on the local sage-grouse populations, based on counts of average males per lek. Statewide, 2005 had one of the highest counts. 2012 was one of the lowest. 2013 counts were slightly higher than that low (6% higher), but still very low. The leks in the WDARM area followed that pattern: In 2006, there were only 84 males. Ibapah's low was in 2010. This population is connected to Nevada's birds. In the Sheeprocks area (about 6 leks), which is isolated from any other populations, there were 190 total birds in 2006 on those leks, but just 33 in 2013. These birds are not connected to the 3 leks in the Tintics, which are not in the SGMA, but we do continue to count the leks to see how they are doing.

One thing that really drives the statewide numbers is Rich County's counts, which have dropped dramatically (from about 1500 birds in 2009 to just 461 in 2013). The factors in Rich county that contribute to this decline have been high winter mortality, and low nest initiation rates. Not initiating a nest may happen when females are in poor (body) condition. This can help a female sage-grouse survive until the next year, but means that she won't have any chicks that year. USU is doing research to look at nest success and initiation.

Jason also explained to the group how population estimates are calculated based on lek counts. Assumptions include: 2 females in the population for every male counted on the lek, and that 75% of the males are counted each year on the leks.

### *PJ mapping and project planning*

Alan Clark updated the group on efforts to map pinyon-juniper to help sage-grouse conservation efforts. Eight western states are working together to develop fine scale maps which will identify areas of Phase I, Phase II, and Phase III juniper encroachment on sagebrush areas. NRCS is leading the effort. Utah is being done first, and the maps should be available this spring (end of March, hopefully). This will be very helpful in identifying areas to work and creating landscape-

scale strategies.

Alan specifically noted that the group should make sure to focus on projects in the Sheeprocks, since that population is the most at-risk population in Utah, and the Utah plan has committed to keeping viable populations in each SGMA.

Eric explained that Forestry, Fire, and State Lands (FFSL) may soon also have money for projects involving fire management. The state forester will have more information if anyone wants to follow up.

### *UPCD Projects*

The group reviewed several projects proposed for Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) funding through the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD).

For several juniper removal projects, (2931, 2930, 2933, and others) the group had questions about why only 80% of the juniper was slated for removal, since about 3% is a maximum after which sage-grouse will not occupy the area, based on current research. Traci will follow up to make sure that it is clear whether the project will be clearing enough juniper to benefit sage-grouse, and whether remaining juniper is being left in PJ ecological sites or elsewhere. If there are too many trees left, it could still be a good project, but sage-grouse should be removed from the primary benefit list. These projects are not in current sage-grouse range, but may be helpful for connectivity long-term. 2930 is in between the Tintics and the Sheeprocks, on the edge of habitat. The group wondered if the description on 2933 was correct, and should say “west” instead of “east.” This is also on the edge of sage grouse habitat, not occupied now and out of the Sheeprocks SGMA. For these three projects, the group also wondered if there were plans for follow-up treatments, perhaps three years down the line, or another way to ensure that all the trees, including small ones, are removed from sage-grouse areas.

The LWG is strongly supportive of the West Vernon Phase 4: Red Pine Canyon project (#2961). The combination of mastication and lop and scatter was particularly good design. This is in old juniper treatment areas.

The Ekker’s (spelling change needed from “Elker’s”) (#3062) and Cow Hollow (#3067) projects, the group felt, are a very good start in an important area. Mace explained that the future plans include a strategic long-term, large-scale plan. Jason will sit down with Boyd and Mace to work on improving these projects, both for planning and for presentation in the database.

Other project comments include: Jericho fire rehab (#2822) is more likely to benefit chukkar, not sage-grouse. Matt will comment.

### *Federal Planning Updates*

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS. The group briefly discussed issues of concern to them. These included whether Wyoming's plan, presented as Alternative E2, is potentially helpful as a guide since the FWS once signed off on many aspects of it. Although no one had a definitive answer, this seemed like a reasonable assumption. Traci mentioned knowing of research being done in the Great Basin showing very low rates of sagebrush return after fire, suggesting that we should be very careful in this area about how fire is managed.

Key suggestions, which Lorien will elaborate on and submit to BLM by the deadline, are as follows:

- Make calculation percentages sensible, fair, and easy to do the same way each time.
- Fire should be managed separately
- Predation control should be given more consideration, and more detail should be provided, especially explaining how invasive predators like red fox will be handled, as they could be a substantial problem.

### *Hunting management Calculations*

Jason explained to the group how hunting quota decisions are made for the four areas in Utah where there are large populations of sage-grouse. The number changes every year based on the spring lek counts and additional data about nest success, among other factors. 700 permits, or 1400 birds, were allowed last year. Most hunters averaged 1 bird, not 2.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will send out more information on the Sage-Grouse Summit in February.
- Traci, Matt, and Lorien will work to coordinate the April meeting with various partners.
- Appropriate follow-up on proposed UPCD projects will be done by the appropriate project managers.
- Jason will sit down with Boyd and Mace to work on improving specific WRI project proposals.
- Lorien will submit the group's comments on the BLM EIS in late January.

### **Next Meetings**

The next meeting will be in Ibapah again. An early-April date will be set after coordination with the Goshute Tribe, the Shambip Conservation District, and Nevada partners.

[From December minutes: A June field tour for tri-state Commissioners may be developed. WDARM's role is yet TBD.]