

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

Date: January 26, 2017

Place: Tooele County Building

Members Present: Evan Glenn (BLM-SO), Avery Cook (UDWR), Alison Whittaker (UDWR), Nancy Williams (BLM), Loralie Cox (UACD), Ray Kelsey (BLM), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Scott Edmisten (RMP), Jerry Caldwell (Tooele County Weeds), Quincy Bahr (BLM-SO), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Erik Valdez (BLM), Brad Jessop (BLM-WDD), Cassie Mellon (BLM), Matt Preston (BLM), Ron Rodriguez (USFS), Jessica Delph (NRCS), Jim Priest (BLM), George Garcia (USFS), Melissa Chelak (USU graduate student), Terry Messmer (USU), Matt Howard (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Winter grouse movements and research update

Melissa updated the group on the data available so far this winter. Only four GPS collared birds are currently trackable. VHS collars require more effort to find in the winter so their locations are generally not known. Of the GPS collars, two are on translocated hens, and the other two are on resident hens. The resident and translocated birds have been using similar areas, but moved at different times during the winter. On a flight last week, only one radio collar was heard. There will be another flight in February.

Upcoming plans for the research project were discussed. 40 more birds will be translocated this spring (10 males and 30 hens). The timing may need to be later than last year given the heavy snows in some places. This year more of the birds will get GPS collars. Some VHF collars will still be deployed because there are still questions about potential differential survival rates for birds with GPS collars.

USFS implementation updates

George Garcia (Forest Service) provided updates on recreation-related topics.

- No new recreation developments are planned by Forest Service in the Vernon area.
- There is an existing travel management plan in place for the Vernon area. There are no plans to add any routes to that plan. They are working on an EA to close 11 miles of duplicate roads in the Vernon area, in an effort to reduce road densities and align with their road maintenance budget. Because a previous WRI proposals for road closures were not funded, the Forest Service will be looking at ways to implement the decommissioning gradually with existing resources while they are performing road maintenance.
- USFS will not authorize new temporary uses (similar to BLM special recreation permits) that will impact sage-grouse or create habitat disturbance that lasts for more than 5 years.

- The recently published “guideline” largely restates what the plan amendments say. For recreation related decisions, that essentially means that no new recreation facilities in the Vernon area will be approved unless they are determined to be neutral or beneficial to sage-grouse.
- There was one temporary use (an ATV poker ride) that happened last spring but had not been permitted.
- There is currently no visitor use monitoring at Vernon. Vernon was not selected from the random sample. Some other sites are monitored on the district, but not all could be.
- Current regulations allow dispersed camping within 150 feet of a road. The sage-grouse amendment did not change that.
- User-created routes were not addressed in the plan amendments.
- The Forest Service’s realistic goal is to just manage the system the way it is mapped and planned. That is where limited resources will be focused.

The group discussed the concern that the primary lekking and nesting season coincides with some of the heaviest recreation usage in the area in spring. Ron Rodriguez pointed out that dispersed camping can be managed with temporary closures or closed. Dispersed camping was not addressed in the Plan Amendment for sage grouse.

BLM recreation management

On the West Desert District, the Outback therapy program has been educated about sage-grouse, lek locations, etc. and knows to be careful. There is often an ultra-marathon that happens in November but it has not been permitted yet.

On the Filmore District, 3 ATV races have been proposed in May, but have not been permitted yet. BLM works with those racers to try to limit them to outside a three-mile buffer zone to keep racers away from birds. Jim has also been trying to gather basic information on spring recreation location usage.

Because people want shade, and go where the trees are, removal of trees from sage-grouse areas may also help manage recreation impacts. This is speculative at this point.

Ray indicated an interest in getting more sage-grouse information on existing kiosks. Matt Howard will send Ray the DWR sign. Wyse Highway and Moore’s road was another suggestion.

A map would be helpful so that those not familiar with the area can better understand how West Desert recreation and sage-grouse areas overlap. Lorien will work on making this happen.

Basic BLM travel management planning process -- overview

Evan Glenn, the BLM state lead for recreation, explained the basic process of travel management

planning with a very helpful presentation. This information is very useful in understanding future planning efforts in the Sheeprocks, and where the local working group and other entities can usefully get involved.

This travel planning process is starting to be used but is not what has been exactly used in the past. Travel planning can be a very long multi-year process, with NEPA being just a small part of it. It has some formal stakeholder participation and some informal at each step. Evan explained that the 5 steps he outlined were very simplified, and there are many interim steps in each phase.

Step 1: Area Designations. During the creation of the land use plan for each field office, all the land managed by that office is “painted one of three colors,” in other words, given one of three basic designations related to travel: open, closed, or limited. Open does not have restrictions, and closed is essentially closed to most travel. So the planning effort is largely focused on areas where travel is “limited” because that is where clarity is needed on what that means.

Evan explained that many old plans used the term “limited to existing,” meaning that no new routes could be created. However, that often didn’t include a map, so it was very difficult to enforce. New plans use the term “limited to designated routes.” That suggests that a map exists, but it of course needs to be created, and those “route designations” need to be done.

Step 2: Resource Inventory. This refers to information gathering that can be done at any time, but is needed in the process at this step. Inventory could include spatial data about use, maps, linear feature inventory (i.e. road maps and lists), cultural resource inventories (the more literature review part) and surveys (the on-the-ground part), and the results of any public participation. Public participation isn’t necessarily required during this phase, but it can be very helpful as a way to get information on how, when, and by whom certain areas are used.

Step 3: Route-by-Route Evaluation and Documentation. At this phase, the big map of all the linear features gets broken down into segments that are more meaningful: “routes.” Lots of BLM resource specialists are called in to look at the route and bring their knowledge of how the route relates to their resource area. There is a federal rule (43 CFR 8342.1) with a checklist of all the many things that must be considered. The focus is the purpose and the need for each linear feature. “Need” could encompass just public enjoyment – it does not have to lead specifically somewhere. Routes with no need determined on the ground aren’t analyzed or moved forward into future planning steps. This can be a painstaking process for each route. Doing all routes in an area can take years. The results of each route evaluation will be available for public access in the relevant BLM offices. They will not generally be included in the formal NEPA documents because the detail would be too much.

Step 4: NEPA Process (Resulting in a Travel Management Plan). Evan explained that travel management planning can cover subsections of a field office area. Unlike Forest Service travel planning, which is done at the District Office level, BLM has somewhat more flexibility. BLM can

split up travel planning into smaller areas – for example, areas where sage-grouse are important could be planned for separately. These areas are referred to as “travel management areas” and could be just a small area, an entire field office, or something in between. In the local case, that would be the Sheeprocks. Usually, the NEPA done for travel management is an EA, not an EIS. Evan note that a travel plan can also include routes that do not currently exist, but will be developed in the future.

Step 5: Implementation and Update. Once a plan is in place, there is still a lot of work to be done, like signage, education, and maintenance work. New NEPA actions can update the plan, like to add a road or change something.

After Evan’s presentation, the group was curious to know how this applies to the Sheeprocks area. BLM is working on travel planning in sage-grouse areas in many locations, including the Sheeprocks. In 2008 in Utah, travel planning was included in several new RMPs (like Vernal, for example). That has caused some challenges, and so this new process is now being implemented in several areas around the state.

The group discussed possible recreation data that could be compared to grouse movements, such as the data gathered by traffic counters, special use permitted events, and grouse movements during heavy use weekends like Easter and Memorial Day. Someone suggested using dedicated hunters to help track recreation data. It was also mentioned that the motorcycle clubs have indicated strong interest in helping understand the impact of sage-grouse on their races, so have offered to help with projects.

Terry Messmer is working with Melissa Chelak to find ways to use the sage-grouse movement data to understand how the birds react to recreation in this area. Terry and Melissa will continue to be in touch with a variety of folks to gather data that can be looked at during Melissa’s data analysis.

BLM landscape level/programmatic planning

Quincy explained that the BLM is working on several large-scale NEPA planning efforts to streamline sage-grouse habitat work across the Great Basin. In many cases, NEPA is the limiting factor to being able to get work done quickly. This effort aims to speed up NEPA where the process of replicating very similar projects over and over is slowing things down. The programmatic EIS would cover many different tools for treatment, and large areas. The small-scale project planning would still need to be done but it could reference the larger document which will address all the standard treatment tools and basic considerations.

Utah has done well on this type of work already, and has thus been able to take advantage of project funding that was available on short timeframes. The effort Quincy discussed was larger, Great-basin scale. Utah would still be able to benefit from these larger efforts.

WRI project review

There are ten projects in the WRI proposal database that are pertinent to the Sheeprocks area. Each project was briefly presented and discussed:

- 4019. Erickson Pass (Brad Jessop). This will create corridors for sage-grouse. Lop and scatter this year on private land (with NRCS dollars); the BLM portion is just NEPA this year.
- 4107. Cherry Creek (Brad Jessop). This has been scaled down due to funding. It is a first entry bullhog, and will be seeded. It ties in with other adjacent projects. Once cultural clearance is done, more treatments will be done in the area.
- 3698. Southern Sheeprocks juniper removal. (NRCS). No one spoke to the project directly, but it is right next to Cherry Creek.
- 4014. Furner (Brad Jessop). This is a final phase in this area. There is sagebrush still in the understory.
- 3918. Little Valley (Brad). This areas was chained in the past, and trees are coming back in. It ties in with previous Government Creek treatments. It will be bullhog, part will be seeded. It will also provide a better fuel break for fire situations. It is mostly on SITLA land.
- 4124. Ott's. (Boyd White). Boyd was not present at the meeting but others explained the project. It is private land in the middle of some BLM, where birds come down in winter from McIntyre. It will be bullhog and lo and scatter as appropriate. The group noted that this is a valuable project based on what we currently are learning about the sage-grouse movements.
- 3903. Vernon Ecosystem (USFS). In 2016, a CE was done on 9000 acres. This is the first phase; this project will be for about 2300 acres. The rest will be done over future years.
- 4082: Elderberry. (Boyd White). Several people familiar with the proposal suggested that the project should have been presented in two or more phases. The conifer treatment can be done this year, but other proposals for fencing and ditching need additional conversation among partners before being formally submitted for funding. Lorien will add this comment to the database.
- 4008. Government Creek wet meadow exclosure. (Cassie Mellon, BLM). This is about a mile from the lek. Water originates on private land, and during wet years it makes it all the way to BLM where livestock and wild horses use it, damaging the area. Because it is not a consistent water source, it can be blocked off without limiting water access for those animals. The group explained that the value to sage-grouse in this area may be very high, so the project is very important. Lorien will add a comment in the database to that effect.
- 4046. Beaver Dam equivalents. No one was available to speak about the project, but it involves riparian restoration and water table improvements. We will hear more about this project and the techniques at the March meeting.

Other updates related to projects:

- Brad noted that the Government Creek 6000 acres 2nd entry is now finished.
- The pilot who crashed during flights for seeding of the fire rehab projects is okay. He was rescued in part by some of the bullhog contracted crews.
- Presentations on all these projects to the Central region UPCD team will be Feb 7th in the central region office in Springville.

Follow-up Needed

- A map of the area would be very helpful as we discuss recreation areas, habitat treatments, and birds movements. Lorien will work to get one made that we can bring to meetings.
- Matt Howard will send Ray Kelsey the DWR sign.
- Lorien will comment in the WRI database about specific proposed projects as noted.
- Terry and Melissa will follow up with the ideas discussed about recreation data with regard to grouse movements.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in mid March. Lorien will finalize the Doodle poll soon.