

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

Date: November 21, 2013
Place: Tooele Co. Health Building, Tooele, UT
Members Present: Kim Hersey (DWR), Traci Allen (BLM), Mike Tamlos (USDA-WS), Terry Messmer (USU Extension), Boyd White (co-chair, landowner), Karen Hartman (USFS), Jerry Hurst (Tooele County), Patti Barney (NRCS), Bruce Clell (Tooele County), Matt Phillippi (NRCS), Renae Bragonje (USFS), Lanson Stavast (USFS), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Nathan Long (NRCS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Upcoming Utah Sage-Grouse Summit and National Forum

On February 18 and 19, 2014, USU Extension will be hosting a Utah sage-grouse summit in Salt Lake City to discuss implementation of the state plan, provide research updates, and many other topics.

In November 2014, there will be a regional meeting for all sage-grouse local working groups across the Western U.S. More details will be provided closer to that time.

NRCS Update

Patti Barney and Nate Long presented NRCS updates.

- Tammy Koldyke has left her position as the SGI biologist. Nate will be taking on the SGI role until the position can be refilled.
- There has been some SGI interest from Juab County. There are also projects under discussion with two different landowners, including a project that has PJ removal, fencing, and water development portions.
- There are soon going to be a large number of fence markers available from NRCS (250,000) that were discussed earlier this year but are just arriving now. Part of the SGI efforts will include getting those markers onto additional fences in the area not already marked. Boyd mentioned that the McIntyre lek has been marked, in addition to others in the area and in Ibapah.
- NRCS will be coordinating with Lorien to hold a landowner workshop that will provide a forum to present sage-grouse updates, and other information of interest to local livestock producers, in the late winter. Send any ideas to Nate, Matt, or Lorien.

WDARM Co-chair Position

Boyd mentioned that he has moved and now works out of Richfield, so may not be the best co-

chair. The group agreed that Boyd is still a good leader, but Lorien will take additional nominations for co-chairs via the listserv. Alan Mitchell is the other co-chair and has not been attending meetings recently.

Upcoming Meeting Planning

The January meeting will be held January 15th, from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm. Lorien will provide a light lunch.

The group agreed that having the spring meeting in Ibapah again would be good. Kim suggested that coordinating with spring lek counts would be very helpful for those who need to count the leks. The Shambip Conservation District may also plan to meet jointly, as they did last year. It would also be valuable to have the Nevada folks involved, including the South Fork Indians and the Elko commissioners. Traci and Lorien will work to coordinate that with them. Lorien will contact Grant Gerber with Elko County.

See note below about a June field tour, also.

Tribal, Research, and Nevada Connection Updates

The Goshutes are interested in further sage-grouse research and projects, including SGI. Terry explained that an initial tri-state research proposal for the birds in the Ibapah-Nevada-Idaho population area was not funded this spring, but efforts will continue to fund that research. There have also been discussions of a June field tour in the area to connect County Commissioners from the three states. A large (10,000 acre) SGI project in the White Pine area was funded this year.

Predation and Habitat Projects

Traci asked Terry what the research says about whether fire breaks for fuel management might create predation problems, and how best to balance those two threat concerns. Terry explained that boundaries like that, including roads, can increase the nest predation risk, but that in most circumstances the bigger scale habitat protection is more critical unless there are specific known predation issues in the immediate area. There has to be a balance, however. Traci said it would be very helpful to have specific guidance or criteria for doing those projects. Kim suggested that we might be able to more strategically locate fire breaks in already disturbed areas, as a way to reduce cheatgrass, rather than making firebreaks in healthy sagebrush areas. Regardless, the local situation needs to be carefully considered because there are several factors to weigh in designing a good project that helps instead of increasing risks.

Terry briefly explained recent events on Desert Land and Livestock, where it appears that long-ago sagebrush removal projects may have negatively impacted the adult sage-grouse populations there just in very recent years, by making good winter habitat scarcer, and increasing the

population's vulnerability to winter predation. They have had very high winter adult mortality recently that reduces the positive impact of the good production they have seen there over the last decade or more. Similar effects were seen in San Juan County with Gunnison sage-grouse, Terry said.

Research Updates

Terry explained that there is a winter habitat model in development that will be available soon. The model uses slope, aspect, etc. and snow depth predictions to suggest areas that might be particularly important to sage-grouse during very harsh winters with deep snow.

Doug Ramsey, at USU, is working on a GIS project that will provide a measure of the baseline level of disturbance in sage-grouse management areas (SGMAs). It will primarily focus on human disturbance, such as roads, housing developments, etc. This will be used in implementation of the state sage-grouse plan. Traci noted that BLM Denver is working on some kind of (vegetation-based) baseline disturbance model. She does not have any details about this yet.

Lorien will check into PJ models which may be being developed out of Oregon.

Federal Planning Updates

Lorien presented the basics of the Draft EIS released by BLM and USFS in early November. This document outlines the possible sage-grouse stipulations that will be used to amend Forest Service and BLM Land Management Plans in Utah. There are five alternatives presented. Chapter 2 of the DEIS compares these alternatives.

- Alternative A is “no action.” This would mean that existing regulations and processes would not change. We know that this does not meet the USFWS’s requirements for “adequate regulatory mechanisms,” but it is useful as a point of comparison on specific strategies within the document, such as how many acres are currently open or closed to certain uses now, as compared with the other alternatives.
- Alternative B is based on the National Technical Team (NTT) report. This report was an addendum to the BLM’s Instructional Memorandum 2012-043. It presents suggestions for conservation measures to protect sage-grouse, based on science. Alt. B incorporates those suggestions into proposed regulations for the BLM and USFS.
- Alternative C is the most conservation-focused alternative. It is based heavily on public input from environmental organizations such as Western Watersheds Project and Wild Earth Guardians. It is split into two sub-alternatives, C1 and C2. One major difference between those sub-alternatives is how grazing is suggested to be regulated. One alternative proposes reductions, while the other proposes elimination of grazing in sage-grouse habitat.

- Alternative D is the alternative proposed by the BLM and Forest Service. It covers every topic that must be addressed. In many cases, it goes into more detail than the other alternatives.
- Alternative E is based on the Utah Governor's Sage-Grouse Plan. Because the Utah plan also addresses issues outside the jurisdiction of the BLM and USFS, only aspects of the state plan that are relevant to federal lands are included. There are two sub-alternatives for E as well. E1 is based on Utah's plan. E2 is based on Wyoming's plan, because several small pieces of federal land managed out of Utah are within Wyoming's borders.

The Alternative preferred by both the BLM and the USFS is Alternative D. (Although the two federal agencies are working together, each agency must make its own decisions.) The final decision will probably incorporate elements from several alternatives. The Draft EIS explains that "though Alternative D has been identified as the preferred alternative, aspects of Alternative E, which is based on the State of Utah and Wyoming's GRSG conservation plans, may also meet the purpose and need of this effort and fulfill the BLM and Forest Service's 'statutory mission and responsibilities, giving consideration to economic, environmental, technical and other factors' (NEPAs 40 Most Asked Questions 4a). As such the proposed plan could include aspects of Alternative D, Alternative E, or other alternatives." This language can be found on page 2-163 of the DEIS.

Some of the key differences between the alternatives are as follows:

- A, B, C, and D all use maps that are based on the Utah DWR shape files of occupied sage-grouse habitat from 2012. Alt E uses the Sage-Grouse Management Areas (SGMAs) from the Utah state plan. Habitats in B, C, and D break habitat into two categories, Priority (PPMA) and General (PGMA). Most proposed regulations apply only to the priority (PPMA) habitats. The PPMA habitat boundaries are based on the SGMAs, minus any area within the SGMAs that is an "opportunity area" or non-habitat.
- Alternatives B and C propose a 3% limit on disturbance. Alternatives D and E propose 5% limits. The details of how each number is calculated vary by alternative. One of the differences is how burned areas are handled.
- For specific issues there are useful comparison charts in the Appendices, such as Appendix K.

January 29 is the deadline for comments on the Draft EIS. At the WDARM meeting on January 15, Lorien will collect any comments that people would like to submit via the working group. An informational meeting on December 10 in Salt Lake City will be hosted by the BLM to provide more information on the draft EIS.

State Sage-Grouse Plan Update

The group briefly discussed the state sage-grouse plan. The baseline disturbance map from Doug Ramsey will be available in early 2014. The role of local working groups, like WDARM, in implementing the plan will be discussed at the Sage-Grouse Summit in Salt Lake, Feb 18-19.

Interest in CCAAs

Patti said that Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) are of interest to some counties. Terry explained that the state is not interested in a regional CCAA for sage-grouse, but there are discussions about how to approach putting them in place at the SGMA level. Lorien explained that CCAAs are very complex and take a substantial time commitment. If anyone is interested, Lorien has additional information. Terry mentioned that the High Lonesome Ranch has a CCAA, and that Desert Land and Livestock is working on one for sage-grouse, which could provide a template for elsewhere in the state.

UPCD Projects

Projects that go through the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD) teams for Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI) funding are due in the database on January 6. WDARM is in the Central Region, and there are always several projects that might benefit or affect sage-grouse. Lorien will make sure that relevant projects are sent out to the WDARM list once they are in the database, so anyone who is interested can review them. We will also discuss any concerns at the January 15th meeting. All projects are open for comment.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will send out more information on the Sage-Grouse Summit in February.
- Lorien will coordinate with NRCS on the landowner workshop.
- Lorien will take additional nominations for co-chairs via the listserv.
- Traci and Lorien will work to coordinate the April meeting with various partners, including Elko County (Grant Gerber), the White Pine LWG, the Tribe, and Shambip CD.
- Lorien will check into PJ models which may be being developed out of Oregon.
- Lorien will provide lunch for the January 15th meeting
- Lorien will make sure that relevant projects are sent out to the WDARM list once they are in the database, so anyone who is interested can review them. We will also discuss any concerns at the January 15th meeting.
- Lorien will follow-up on WDARM's potential role in a June field tour for NV-ID-UT commissioners.

Next Meetings

The next meeting will be held in Tooele on January 15th. The group requested a lunch meeting. USU Extension will provide a light lunch.

The following meeting should be out in Ibapah again. An early-April date will be set after coordination with the Goshute Tribe, the Shambip Conservation District, and Nevada partners.

A June field tour for tri-state Commissioners may be developed. WDARM's role is yet TBD.