

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

**Date: December 12, 2016**

**Place: Tooele County Building**

**Members Present:** Rachel Brown (Rocky Mountain Power), Evan Glenn (BLM-SO), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Reneé Chi (NRCS), Hugh Hurlow (UGS), Alison Whittaker (UDWR), Tom Becker (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Keeli Marvel (Dugway Proving Ground), Robbie Knight (Dugway Proving Ground), Nancy Williams (BLM), Jerry Caldwell (Tooele County Weeds), Shane Green (NRCS), Quincy Bahr (BLM-SO), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Alan Clark (DNR), Erik Valdez (BLM), Chris Bryan (BLM), Alan Bass (BLM), Brad Jessop (BLM-WDD), Matt Philippi (NRCS), Jim Priest (BLM), George Garcia (USFS), Alyson Eddie (Logan Simpson), Whitney May (Logan Simpson), Melissa Chelak (USU graduate student), Matt Howard (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

*RCPP update*

Alison Whittaker updated the group on the process to apply for RCPP funding. The funding is intended to help get more sage-grouse habitat restoration projects on the ground in the Sheeprocks area. Projects can be in the Sheeprocks SGMA or in the East Tintics. Conifer removal, greenstripping, sagebrush improvements (including dealing with cheatgrass problems), and riparian restoration work are all possible project types.

All projects must go through a leasee (on federal/state land) or private landowner (on private). The landowner must sign up with NRCS, just as they would for an EQIP project. Projects will also be submitted into the WRI database, as there is some matching funding set aside through WRI to assist with the projects. Anyone who knows of possibly interested landowners should contact Matt Phillippi. Matt notes that right now he has 10 SGI sign-ups.

For RCPP, they have 5 years to fully expend the money, although likely it will be done sooner than that depending on how many sign-ups happen early on. There will likely be 1 or 2 more years of signups after this winter's round of funding.

*BLM IM presentation*

Quincy Bahr presented the basics of the new BLM Instructional Memoranda that were released in September. The seven new IMs provide additional consistency between field offices in BLM about how to implement the new RMPs that were completed in 2015. Quincy focused on the monitoring, grazing, and disturbance IMs. Key discussions are noted below. Anyone interested in seeing the

full detail of the presentation can contact Lorien.

## Monitoring

Many aspects of monitoring are described in the IMs. Some are general for all monitoring across BLM, to help improve data standardization. Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) addresses this. The sage-grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) looks specifically at sage-grouse habitat on four scales, referred to as 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> order. A Habitat Assessment Summary Report will be produced that summarizes data from all four orders from rangewide scale to local field office data. This report will be used in some agency evaluations, such as Land Health Standards. Table 2.2 in the Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment has the standards against which 4<sup>th</sup> order (site scale) habitat assessments will be compared. These standards are based on data specific to Utah. ePlanning is a new system where all BLM NEPA documents will be stored and accessible. This is part of the process to account for all the actions that are taken on behalf of sage-grouse, so it will be easier to track and report RMP effectiveness for the Fish and Wildlife Service's sage-grouse review in 2020.

## Grazing

The grazing IMs include one on prioritization of permit renewal efforts, and one on incorporation of thresholds and responses into the grazing permit renewal process. Grazing is addressed in these two IMs because so much of the sage-grouse range is grazed that it was important to make sure that grazing will be handled similarly across different offices. It does not reflect a concern that grazing is inherently a problem for sage-grouse. It does reflect a need to make sure that, when improper grazing might be affecting grouse negatively, it is handled similarly across different BLM offices and in as expeditious a manner as possible.

Among the options available for incorporating thresholds and responses into the grazing permit process are: incorporating specific thresholds and responses into a permit, or examining different options during the NEPA process but not incorporating them into the permit. This latter option would provide an opportunity for faster response times later to incorporate possible changes into a new decision, because it has already been analyzed. A question was asked about whether every allotment would need its own NEPA. The EA done for grazing permit renewals can group allotments or permits in ways that make sense. For example, an EA could look at a group of permits that all share a common characteristic. Then multiple decisions (one per permit) could all reference the same NEPA analysis.

## Disturbance

Regarding disturbance, SDARTT, a disturbance tracking tool, will be used across the range. It will also be public-facing. That way, project proponents can look at an area where they might be interested in proposing a project, and will be able to see whether the disturbance cap has been

met in that area, or what level of disturbance is already there.

Quincy explained that the disturbance cap and disturbance measurement described at the scale of the IMs is probably not particularly useful for looking at recreation disturbance. Most recreation impacts on sage-grouse habitat are not captured in the disturbance threshold measurements. For example, two-tracks are not included as permanent disturbance in the SDARTT tracking system. Only the kinds of roads that are maintained (e.g. bladed, crowned, ditched) count as disturbance. Recreation facilities over a quarter acre would also be counted. Someone brought up the complexity of areas like campgrounds or trailheads which gradually expand to become more than a quarter acre.

### *USFS implementation updates*

George Garcia (Forest Service) provided a suite of updates on different topics:

- Somewhat similar to the BLM IMs, Forest Service has several “abstracts” out that explain the sage-grouse amendments on specific topics. Minerals, fire management, grazing, powerlines, etc. will all be covered. Not all are finished, but completed ones are available online at <http://www.fs.fed.us/science-technology/fish-wildlife-plants/sage-grouse/implementation-guide>
- USFS is working on an EA for 11 miles of road closures/decommissioning in the Vernon area, consistent with the existing USFS travel plan, which was completed in 2007.
- USFS just signed a CX for 8500 acres of conifer removal. It is a multi-year project. There will be submission into the WRI system this year for funding relevant to Years 1 and 2. The 8500 acres is on the north side of the Sheeprocks.
- Regarding grazing-related implementation of the sage-grouse amendments: monitoring got started a little later than hoped this year, so the data is not as complete as would be appropriate for making any decisions based off it. More monitoring on allotments will be done next year. This will push any amendments to grazing permits into 2018.

### *Hydrology Study*

Hugh Hurlow, with Utah Geologic Survey, explained how they are planning to design their research project on how conifer removal impacts water quality and quantity in the watersheds. Hugh explained the basic assumptions about how water yield in springs, streams, or other wet areas downhill from conifer treatments might change when the conifers are cut. He also outlined four areas (two treatment watersheds and two controls) in the Tintics where their research will be set up. Those are Death Creek paired with White Buffalo, and Mud Spring 1 paired with Mud Spring 2.

The researchers will instrument the areas this spring (2017) and then gather at least two years of data on water flows before the conifers are cut in the treatment areas (in 2020). They will measure water flow (quantity) of ground and surface water, as well as water quality. Most of the

funding is coming from WRI, but DWQ is also helping with some of the water chemistry analysis costs. Questions included whether the slopes of the area were conducive to bullhog accessibility (it should be fine) and whether they would be taking vegetation data to understand how different ground covers correlate to different amounts of runoff or infiltration (yes).

### *Other updates*

- Brad Jessop noted that a field tour on Wednesday (12/14) is going to visit various wet areas and discuss restoration opportunities.
- Future meetings will continue to address the connection between wet areas and sage-grouse habitat quality. Information on restoration project potential for washed out areas would be valuable.
- BLM is finishing up the contracts for bullhog work in Government Creek. One treatment of about 4000 acres was just finished, and a second is in progress currently. These include areas that were burned in the fire this summer/fall.
- George recommended that we reach out to the Utah Office of Tourism for the recreation-focused meeting in January.
- A few personnel updates:
  - Chris Bryant will be leaving his BLM position for a position out of state.
  - Nancy Williams is a new BLM biologist (refer questions that would have gone to Chris or Masako to Nancy).
  - The Forest Service is working on a replacement for Karen Hartman, who is on a year-long detail out of state. The position will probably be filled in the upcoming months.
  - Evan Glenn replaced Dave Jeppesen in the recreation role at the state BLM office. Dave has moved to a Washington office role, based out of Salt Lake, focused on sage-grouse and trails.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will focus the next meeting on recreation information and updates, with possibly some research presentations.
- Anyone interested in Quincy's presentation can contact Lorien or Quincy for a copy.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be in late January. Lorien will finalize the Doodle poll this week.