WEST DESERT (WDARM) LOCAL WORKING GROUP

Date: October 11, 2016
Place: Tooele County Building
Members Present: Boyd White (NRCS/UDWR), Terry Messmer (USU Extension), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Melissa Chelak (USU graduate student), Terri Pope (UDWR), Jim Priest (BLM), Erik Valdez (BLM), Keeli Marvel (Dugway Proving Ground), Tom Becker (UDWR), Whitney May (Logan Simpson), Alan Clark (DNR), Jessica Henrie (Tooele Transcript Bulletin), George Garcia (USFS), Robert Edgel (UDWR), Chris Bryan (BLM), Brad Jessop (BLM-WDD), Elizabeth Mitchell (Bennion Ranch), Alisa Meyer (Shambip CD), Mark Farmer (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

After introductions and agenda review, Lorien showed a recent NRCS poster showing the depth of different sagebrush ecosystem root growth.

A few personnel change updates:

- There will be a new BLM biologist replacing Masako starting soon. Masako is the new Forest Service biologist for the Logan and Ogden Ranger Districts.
- Jared Reese is now the state BLM sage-grouse biologist.
- Local BLM sage-grouse biologists are still being hired.
- Robby Edgel has been hired to fill the UDWR Central Region position that Allison Whitaker left when she moved into the WRI position.
- USFS still looking for a Temporary replacement for Karen Hartman, who took a 1 year detail to South Dakota.
- Alan Clark will be retiring in January.

West Government Creek Fire Discussion

George Garcia (Forest Service) and Brad Jessop (BLM) presented jointly about this summer's fire in the West Government Creek area. The fire started with a lightning strike, and burned 4,338 acres total, most of which burned in the first 48 hours. Most of the acreage was on Forest Service land, some on BLM, and a tiny bit on SITLA. The forest land that burned was mostly juniper, and went up slope to some difficult to access areas. Some lower lands were also burned, which connect to the flatter BLM lands to the west.

Because of its proximity to the sage-grouse areas, this fire was a full-suppression effort from the very start.

The USFS assessed the situation to determine intensity, and determined that no emergency rehab was going to be needed. Emergency rehab would be called for if sediment wash-outs endangered a structure, for example, but immediate concerns of that nature were not found. Just removal of vegetation does not necessarily trigger rehab efforts. Recently, most low intensity Forest Service fires do not get any rehab done.

The fire burned about 1,085 acres of BLM all of which had been previously bullhogged. About 775 acres that burned are currently under contract to remove all of the trees. The contractor will mulch burned trees within the contract area to allow drill seeding to occur as part of the fire rehabilitation efforts. This fire provides an opportunity to better understand whether or not previous fuels treatments have contributed to the ecological resilience of the area. Some burned areas that were previously bullhogged will not be reseeded. In these areas, natural recovery will be compared to burned (previously bullhogged) areas that will be drill seeded. Although this is unusual it will be very interesting to see how the projects come out. Some acres will be drill seeded and others will be aerially seeded. Also, some fences were damaged on BLM, and will be replaced. George noted that replacing any infrastructure that burns in fires on Forest is very difficult to find funding to replace. No major damage came with this fire on Forest, however.

Although normally Forest Service would not have much option to do rehab on this fire, the combination of BLM efforts and DWR helping with seed mixes will allow Forest Service to seed approximately 1,640 acres on the lower-elevation Forest land that burned. The group discussed seed mixes. BLM, when doing emergency stabilization rehab (ESR) can only seed stabilizing vegetation (not ecological restoration; just focused on soil loss prevention). Therefore, BLM's contribution to seed mixes is usually mostly grasses. In subsequent years, BLM moves to a Burned Area Rehabilitation plan (BAR), which is more focused on ecological restoration and has more options. Elizabeth asked whether any of the high elevation areas could have shrubs (mountain mahogany, bitterbrush) included for additional protein. Because of the multi-agency partnership, more variety of seeds will be able to be included in the initial aerial seeding flights. No reseeding will be done in the higher elevation Forest area.

The group had an excellent discussion about needs for increased fire rehab coordination across agencies at different levels of administration (local coordination is sometimes more easily done, but greater state-office coordination would streamline many efforts).

The North Moore fire, on BLM land, was mentioned briefly. That started in mid-June, burned north, and then stopped at the boundary of the previous 222 fire. More information could be presented at a future meeting if there is interest.

Research and translocation updates

Melissa presented about the translocations research project. She noted that there is no data yet to say how the fire has affected the birds. They were not using it before the fire, as there was

mostly PJ there, and they are not using it currently.

There were very low nest initiation rates for both resident and translocated hens. Chick survival rates were also low, although because the sample size is very small, it could be normal. There was also unusually high August mortality for adults; many were in the McIntyre area, which is some of the best habitat in the area. There is some evidence that it might be related to coyote predation, although it is not certain. More effort on coyote control in that area next August might be important. Someone noted that foxes are likely to take birds to a den, whereas coyotes are more likely to eat a bird in place. Elizabeth noted that she was looking forward to seeing the seasonal movements, especially the difference in how birds move in spring versus summer.

The goal of translocation is to maximize chick production in the population. More birds will be brought to the area to keep the population viable next spring also. 40 more birds (30 hens and 10 males) will be given 20 GPS and 20 VHF collars. The researchers will also try to capture and collar 7-10 resident birds.

Jim Priest noted that there will soon be several kinds of BLM monitoring data (HAF and AIM, specifically), which may add to our understanding of the population.

Sheeprocks Environmental Assessment

Jim Priest presented the status of a programmatic EA in development for the Sheeprocks, a joint effort between the Fillmore and Salt Lake field offices. Erik Valdez with BLM fuels is the project lead. Currently the project is in the scoping phase; there will be additional time to comment later.

The EA covers 15-20 years of projects in the Sheeprocks. Jim showed a map with a color scheme where red areas are considered the highest priority areas for treatments than other colored areas, but projects will be possible in all areas. There will probably be a re-prioritization in about 5 years. The timeframe for the NEPA is to have some projects proposed for the 2017-18 WRI year. Jim handed out hard copies of the document at the meeting. Anyone with feedback can contact Jim, Erik, or Brad directly. The project name is “Greater Sheeprocks Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration EA.”

They will also be coordinating with Hugh Hurlow at Utah Geologic Survey to study the impacts of the PJ removal on various hydrologic functions including effects on streamflow.

Tom Becker suggested that there might be a need to reclaim the Onaqui bench, which has been losing sagebrush to greasewood invasion in areas where sage-grouse used to be found. Jim explained that the EA is for sage-grouse habitat improvement, and includes the ability to manage weeds and cheatgrass, and address lack of sufficient understory as well. It also includes restoring and protecting wet /riparian areas such as springs and wet meadows.

Recreation sage-grouse signage

Mark Farmer presented a simple sign, designed by the DWR, to alert people to the presence of sage-grouse in the area. Feedback from the group about the draft included:

- Information on how to report poaching would be helpful
- More pictures of grouse the way people really see them, rather than strutting could be valuable.
- Simpler language regarding "impact" would be more accessible to a wider audience.
- The county and state parks should also have a chance to provide feedback as they are not in attendance at the meeting. (Lorien will forward the sign on to both of these entities.)

The group will have a larger discussion on recreation issues again at an upcoming meeting. Lorien explained that Tread Lightly, an organization that specializes in recreation messaging, has offered to become involved. They have a baseline survey done in 2012 for all of Utah exploring recreation issues, and will be doing a follow-up survey in 2017. The WDARM group was very interested in hearing about the survey and also hearing more about how Tread Lightly could assist the group with sage-grouse and recreation issues.

Tom Becker suggested that someone could compile a presentation of google images over 20 years to see how recreation has expanded. Lorien will look into this.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will get Tread Lightly to an upcoming meeting.
- Lorien will send out the draft signage from DWR to Chris Haller and Tooele County.
- Lorien will explore how to present historical imagery of recreation areas to the group at a future meeting.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in early December and will focus on the BLM IMs, Forest Service planning updates as they are available, and recreation discussion as speakers are available. Lorien will send out a Doodle poll.