

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

Date: January 28, 2021

Place: Virtual meeting via Zoom

Individuals Present:

Hugh Hurlow (UGS), Kathenne Latig (UGS), Lydia Bailey (NAU), Mark Farmer (UDWR), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Heather Talley (UDWR), Emily Jensco (BLM), Ethan Hallows (SITLA), Brian Christensen (UDAF), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Alan Clark (private citizen), Keeli Marvel (DPG), Shane Hill (UDWR), Tami Howell (BLM), Nancy Williams (BLM), Jacob Hall (NRCS/UDWR), Jerry Bullock (BLM), Dylan Tucker (BLM), Jordan Davis (BLM), Cassie Mellon (BLM), Brad Jessop (BLM), Stephanie Graham (BLM), Luke Decker (USFS), Rebecca Lee (UGS), Sidney Burlison (NRCS/UDWR), Lorien Belton (USU Extension)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Biocrust presentation

Lydia Bailey, from Northern Arizona University, presented on biocrust basics and restoration research. Biocrusts play numerous important roles, particularly in arid environments like the West Desert.

Biocrusts influence:

- soil stability
- increase infiltration
- reduce evaporation
- improve soil fertility (actively by fixing nutrients, and passively by capturing dust), and
- can influence seed germination based on whether they function as a barrier or a seed-capture location

Restoration presents several categories of challenge:

- acquiring the crusts (either via salvage operations or by growing them)
- getting them to the field
- making sure they stay there

Lydia explained some of the details of these challenges, including trials in growing them. She noted that there is a biocrust field guide online (google works very well but the link is also below).

https://www.usgs.gov/centers/sbsc/science/a-field-guide-biological-soil-crusts-western-us-drylands?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

Project updates

Brad Jessop explained that WRI project #5146 is focused on aspen encroached with conifer in the East Tintic/Onaqui areas. It will involve hand cutting of conifer and burning piles in winter. The polygons are at the top of Mill Canyon.

Project #5688 in Ibapah is just cultural clearance this year. The long-term project will be PJ removal (lop and scatter and some mastication) and seeding. There will be time to add riparian components into future WRI project proposals, and Robby is also working to include pinyon jay surveys.

#5561 is Robby's project in the north Sheepprocks, just north of Vernon. It is part of ongoing Vernon BDAs and PJ removal work. This year, there will be more conifer removal, shrub restoration near a lek, and more BDAs for sage-grouse habitat improvement.

Terra, #5782, is Ashley Longmire's project, a juniper chaining combined with some pipelines and troughs.

Personnel updates

There are a number of personnel changes in the group's area:

- Sidney Burluson is the new Farm Bill biologist with NRCS/UDWR, filling the position Boyd White vacated. Sidney will be housed out of Provo.
- At the BLM, Mike Gates is the new district manager, and Jessica Wade has filled Matt Preston's position in the field office. Several other positions are currently being hired.
- At the Forest Service, Karen Hartman retired at the end of 2020. Luke reported that is in unsure when or if they will be able to rehire for that position. For the time being, Anthony Grey (Heber/Kamas) and Pamela Manders are working to cover the area until USFS knows whether they will be able to rehire.

BLM updates

Related to Ibapah, Lorien read Emily Jensco's email regarding the HAF delay in the area. She explained that the HAF for Ibapah is currently on hold due to staffing, as they are hiring for the sage-grouse position.

HAF mapping update

Michel Kohl zoomed in from Georgia to discuss the soon-to-be-released seasonal habitat maps. There will be new maps for seasonal habitats. Summer and winter models will come from GPS birds. Nesting maps include data from both VHF and GPS birds. Ibapah's data is limited, as that is the only area of the state with no GPS data. Michel noted that the majority of GPS collared birds

are female.

The maps vary slightly and are broken up by region, matching the five DWR regions. This allows regional habitat variation to be taken into account in the maps. A few things to note:

- Overall, this is a mapping of habitat suitability of the landscape for sage-grouse, not a map to show exactly where birds are.
- The pixel colors represent where sage-grouse COULD live/nest/etc. The model does not know whether birds are actually there or not – that is for local biologists to determine on the ground.
- There are values for suitable, marginal, and unsuitable habitat. What that looks like on the ground varies somewhat by region.
- “Nesting” isn’t a time frame (i.e. where birds would be during a season), but rather the likelihood that a sage-grouse would put a nest somewhere, based on past data.
- The “summer model” represents the biological calendar
- “winter” is where the grouse set up shop in the winter, versus where they do not go. Currently, only the winter maps have dates that match the Utah state sage-grouse plan. That may be reconciled in the future.
- The model might not show that an otherwise nice-looking bit of sagebrush in the middle of a large expanse of PJ is good habitat, because relative to the rest of the state (where such patches are found surrounded by other sagebrush, for example), it isn’t.
- Some more recent treatments (since 2018) won’t show yet in the model. Ideally the model will be updated periodically, but a schedule for that has not yet been determined.

The maps will be available for everyone eventually via the DWR website. It will be the map used by DWR and BLM, and likely also eventually USFS. There will be a training coming soon for BLM to know how to use it in conjunction with other tools. This is in the works between Jared, Avery, and Heather.

Other updates and discussions

- CJay has been out on Vernon this winter for deer protection. Wildlife Services has taken 126 coyotes and 22 red fox in that area since November. He has been focused around the Little Valley area, Benmore, and the Frederickson lek.

Follow-up Needed

- No follow-up tasks were defined.

Next Meeting

The next meeting date was not set, but will likely be in April, TDB by a doodle poll.