

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

Date: November 4, 2011

Time: 1:00 pm – 3:15 pm

Place: Tooele City Hall, Tooele UT

Members Present:

Jason Robinson (UDWR), Tom Becker (UDWR), Boyd White (co-chair, landowner), Karen Hartman (USFS), Dylan Tucker (BLM), Mellissa Rosenhan (BLM), Kim Hersey (UDWR), Mike Tamlllos (USDA-WS), and Randy Larsen (BYU), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator). Attending via phone: Traci Allen (BLM SFLO), Ray Kelsey, (BLM SLFO)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

New Resources

Two new resources are available for sage-grouse groups, and others. Lorien distributed copies of a pocket-sized publication for land managers and landowners that describe basic sage-grouse biology and habitat needs. In addition a new reference publication will soon be coming out that provides details on the wide range of programs available for doing conservation/wildlife work on private lands. The group looked at a draft and noted that it would be useful for new sage-grouse biologists as well as others.

Revising the LWG Conservation Plan

Much of the upcoming year will focus on revising the sage-grouse plans for each group. WDARM started this process with a review of the threats table earlier this year. Traci suggested that the word document be circulated to the group and anyone who is interested in helping can provide suggestions in tracked changes.

BLM Updates

Traci Allen explained that the BLM has been mandated to modify all land use plans in areas relevant to sage-grouse. They will be working toward having completed plans by the end of 2014. The WDARM area is included in this. Traci will be the local lead on this process for the Salt Lake Field Office (Tooele and Utah counties), and Randy Beckstrand is the lead for Fillmore (Juab and Millard counties). The national office of BLM will hopefully soon be issuing an IM (instructional memorandum) that will provides details about how to address threats to sage-grouse through land use plan revisions. The process is essentially on hold until that IM is issued. There will be scoping meetings in January for the land use plan update process.

Traci asked Jason if all sage-grouse habitat in Utah is still “priority.” Jason said that hopefully soon a map will be released with priority and general habitat designations, and there will likely

be different stipulations for “priority” and “general” habitat.

Jason noted that he served on the national technical team, and helped draft the supporting documentation for the IM. He explained that it would likely not be “business as usual,” as covers all of sage-grouse habitat, and will probably require management changes. Priority habitat will likely have stricter restrictions. The IM will provide specific guidance to BLM, and will involve many aspects of BLM management. There will also be guidance on how the Resource Management Plans (RMPs) and other Land Use Plans (LUPs) will be revised.

On a related note, approval of Utah’s “Appendix 5,” which is the development guidelines associated with Utah’s 2009 state plan, has been postponed again, in part to ensure that the direction from the IM and the state do not conflict.

Project and Threat Updates

A planned fuel treatment for the East Onaqui Bench will reduce PJ in the Lookout Pass area. Traci is going to try to combine the NEPA for that project and the squarrose knapweed project that was developed in discussions at previous WDARM meetings, since they are both sage-grouse benefit projects in addition to their other merits. The juniper removal at Lookout will include some seeding as needed, based on elevation. The Government Wash lek project would involve spraying squarrose knapweed. There is a need to treat on the lek as the weed has spread there. If there is any ground disturbance, seeding may be necessary. The project details are still being worked out. Traci will be working on the NEPA. Tom Becker expressed a concern that the spraying would kill forbs, and some forbs may need to be reseeded even if the ground is not disturbed.

There is a water ski area being planned in the area for disabled children. There is some chance that the project might marginally increase forbs due to the water availability. If that looks likely, we might consider a small habitat project nearby to improve brood-rearing habitat. About a mile and half from the lek, just south of the ski area, might be a good place for a sagebrush mosaic (Shurtleff Creek).

The Lookout Pass lek has been plowed by the landowner. Last year the lek count was zero. There might be another lek in the area that we don’t know about where the birds have gone. Concentrating efforts to find new leks in that area might be a good idea.

In Utah, three biologists will be hired soon to help implement projects funded by the NRCS Sage-grouse Initiative. National training for all these biologists, who will be posted around the West in sage-grouse areas, will take place in November in the Sheeprocks. This will allow our WDARM group to showcase some projects. Jason will be helping put the tour together. The group decided to write a welcome letter for the biologists, to be presented by a WDARM member at the training. It will highlight some of the issues relevant to the local area. Lorien will draft the letter and send it to others for review and comments in time for the training.

Jason installed fence reflectors on the lek near Ibapah. (This is in addition to other fence markers reported at previous meetings.)

Predator management continues in the area, and will happen early in the year. Between 500-600 eggs are put out in the Vernon area. Tom Becker helps with pre-baiting. The current Utah limit on how many ravens can be killed is 2000. Assuming a kill rate of one bird for every four eggs, last year about 1800 were killed. The focus is on feedlots and in other areas where ravens congregate in the early part of the season.

Travel Management and Trails Issues

Travel management concerns for sage-grouse will likely be addressed through the new sage-grouse revisions to the RMPs. Traci is hoping to get some baseline information for ground disturbances (recreation) from the BLM state office. There is still a need to overlay sage-grouse areas with trail maps to identify areas where recreation disturbance may be of greater concern, and to understand how much disturbance we have in current habitat.

Tom Becker asked if anyone knew of research that discussed density of disturbance, or how disturbance should be managed at different densities. No one was aware of anything in particular, although energy-related disturbance research may be somewhat applicable. Jason noted that research that looks at cumulative impacts is the direction that disturbance analysis is going.

Traci updated the group on the Pony Express Trail progress. A plan is being put together to regulate large group (50+ people) use of the Pony Express Trail via a permitting process. Once the BLM IM is released, she will finish it but needs to make sure it will be compatible. She has been looking at buffer zones for activities around sage-grouse areas. Main elements of the new plans will include the following: Now there will be a cap on groups. Groups over 25 people will need a permit, and the cap on motorized groups will be 50 people; 125 people/group cap for nonmotorized. No races will be allowed, and there will be additional scrutiny of commercial groups. All permits will be reviewed by wildlife and recreation staff. Some areas of sage-grouse areas may be completely off limits. This is all part of a push to manage the increasing recreation demand along the Pony Express Trail. Currently, no regulations exist that are based on the capacity of the resource. The proposed cap of 1500 people per year would be a 3.5% increase from current. The plan would apply to areas within five miles on either side of the Pony Express Trail. Outside that corridor, any organized group of more than 25 people would need to apply for a permit. These limits are being looked at because of an anticipated continued increase in large OHV group recreation requests that have the potential to impact resource conditions in the area. Dispersed recreation activities will continue across the area. These proposed restrictions are not designed to apply to dispersed recreation, just larger permitted groups.

Tom Becker asked how that plan corresponds to County desires. Lorien will communicate further with the county to discuss recreation planning and increased communication between the working group and the county to help answer that question.

Map

The map still needs to be updated with the MOA, new project shape files, etc. Lorien may wait until the new priority areas have been defined.

Research Update

Randy Larsen updated the group on research progress. A five-year agreement was signed with Dugway, with work to include increasing knowledge of the Gov't Wash/Creek population. It will be important to not disturb the birds, since the lek had a low (9-bird) count. Therefore, capture and collaring are not likely to be part of the research. Translocation and GPS collars have also been discussed. The research plan is not yet final but continues to be developed by the research partners.

Actions Taken

No formal actions were taken.

Follow-up Needed

- Traci will continue to work on NEPA for the knapweed project. Project planning should consider whether forbs lost to spraying should be reseeded in the area.
- At a future meeting, the group should revisit the idea of a brood-rearing habitat project near the water ski area.
- Lorien will work on updating the map when all new info is available.
- Traci is working to get baseline information on disturbance.
- Lorien will communicate with the county to explore opportunities to overlay sage-grouse habitat maps and trail maps, and discuss how BLM plans relate to county plans.
- Lorien will send the word version of the current LWG plan to Traci

Next Meetings

Two upcoming meetings were scheduled: January 31 and March 27. The March trip will be combined with a lek-viewing trip if weather allows.