

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

Date: November 8, 2012

Place: Tooele County Health Building, Tooele UT

Members Present: Boyd White (co-chair, landowner), Tom Becker (DWR), Jason Robinson (DWR), Covy Jones (DWR), Kim Hersey (DWR), Lans Stavast (USFS), Karen Hartman (USFS), Renae Bragonje (USFS), George Garcia (USFS), Jo Proctor (Hill Air Force), Casey Burns (NRCS), Bruce Clegg (Tooele County), Jan Reinhart (UDAF-GIP), Ashley Hansen (UDAF-GIP), Mike Tamlos (USDA-WS), Kent Page (Tooele County), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Planning Updates

Lorien provided brief updates on the various planning processes (federal and state) currently underway. The state plan should be released for comment soon, including new maps. The local working groups have been very helpful in providing comments over the last six months as the process developed. Counties have been particularly involved this summer. Lorien went to a Tooele County planning meeting this summer, and helped the planning board understand the status of sage-grouse issues. One concern they had was how to make sure that Ibapah landowners were fully aware of the issues and had a chance to comment. No actions were taken on sage-grouse at that meeting. In the future, counties will likely be asked to consider ordinances, or revisions to General Plans, that will help protect sage-grouse.

The BLM/USFS planning process is occurring in parallel. An EIS that is being developed as a step toward amendments for sage-grouse that will be done for BLM and USFS land use plans. The state plan, if done in time, will be included as one of the alternatives. BLM staff are working on the EIS and it will also hopefully be available for comment by the end of the year.

Project Updates

Two WRI pinyon-juniper projects are in progress, East Vernon and Black Creek.

The Forest Service is considering a sagebrush harrow project in the Vernon area, and is looking for NEPA funding. The group discussed the project idea in relation to fire concerns and a new paper by Beck et al. that came out recommending against many kinds of sagebrush treatments for sage-grouse benefit. Several individuals suggested that focusing on pinyon-juniper treatments, and staying away from sagebrush treatments in the area, might be a safer bet. Another peripheral suggestion included focusing greenstripping efforts near roads, to enhance the value of roads as possible firebreaks, while not fragmenting the landscape further.

The NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative is focusing effort on pinyon-juniper projects. January 18th is the sign-up for these projects.

Research and Population Updates

Dugway is currently conducting sage-grouse surveys to determine if any sage-grouse are using specific Dugway areas. Randy Larsen has been discussing possible projects to understand grouse use of treatment areas, but everyone is being cautious to make sure that proposed research efforts, specifically collaring, does not place unmanageable stress on populations where lek numbers are currently low. Randy's research is on hold for that reason right now.

Kim Hersey presented lek count trends on the 12 known leks in the WDARM area, including several in the Vernon area, several in Ibapah, and several others in the East Tintics, which the group was least familiar with. All leks show declining numbers since high counts in 2005 and 2006. The years 2010 and 2011 were particularly low. Jason Robinson and others explained the trends and correlated events, including natural population fluctuations, weather-related changes, and Mormon cricket population highs. Jason noted that every population parameter for West Desert sage-grouse populations improves when there is more rain, especially warm spring rains. It makes it difficult to determine exactly what other life history factors are limiting the population. The Lookout Pass lek was plowed, and no birds have been seen there in some time.

The group agreed that a field trip to visit the East Tintic population areas would be valuable. These are in the BLM Filmore area, and we should engage that office more. Jason has been doing research on this population. The birds from several leks move up the mountain to the same area in the summer. However, they do not appear to be missing with other populations in the Vernon area (like the birds on the McIntyre lek).

Predation

The group discussed the increased problem of red foxes coming into the area. Ranchers may be less inclined to kill them when they are out hunting coyotes, because they are cute, and may be less of a threat to livestock. However, if coyotes are reduced while red foxes are not, it may increase the negative impact of red foxes and encourage their population growth. There may need to be education efforts with ranchers to make sure red foxes are seen as a problem, and worth controlling.

Red fox control is challenging because it requires specific, focused trapping efforts. It cannot be easily combined with other predator control efforts, like those for ravens or coyotes.

The group suggested that DWR may want to consider spending more time and money on addressing the red fox issue to prevent it from getting out of control. Right now, DWR provides \$30,000 annually to Wildlife Services to manage predators for wildlife, including sage-grouse. It will be in the governor's plan, so hopefully that may increase opportunities for funding. Casey Burns explained that he is working on ways for NRCS to help fund projects that get at the

root of predation problems, such as reducing attractants for predators. He will provide updates to the groups, through Lorien, once the practices have been finalized and are ready for use. He noted that a first step to addressing these issues is doing an inventory of problem areas, like trash heaps and livestock areas like lambing grounds. Mike Tamillos noted that he has a good sense of many of those areas already.

Casey also noted that NRCS is working on a modeling tool to help identify high-priority fences for fence markers. Lorien will ask Tammy to demonstrate that tool at a future meeting.

Actions Taken

No formal actions were taken.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will keep the group updated with information about the state sage-grouse planning efforts, and notify everyone about any comment periods for that or the BLM/USFS EIS.
- Lorien will send the Beck paper to the WDARM list
- Lorien will send a reminder to the groups that January 18th is the current sign-up date for the next round of SGI projects.
- Lorien will work with DWR biologists to schedule the April meeting in Ibapah and make sure landowners in that area are aware of the meeting.
- Lorien will make contact with the new biologist in the BLM Fillmore office, to inform him about the working group and help plan the summer field tour.
- The group will continue to brainstorm how best to address red fox problems in the area, and how rancher education may be a part of that.
- Lorien will communicate to the state planning team that Vernon has a red fox problem that needs to be addressed.
- Casey will let Lorien know when NRCS practices to help address predation issues are available. Casey will coordinate with Wildlife Services to assist in an inventory of problem areas that attract predators.
- Lorien will see if Tammy can present the NRCS fence-marking model at a future meeting.

Next Meetings

The next meeting will be February 13th in Tooele. The spring meeting in April will be held in Ibapah to give people a chance to get to know that area and to provide local landowners an easier way to participate in WDARM. The meeting will be coordinated with lek counting when the date gets closer. Summer field tour ideas include a visit to the East Tintic populations. This can be combined with a discussion and tour of recreation impacts.