

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

Date: January 31, 2012

Time: 1:00 pm – 3:30 pm

Place: Tooele County Health Building, Tooele UT

Members Present:

Jason Robinson (DWR), Tom Becker (DWR), Boyd White (co-chair, landowner), Rory Reynolds (DNR), Rachel Madison (Tooele Transcript Bulletin), Renae Brajonje (USFS), Mark Farmer (DWR), Covy Jones (DWR), Karen Hartman (USFS), Dylan Tucker (BLM), Mellissa Rosenhan (BLM), Mike Tamillos (USDA-WS), Traci Allen (BLM), Masako Wright (BLM), Ray Kelsey (BLM), Robert Hamilton (Rocky Mountain Power), Darrell Johnson (landowner), Scott Pehrson (landowner), Shelley Pearce (USFS), Lans Stavast (USFS), George Garcia (USFS), Dave Brown (Tooele City), Jerry Hurst (Tooele County), Robbie Knight (Dugway), Jan Reinhart (UDAF-UGIP), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

BLM Updates

As noted in the November meeting, BLM will be revising Land Use Plans (Resource Management Plans) to include sage-grouse concerns. An Instructional Memorandum issued in December (#2012-043) explains the process. Scoping meetings that are taking place around Utah in January are intended to gather information to be considered during this process. An additional Instructional Memorandum (#2012-044) outlines the interim policies that BLM will follow until the plans are updated. A third document, written by scientists who were convened to be the BLM's national sage-grouse technical team, was the basis for the interim policies IM. It is available online, and describes the science behind the interim policies IM in great detail. They will also help inform the land use plan revisions, which will be much more detailed than the IM.

Traci explained that ten Land Use Plans in Utah will be revised in this process. She is the contact for the Salt Lake field office, and Randy Beckstrand is the Filmore contact. Here in the West Desert, recreation management and grazing will be a large focus. It will be important to make sure the amendments address concerns and are appropriate for the local area. One challenge will include benchmarking good habitat in these much drier areas.

In addition to the BLM, the Forest Service will be undergoing a similar process. Forest Plans will also be revised to ensure they contain regulatory mechanisms that adequately protect sage-grouse.

Project and Threat Updates

The new Sage-grouse Initiative biologists for NRCS were trained in the area in late November. They visited the Benmore Pastures project site. A couple of sage-grouse biologists were skeptical of the benefits of the sagebrush treatment. Mark Farmer said that it was difficult to see the impact of the treatment due to the very wet year making it much harder to see how the treatment area, which was designed to improve brood-rearing habitat, was different from surrounding areas. The project had removed sagebrush overstory and increased understory from 1% to 10%. The challenge of understanding how best to improve habitat in dry areas, when most work is done in higher precipitation areas, is very important to WDARM.

Jason noted that we need to document how sage-grouse respond to projects designed to help them, because that data will be very helpful. Covy will pull together some folks to discuss next steps on this: Traci, Karen, Randy, and others.

Travel Management and Trails Issues

The group had a productive and informative discussion about recreation and trails challenges in the county. The recreation management needs extend far beyond sage-grouse issues.

Particularly in years when there is a lot of snow in the mountains, like last winter, people who want to start recreating early come to the West Desert with their off-road vehicles. This is often just during the sage-grouse breeding and early-brood-rearing season. In addition, it is a sensitive time for the habitat in general. Early spring off-road use in muddy times also makes trail (and local road conditions) bad, which can be a frustration for ranchers who need to use the dirt roads with large equipment.

Currently, dispersed recreation is not regulated. Permits are issued only for larger, planned groups. Currently, BLM has to write an EA (environmental assessment) on every permit issuance.

One major concern is that it is often unclear which trails are official trails and which are unauthorized, so even people who want to be responsible may not have enough information to do so.

A question was posed to the sage-grouse biologists about how much of a concern it is if an ATV flushes a sage-grouse. Jason explained that the amount of harm depends on the situation. If the bird is just sitting on an existing trail and flies off, there is probably little damage done. However, if someone is off trail, and flushes a hen off her nest, that could be a huge problem, especially if the nest is damaged by the ATV or if a predator like a raven sees the bird fly off, and then later returns to eat eggs or young chicks. Additionally, if it is the mating season and birds are on the lek, sounds are very important to their mating communications, so excessive noise nearby could be disruptive.

Ray Kelsey noted that last Easter weekend (Easter often occurs near peak sage-grouse mating/nesting seasons), 300 RVs were counted in a relatively small area. Most RVs have multiple people and therefore multiple off-road vehicles associated with them (the BLM estimates 3.5 people per RV). That is a major impact in a small area.

Another problem is that lek sites, because they are flat and generally have less vegetation than surrounding areas, may look like great campsites, bringing people directly into an important area for grouse just at the time of year they are most prone to disturbance. Also related to camping, dispersed camping in the Cherry Creek Road area is a potential problem for sage-grouse.

Someone noted that it is important to make sure people understand the problems – have buy-in for fixing them – before proposed BLM plan amendments are opened for public comment or take effect. That way there will be greater public support and less local concern with new regulations.

Several ideas were discussed on how to help address this suite of related problems:

- One way to address this is to encourage trailhead use, so that official trails are better marked.
- Kiosks that identified sage-grouse areas, so responsible recreationists would know where to be particularly careful of not going off trail, would be helpful. Obviously, any information would need to be vague enough to not create additional opportunities for anyone who would intentionally harm sage-grouse in the area. Mark Farmer offered assistance with the kiosk, noting that the template used in the Strawberry Valley could be adapted for the West Desert, and dedicated hunters could be used to help install kiosks. Tooele County would be able to authorize signs on their road right-of-ways so that they could be places in strategic locations. The BLM would also like to be part of the discussion on signage. Jason noted that he can provide photos if needed.
- A more general sign that just says “entering sage-grouse country” might be a good option for the top of Lookout Pass as well.
- BLM has a TreadLightly program, but it has a relatively narrow scope and does not currently address sage-grouse issues.
- Radio or TV spots on OHV ethics could be useful also. Local companies could be approached to help sponsor the spots, or include them in product ads. Public service announcements might be another way to get the message out. Tom becker suggested approaching Yamaha and Honda.
- The BLM plan will include outreach, marking trails, ways to prevent route profilation, and reducing route redundancy.
- Tooele County is working on how to address many of these issues as well. They have a website, TooeleCountyTrails.com, which they would like to be a central repository for information on trails. They could include sage-grouse information (how not to hurt the species while recreating) on the site. Currently, they are advertising 29 trails in the area, hoping to drive more traffic to trails that are officially designated.

- Lorien will work to increase coordination and communication between Tooele County Trails committee and WDARM. She will attend the next meeting, March 1st at the Desert Peak Complex.

Predation Issues

Robbie Knight said that he would like to get a coordinated take permit for ravens that would allow take on and around Dugway. Because there is not a specific livestock interest in every area where raven treatment could benefit sage-grouse, this would allow for more predator management work in other areas. Robbie will follow up with this and enlist WDARM members as needed.

Actions Taken

No formal actions were taken.

Follow-up Needed

- Covy will pull together some folks to discuss next steps on ways to evaluate sage-grouse response to treatments
- Lorien will provide copies of the new sage-grouse habitat guide for Robbie Knight, as well as the county folks.
- Lorien will attend the County Trails meeting on March 1st at Desert Peak.
- Lorien will follow up with DWR, BLM, and Tooele county to determine next steps on getting kiosks up in key locations.
- Robbie will work on getting a coordinated take permit for ravens on and around Dugway.
- Lorien will work with Boyd, Jason, and others to plan a lek viewing trip that precedes the next meeting on March 27th.

Next Meetings

The March 27th meeting will be combined with a lek-viewing trip if weather allows. The meeting will be scheduled for the morning immediately following the field trip.