

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

Date: November 20, 2019
Place: Tooele County Health Building
Individuals Present: Melissa Chelak (USU), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Heather Talley (UDWR), Shane Hill (UDWR), Brad Jessop (BLM), Jerry Bullock (BLM), Mellissa Wood (BLM), Dylan Tucker (BLM), Sarah Moldenhauer (BLM), Misael Rivero Otero (BLM), Nancy Williams (BLM), Alan Clark (public), Keeli Marvel (Dugway P.G.), Terri Pope (UDWR), Karen Hartman (USFS), Janet Larson (Shambip CD), Hugh Hurlow (UGS), Reneé Chi (BLM), Lorien Belton (USU Extension)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Intros and updates

- Heather Tally has a new position with DWR, and has taken over Jason Robinson's upland game position as well as the portion of Ben Nadolski's work focused on statewide sage-grouse policy coordination.
- Keeli noted that there is a new manager for Fish Springs NWR – Jonathan Shore.

Sage-Grouse Research Updates

Melissa provided research updates since the last meeting. This year, 26 birds were translocated, bringing the project totals to 146. There were 37 mortalities this year, out of 68 monitored individuals: 1 collared in 2016, 6 2017 birds, 15 2018 birds, and 15 2019 birds. This is slightly higher than last year's mortality rates.

Lek counts were lower this year, but it is difficult to say how much the numbers were influenced by snow hindering access to the leks until after peak counts of past years. Many leks couldn't be counted until April. There were 24 nests this year, from 44 individuals collared. Of those, 17 hatched out. Lorien shared a powerpoint originally presented at the sage-grouse Plan Implementation Council meeting, with statewide and SGMA lek trends.

During the 2020 field season, there will be no additional translocations, but monitoring, surveys, and resident bird captures will continue.

Predation appears to be a mix of avian and mammalian predators, with more avian predation during raptor migrations. Melissa will be publishing predator numbers and her surveys in the annual report at the end of the year.

Brad or Hugh will send Melissa combined shape files for habitat projects so she doesn't have to duplicate efforts that others have already done.

UGS Water Study Update

Hugh Hurlow gave a research update on the groundwater and conifer study. There are three pairs of treatment and control polygons. Mud Springs and Railroad Springs are regular pairs of treatment/no treatment for conifers. Death Creek has surface flow, groundwater level, soil moisture, and vegetation monitoring, but Despair Wash has no surface flow or groundwater, only soil moisture instrumentation. There will be 350 acres of treatment area (PJ removal) in various polygons in Railroad Springs, where there are multiple springs where flow is being monitored. Some are being monitored for flow changes, some for chemistry only, and some have piezometers.

UGS is also measuring how the BDAs in Vernon Creek change groundwater, using different reaches along Vernon Creek as treatment and control areas. They are also considering looking at evapotranspiration on the BDA project to see if there are detectable changes.

BLM project updates

Brad Jessop showed a map of fire project plans, mostly in the Filmore field office area. There are multiple projects already funded that will be done in the fall of 2020. These include:

- McIntyre (143 acres bullhog, 214 acres lop and scatter)
- Maple Springs (near the Maple springs lek) 333 L&S; 126 bullhog. This one may be a difficult bullhog so they are considering a lop and pile option, although it might be more expensive. This is in an area which is BLM PHMA after the hard trigger, although it is outside the SGMA boundary.
- Erickson Knoll (will also involve SITLA): some chaining maintenance and L&S and seeding and bullhog.

Several projects relate to the UGS study. Railroad springs (associated with Hugh's UGS project) started this fall. It was seeded two weeks before this meeting, and the contractor is continuing to work from south to north. The project is focused on sage-grouse so thorough tree removal is a priority. As part of the Dingell Act, a whole lot of this land will be transferred to SITLA sometime in the future, but the details are not available yet. The West Tintic Valley Project (also related to Hugh's research) is upslope from Railroad Springs. BLM has stepped away from the Death Creek project area, so if treatments are needed to complete the research, WRI may be the best route. BLM is planning to treat Mud Springs in 2020, however.

Renee and Jason suggested another area for possible treatment in the future.

BLM is planning to try out aerial treatments of PJ treatment areas using Open Range G (pellets) to test effectiveness of that option.

Other BLM updates

Mellissa Wood explained that BLM recently awarded a research grant to Steve Peterson at BYU to study sage-grouse and feral horses on the Onaquis. We will include Steve in future working group meetings to provide additional detail.

Renee Chi has been working since May on the causal factor analysis for the Sheeprocks, since it hit the hard trigger. She suggested we discuss in at the next meeting, when she will have something to present. Once that CFA is done, she will be focusing on HAF 4th order (fine-scale) data.

Updated habitat maps (coordinated with the state of Utah/DWR) are likely to be about six months out before the GPS collar data is included in what is online. Among the issues that are being worked on is that the pixel size is currently too large for effective use at a project planning scale.

BLM plan updates

At our last meeting Jared Reese presented elements on the newly approved BLM plan amendments for sage-grouse. At this meeting, Mellissa Wood (who has replaced Quincy Bahr in the BLM state office) reported on a recent court injunction preventing implementation of those new regulations. The injunction is dated Oct 16. The BLM's response will include several different approaches. Many of the changes in the new amendments were clarifications, partnership improvements, and other changes not related to the concerns presented in court. Those will be handled through a separate "plan maintenance" effort. Updates to table 2.2, which fall under the existing mandate to use the best available science, will be included in this document. Substantive issues raised by the injunction will be addressed in a supplemental EIS that will be available in the new year, likely February, for public comment. Those issues include cumulative effects, scientific basis for changes, and a lack of meaningful alternatives presented in the EIS, among other topics. The injunction also complicates the legal environment, since the state of Utah had sued the BLM about the original amendments, but the changes addressed some of their concerns; now, the change back makes the situation unclear.

Other updates and discussions

- There are many BDA project efforts, led by Robby Edgel.
- There may be a test plot to see if sagebrush plugs can be used to establish sagebrush; a project elsewhere in the state was successful using backpacks to water the plugs in a targeted way at the start.
- Terri noted that there are conversations starting about how to make sure we protect our current habitat projects (especially areas where good sagebrush habitat for sage-grouse has been re-established) with fire breaks, since we know there is cheatgrass out there and don't want to lose past investments.

- George Garcia, with Forest Service, is leading up several special projects, and put in for Chief's grants for some large-scale projects; we should learn in December if they were successful.
- Luke Decker is the new Spanish Fork District Ranger for the USFS.
- Erica Fleishman's local bird data is available for those who want it; Terri and Nancy requested the link. Lorien can send it to others if they are interested as well.
- The group opted not to meet in person to discuss WRI projects relevant to sage-grouse before the comment deadline, but Lorien will send out a list of projects to the email list so those who want to review them can.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will get the group a list of WRI projects to review once they have been submitted.

Next Meeting

Lorien will send out a doodle for the next meeting. It should be after the WRI project comments are in. Topics to include:

- BLM Causal factor analysis
- BYU horse study
- Tintic birds GPS (Melissa and Renee report)
- Mid-April field tour planning (lek visits as well as re-scheduling the Ibapah projects trip)