

**WDARM**

**Date: February 12, 2009**

**Time: 1:00 pm – 3:00 pm**

**Place: Tooele County Health Building**

**Members Present: Boyd White (Chair), Alan Mitchell (Co-chair, Rancher) Karen Hartman (Forest Service), Scott Pehrson (Rush Valley SCD, Rancher), Tyler Staggs (BLM SLFO), Traci Allen (BLM SFLO), Jan Knerr (Utah GIP), Jason Robinson (DWR), Blaine Russell (Rancher), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, recorder)**

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

Jason Robinson presented the background of sage-grouse listing status with the FWS. He noted that Utah is in four of the seven Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) sage-grouse management zones in the western U.S. He also presented the state sage-grouse plan status: it is almost finished, and ready to go soon through the RAC and State Wildlife Board. The statewide plan should serve as a reference for the LWGs, with reference information and documents, as well as guidelines for the LWGs. This plan, like the LWG plans, also has objectives and strategies.

One of the key objectives in the state plan is to ensure that projects get linked back to the threats noted in the plan. That will help as the Division of Wildlife Resources works to provide the Fish and Wildlife Service with sage-grouse information.

**Updates:**

Karen Hartman explained that some sage-brush chaining has been done on Alan Mitchell's land, as well as Dixie Harrow on some Forest Service permits that he runs. NEPA clearances are being worked on for a couple other projects on Forest Service land. The goal of all these projects was to improve brood-rearing habitat. Habitat projects on the Darrell Johnson property in Rush Valley were also discussed.

Mark Farmer, who could not be present, sent a spreadsheet of UPCD (Utah Partners for Conservation and Development) projects in the WDARM area. This sparked a conversation about what role the WDARM group should play in the UPCD. It would be good if projects that claimed to improve habitat for sage-grouse could be viewed by the LWG before being submitted to UPCD. The group did not make any decisions on how to make that more likely. Jason noted that because the group does not have formal authority, it could make recommendations but not require anyone to go through the group. Tyler emphasized that it would be preferable if all UPCD projects that reference sage-grouse note which threat in a sage-grouse plan is being addressed. This (as well as WDARM support for the project, if relevant) would increase the

credibility of the project.

Blaine Russell mentioned concern with ravens in Rush Valley, which have increased in recent years. At any given time he said there might be as many as 200 in his field. Jason explained that ravens are a challenge to control because of various limitations placed on APHIS on what it can control. He also noted that in the West Desert area, (unlike some other areas of the state, like Strawberry Valley), predators were less of a limiting factor than suitable habitat. The group discussed the challenge of determining exactly what the limiting factors were, but did not reach any conclusions. In other predator discussions, Jason noted that coyotes, red fox, and golden eagles are known to take adult sage-grouse.

Jason mentioned a proposed pipeline that would run from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas, through Rush Valley, Willow Creek, Tintic Junction, and then south into the SW desert. The Fish and Wildlife Service is currently looking at concerns. The pipeline pathway may be close to active leks. Traci asked Jason to send an email about the name of the pipeline. Current proposal is within 400 meters of a lek.

Also motorcycle races on the Sheeprocks are a potential threat to grouse winter habitat. Efforts to work with the organizers to mitigate risks are under way.

Also, a big power transmission line is being discussed that will cross East Tintic mountains en route from Mona to Salt Lake. Hopefully, it will be routed away from leks. It might go up through East Vernon Hills. Jason presented a new study to track Tintic birds; there may be opportunities to help with tracking and catching birds to better get a sense of where they are.

Boyd asked about the possibility of bird transplants to West Desert. Jason explained that the RAC and wildlife board needs to approve translocations. DWR is putting together a statewide wish list for where SG could be put. If this group wants birds, the group should express that interest to Tom Becker and Dennis Sutherland. Boyd will make that contact to express interest.

Jason explained that pure introductions (where no birds remain naturally) don't seem to work, but augmentations (adding birds to an already existing population) have been successful in Strawberry Valley. In order to test whether the translocations have really worked in Strawberry Valley, the division will first remove the augmentations (this year), but keep the predator control for a few years. Then later, predator controls will be removed, to see what really limits the population.

BYU has put out methods for successful augmentation. This spring, a new project will involve augmenting the Anthro Mountain population south of Duchesne, with heavy grad student help for monitoring.

Jan Knerr asked about lek counts. The WDARM members present had not seen last year's numbers. Jason explained that last year's numbers were down, which likely had something to do

with missing the peak lek attendance time for lek counts. Because we didn't have someone out there all the time, we missed the peak. Populations in the area are likely to be fairly stable (although small) despite the apparent decrease from the counts.

Jan also explained that GIP is looking for how to monitor projects and wonders how to coordinate with other monitoring efforts. Jason pointed her toward Rory Reynolds and Russ Norvell to discuss what is being developed by UPCD to monitor wildlife on UPCD projects. They may have a crew designated to work on this.

The group discussed whether non-DWR members of the group could help with lek counts or searches again this year. (There are about 10 known leks in the area.) Jason explained that for now, biologists can handle the lek counts, but lek searching help might be really helpful. Lorien will also ask Todd and Dave how they have coordinated with dedicated hunters in the past. The requirements for hours are high and there are many hunters in the Central Region (almost 5000) who need to get in 40 hours, so there could be a lot of interest in lek searching assistance.

Jason mentioned that flights to search for leks were being looked into. Tyler said that Craig Miller in Haver, MT does a lot of that. Tyler will send Jason his contact info. DWR could also coordinate with APHIS to see if they have any anecdotal evidence, since they fly for other reasons over similar territory. In the past, dedicated hunters and WDARM have done lek searching. DWR (Tom) coordinates this.

Someone asked if there would be any changes to hunting regulations this year. Jason explained that there will be no changes in hunting this year: 1 person can bag 2 birds. The number of permits is what fluctuates. There are only 4 areas in Utah where sage-grouse are hunted; all have breeding populations of at least 500 adults. The number of permits fluctuates based on lek counts. This year, there was so much demand for sage-grouse tags that it crashed the computer system within hours. The Division is looking at ways to address the demand.

In the WDARM area, hunting is not permitted. Poaching is viewed as a problem here, but because of the size of the area, it is hard to justify the time to add enforcement. More public education or just a few example cases of people being caught could be valuable. This might be a topic to put on the brochure for the group: reminding people that there is no open season here, and there hasn't been for years.

LWG would like to have its own newsletter to share information to the group. Lorien will set up the group's listserv, which will facilitate communication. Also, Lorien will send the link to the CBCP website to that list as a reminder of where to find plans and resources.

### **Upcoming meetings:**

Yearly schedule: February meeting, April lek searches and meeting if people are interested, a May field tour, and a Nov/Dec meeting.

Field tour planning: Alan volunteered the Bennion ranch this summer. There was a treatment there in the winter of 06-07. Because they have approval to graze this summer, it would be good if the tour were timed so that the group could view the area pre-grazing. A late May or early June tour would be good. The first week of June conflicted with activities for several people, so **the date was tentatively set for May 27<sup>th</sup>**. Other locations to visit included the Benmore pastures, Diagonal Electric, and the McIntyre lek (largest lek in the WDARM area) habitat project, which was a combo mowing and spike to mowing to clear the lek and also Spike in strips to reduce shrubs to increase brood-rearing habitat. That was an NRCS funded (by Kendall Bagley). Those treatments tried to maximize edge.

Lorien will connect with Ashley Green, Mark Farmer (who usually does the maps), and Jason to coordinate the field tour to go to Diagonal Electric, Bennion, Benmore, and McIntyre Ranch. USU Extension will provide lunch.

The group would like to postpone strategies and actions review until the fall meeting. However, if lek searching happens in the spring, we will have a meeting to review strategies and actions in association with that (probably the same day as the training session for lek searching).

### **Actions Taken**

The field tour will be scheduled on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

### **Follow-up Needed**

Boyd will:

- Contact Tom Becker to express WDARM's interest in having birds translocated to the area

Lorien will:

- Set up the group's listserv
- Send the link to the CBCP website to that list as a reminder of where to find plans and resources.
- Ask Todd Black and Dave how they have coordinated with dedicated hunters in the past
- Send an email to the full list to see who would be interested in lek searching
- Connect with Ashley Green, Mark Farmer, and Jason Robinson to coordinate the field tour on May 27<sup>th</sup>. USU Extension will provide lunch.
- Work with the chairs, Todd Black, Tom Becker, and others to coordinate lek searching and an April meeting if appropriate.

**NEXT MEETING: May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009** unless lek searching coordination happens and another meeting occurs in association with that, likely in early April.