

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

**Date: February 12, 2015**  
**Place: Tooele Co. Health Building, Tooele, UT**  
**Members Present:**  
Chris Haller (Utah Div. of Parks and Recreation), Dave Brown (Tooele City), Bekee Hotze (BLM), Matt Phillippi (NRCS), Jan Priest (BLM-FFO), Masako Wright (BLM-SLFO), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Shirl Nichols (Juab County), Glenn Greenhalgh (Juan County), Tom Becker (UDWR), Boyd White (UDWR), Matt Howard (UDWR), Jay Martini (USFWS), Richard Nielson (Utah County), Eric Ellis (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Lans Stavast (USFS), Darrell Johnson (Shambip CD), Elizabeth Mitchell (rancher), Loralie Cox (UACD), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Jim Larsen (rancher), Keeli Marvel (Dugway P.G.), Chris Bryan (BLM), Alan Clark (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

### **Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

#### *Quick updates*

Several brief updates were presented:

- NRCS has upcoming deadlines: March 20 for SGI funds, and Feb 27 for new SGI-Conservation Stewardship Program funding (new this year). [update since the meeting: the new deadline is March 20 for CSP also]
- A local high school biology teacher has asked if there are sage-grouse projects that could involve high school students. Lorien has forwarded the inquiry to several in the group already, but anyone with ideas is welcome to contact Lorien.
- Matt Phillippi is working on scheduling the next meeting, which will likely be March 24<sup>th</sup> in Ibapah. Anyone interested in participating in lek counts that day before the meeting is welcome to. Terri Pope will be coordinating.
- Eric Ellis noted that the state has a new sage-grouse website with map layers including PJ removal priority areas, lek locations with buffers, landownership, etc. Lorien will send out a link to the listserv with the new website.
- The WDARM group needs new co-chairs since Boyd is now DWR and Alan is no longer involved with the group. Given the number of agenda items today, this discussion will be postponed until next meeting.
- Lorien read aloud a paragraph written by Dave Dahlgren about early lekking. Males are on leks very early this year due to lack of snow, but Dave notes that females are still likely to postpone nesting until the photoperiod (daylight) is longer. Someone in the group inquired as to whether the lack of new plant growth and bugs once the chicks finally hatch would be a problem. The timing of nesting and lekking on top of a dry spring could impact populations.

### *Trails and Sage-Grouse Overlap – Prospector Trail System Discussion*

The main topic of the meeting was ongoing planning and signage on the Prospector Trail system, a large trail network based on county roads. The trail system is currently widely used, and crosses multiple jurisdictional boundaries, including BLM, Forest Service, state, and private land in three counties (Tooele, Juab, and Utah).

Utah Division of State Parks and Recreation is working with a number of partner organizations on a multi-phase project to improve the Prospector Trail System, which extends across a wide area from Fish Springs to Ericson pass to Vernon. Chris Haller, from State Parks, presented the context of the project using a large printed map.

According to state policy, the agency helps develop infrastructure, safety, signage, etc. They also assist with kiosks, maps, and similar materials. There is also an affiliated nonprofit group called Tread Lightly. Other agencies' involvement varies according to their policy requirements. The Forest Service, which has a travel management plan in place, has been involved in the first phase of the project, which has been to place signage on Forest Service land. Counties, SITLA, the BLM, State Parks, and Forest Service are all involved to some degree.

There is some existing signage on both B and D roads in the area. Some has been placed by volunteers. Signage is generally placed at intersections to help direct people using the roads. An average person on an ATV trail might ride 30-50 miles on the trail system.

Among the issues which will the phased signage approach hopes to address are:

- There is currently no “main entry” to the trail system.
- Most routes are inadequately marked, so many people go off-trail, maybe without even knowing that they are not on an official trail.
- People prefer loop routes, so dead end trails often become a source of unauthorized additional trails made by recreationists
- There are not clear designated parking areas, so the impact of recreation is dispersed across the landscape rather than concentrated in areas where people can receive information and direction.

Several points of clarification that were made by various individuals during the meeting:

- According to state law, all roads are close unless posted open. “Open” means there is a travel management plan, the roads are signed as open, or they are on a map.
- There are different road designations. County D roads are those which counties regularly maintain. County B roads are the subject of some controversy, relating to RS2477.
- Alan Clark explained the basic situation with the Governor’s sage-grouse plan, which was released in early 2013
- Studies that looked at “why people ride” explain that family experiences, scenic viewing, wildlife viewing, cultural background and history, are among the top reasons.

Concerns (and some responses) brought up during the meeting:

- DWR is concerned that added infrastructure, but particularly newly designated parking areas, will need to be located far enough away from important sage-grouse habitat areas that the impact that radiates out from those areas not impact leks or other key areas
- DWR is also concerned with how recreation activities may disturb some of the seasonally important sage-grouse activities, such as lekking and brood rearing. Exploring how to restrict recreation activities during crucial times would help sage-grouse. At least one county employee present at the meeting interpreted the idea of seasonal restrictions as a challenge similar to the RS2477 issue. Lorien attempted to explain seasonal sage-grouse needs but the group moved on to another topic without resolving the issue.
- In the Vernon Reservoir area, the fact that people are allowed to camp anywhere as long as it is within a certain distance (100 or 150 feet?) of a road creates a large impact on the quality of the range for ranchers, and for sage-grouse habitat. Because people have ATVs, and often kids with ATVs, there is a large impact around the camping areas created by very localized recreation.
- Once there is a trail/scar, people will follow it, even if it is unofficial or not supposed to be there
- Elizabeth emphasized that it is important not just to sign the routes that SHOULD be followed, but also those which should not. She suggested that time and money be put into signage with a message of “NOT here” as well as those which indicate “go here.”
- Many people in the room felt that the majority of recreationists will follow rules and stay on routes as appropriate, as long as they are educated about what those areas are
- It is very important to provide information BEFORE people get out to the area where they are recreating, because planning for routes, etc. may take place at home when more technology is available. Also, there is limited cell service in most of the people ride, so although apps or other technological ideas may be helpful, they are not always accessible.
- Dave noted that asking people to avoid the leks is very difficult when they don't know where the leks area, and felt that signage is the best option to address that. Several biologists expressed concern that that would put the birds in danger to have lek sites clearly signed.
- Education: People probably do not understand that their actions in the West Desert might further imperil the sage-grouse populations. If there were a way to educate people so they felt a personal responsibility to help protect sage-grouse habitat, it would be very helpful. The point was made that most people do not care about sage-grouse, even if they generally like wildlife, so education would be very key to the general public even understanding that sage-grouse live in the area. Matt pointed out that sometimes, not caring about something is just because people have never been introduced to the idea that something exists. Suggestions for ways to educate the public included going through ATV advocacy groups, 4-wheeler clubs, and mechanics to disseminate information. This could be an opportunity to address multiple wildlife topics, not just sage-grouse.

Plans moving forward, and input from other agencies:

- The BLM will be doing an inventory this summer (2015) of all the routes in the Prospector Trail system. This will help inform any future BLM decision-making. The BLM will also be doing a travel management plan for the Sheeprocks Sage-Grouse management area, which overlaps portions of the Prospector Trail system.
- Jay Martini explained that the FWS will look at recreation impacts through the lens of the COT (Conservation Objectives Team) report, which suggests the following:
  - o avoid off-road use in sage-grouse areas (suggesting that finding ways to keep people on trails is very important)
  - o avoid placing recreational infrastructure in sensitive areas (suggesting that appropriate planning for siting new parking areas and other infrastructure will be examined by FWS)
  - o recommend having travel management plans in place in areas where recreation could create problems for sage-grouse

Lorien thanked the group for participating in this initial information sharing session. The topic will be likely discussed again at future meetings now that the foundations have been laid. Elizabeth wrapped up the discussion with a strong recommendation to make sure that everyone really look at the proposed plans and provide comment and feedback whenever possible.

### *Additional Updates*

- Dave inquired about something he had heard recently about restricted activities on federal lands because of sage-grouse. No one was familiar with the details. Lorien will look into this and provide more information if it is relevant to sage-grouse in Utah.
- Governor's Executive order: Lorien highlighted the recent Governor's Executive Order for sage-grouse, which was released on Tuesday last week. It outlines how the state agencies will coordinate to implement the 2013 Governor's state sage-grouse conservation strategy. Lorien will forward the full text of the executive order out to the group listserv.
- Proposed WRI projects: Lorien briefly reviewed the rankings of proposed Central Region WRI projects that will benefit sage-grouse if funded:
  - o Highly-ranked projects include East Tintic Phase 5 (3247), West Vernon Phase 5: Lion Hill (3236), FFO Funer Valley Bullhog Phase 1 (3344), Onaqui East Bench Bullhog phase 3 (3249), Tintic Junction/Bullhog (3316).
  - o Mid-ranked projects included Bennion Ranch Lop and Scatter (3408), Southern Sheeprock Juniper removal (3382), Furner and Dog Valley Juniper Removal (3188), Eureka East Tintic Squarrose Knapweed Phase II (3303), Hell's Kitchen (3414) and Chicken Rock Lop and Scatter (3401).
  - o The Vernon non-system road closure (3433) received a low-priority ranking.
- Lorien shared information from Mike Tamlllos regarding the local red fox population. Mike has been trying to monitor the area near Little Valley to understand the scope of the problem. It has been very difficult without snow to observe tracks. However, he has seen evidence that red foxes are there, which makes it likely that they could negatively impact

ground-nesting birds in the area, specifically sage-grouse. Mike will spent time in the area this spring and work to reduce fox numbers, but a larger or more coordinated and funded effort may be necessary to make enough impact to help the sage-grouse.

- Bekee Hotze explained that BLM will be working on a travel management plan for the Sheeprocks area. The process is just beginning, and there will be more information soon. Lorien will keep the working group informed about opportunities to participate in that process.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Anyone with ideas for sage-grouse projects that could involve local high school students can contact Lorien.
- Lorien will send out a link to the listserv with the new state sage-grouse website.
- Matt Phillippi will confirm the details of the March 24<sup>th</sup> meeting in Ibapah.
- New co-chairs will need to be elected at the next meeting.
- Lorien will keep the working group informed about opportunities to participate in the upcoming BLM travel management planning process for the Sheeprocks.
- Lorien will forward the full text of the executive order out to the group listserv.
- Boyd will discuss the Sheeprocks project at a future meeting.
- Lorien will help coordinate a field tour to the recreation-impacted areas this spring, with the help of other LWG members.

### **Next Meetings**

The next meeting will be in Ibapah, most likely on March 24<sup>th</sup>. Matt Philippi is waiting for confirmation that the date will work for the tribe, as well as the Shambip Conservation District and the NRCS working group. The summer field tour will visit to areas being discussed in the trails and recreation conversations.