

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

Date: March 24, 2010

Time: 6:00 am – 11:00 am

Place: BLM Field Station, Vernon, Utah

Members Present: Mellissa Rosenhan (BLM), Jim Priest (BLM), Traci Allen (BLM SFLO), Tyler Skaggs, (BLM) Steve Gray (UDWR), Mark Farmer (UDWR), Alan Mitchell (Bennion Ranch), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Tom Becker (DWR), Kim Hersey (UDWR), Justin Racioppi (Univ. of Utah/BLM), Morgan Williams (UDWR), Linden Greenhalgh (USU), Burke Davenport (NRCS), Jan Anderson (Farm Bureau), Karen Hartman (USFS), Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator/recorder)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

About 13 people met at 6 am and traveled around the area before dawn to observe leks. Sage-grouse were lekking at Government Creek lek but none of the other leks has any activity. The group reconvened at the BLM field station in Vernon and were met by several other individuals.

At 9 am, the regular meeting started. Lorien Belton reviewed the agenda and everyone introduced themselves.

Plan and Population Updates

Jason Robinson gave an overview of the recent USFWS finding regarding greater sage-grouse. The finding was warranted but precluded, meaning it is now a candidate species, and it has been assigned a priority ranking number of 8 (on a scale of 1 to 12). The decision was rangewide, and there will now be official annual status reviews by the USFWS to revisit the decision.

Jason explained that the decision uses a five-factor analysis to look at threats. Those five factors are habitat, overutilization, predation and disease, regulatory mechanisms, and other issues. Each is considered. Habitat fragmentation was one of the key issues of concern. Another major topic in the finding relates to regulatory mechanisms. The BLM has a huge amount of sage-grouse habitat, so the adequacy of BLM regulations for protecting sage-grouse was also discussed in the 103-page document.

No USFWS employees were able to attend this meeting, so Jason also summarized several key points and frequently asked questions from a USFWS presentation given to other LWGs. First, some of the things that have changes since the 2005 “not warranted” finding are an increase in West Nile Virus (WNV) impacts to populations on the fringes of the range, an increase in cheatgrass impacts to sage-grouse habitat in Nevada, and increasing fragmentation due to energy development.

Some of questions from other meetings addressed predation and hunting. Predation, for example, was address in the finding, but not as a large, driving issue rangewide. Hunting sage-grouse is still determined by the state wildlife agencies, who continue to have management control. Sage-grouse hunts will continue in Utah in the four key areas where populations have been determined to be large enough to support a limited harvest without affected decline. This is because hunting sage-grouse provides considerable benefits while having a minimal impact.

Several questions were then asked in the meeting:

Q: Does this new classification change our strategy, either as a working group or as individual members of the group?

A: For WDARM, the strategy won't change. The plan lists positive things that can be done, and are being done, for sage-grouse, and those will continue. For the state, nothing will change either, for the time being. The sage-grouse management plan is in place and will direct efforts toward sage-grouse conservation as before. For BLM, the finding may increase the likelihood of having to do a fish and wildlife evaluation, and a consultation letter may be added for BLM NEPAs. Technically, however, the BLM, state, and others do not have to consult with USFWS on projects related to sage-grouse. For most entities, it will be business as usual.

BLM employees at the meeting noted that on March 5th, a new BLM memorandum was circulated regarding best management practices for sage-grouse mitigation in oil and gas development areas. The BLM has also contracted with Kevin Douherty to determine what priority critical areas should be designated. This may become an extension of a rangewide connectively model that BLM began several years ago. BLM also has a statewide biologists group that is working on and IM for sage-grouse statewide. All this is to say that for BLM, it will be an improvement over business as usual.

Forest service employees explained that they did not anticipate changes in management strategy based on the finding. In this area, Forest Service land covers more sage-grouse habitat than in many other areas, so USFS actions are important to grouse.

Q: What is being done for raven control?

A: Predator control will continue in areas where predation has been identified as a concern for sage-grouse populations.

Q: Has raven control ever been justified?

A: raven control has been proven to improve nesting success, yes. We are doing raven control, although budgets for it are extremely limited. Wildlife Services is the only entity currently allowed to place the poisoned eggs on the landscape, but others may be able to help with pre-baiting (placing non-poisoned eggs out to condition the birds to eating them). Wildlife services and the division will be partnering to get data on effectiveness of control efforts, including raven transects.

Q: Is the Utah population status up or down?

A: The answer is complicated. There was a peak in 2006, and it has been declining since then. However, the long-term trend is not so alarming. Counts depend significantly on weather conditions, and sage-grouse populations also respond dramatically to timing of spring precipitation, particularly here in the West Desert. Generally, however, sage-grouse populations respond to major disturbances slowly, over years, due to their long lifespans and somewhat smaller broods.

Q: Will core area designations be implicit value judgments about more or less valuable populations?

A: That is a possibility, but until they are designated it is not clear how that would be used.

Updates

Lorien noted that NRCS is planning to spend \$16 million (about \$1 million in Utah) on sage-grouse conservation. NRCS staff explained that signups will be open until April 23rd. Landowners within historic sage-grouse range will get higher points. Two categories for ranking will include location and relevant threats.

There will be a state-wide NRCS sage-grouse training in May that will take place in the West Desert. It will be part webinar (as part of a larger, West-wide training for NRCS) and part field trip. Jason will be helping and others from the LWG may be recruited to help with the field trip.

It was suggested that WDARM might need to be more strategic in recommending projects, so that smaller sage-grouse populations in the area can stay linked. This might be a good place to target EQIP and WHIP finds from NRCS that are related to sage-grouse.

BLM noted that many applications have come in for powerlines. They requested that anyone with information on the impact of different kinds of powerline structures (such as monopoles versus lattice structures) on sage-grouse to please send it to them. Lorien will send Traci Allen contact information for Phoebe Prather, who may have some resources.

The group discussed fence line concerns. Work on Deseret has indicated that the visibility of the fences may be most important for sage-grouse, so overgrown fences might be more of a problem. Traci Allen will send Burke Davenport information and names of vendors for fence deflectors. The BLM has purchased reflectors for fences in the BARM area, but not in the WDARM area.

Jason updated the group on the recent radio collaring efforts in the area. Five of the 9 collared are still alive. Additional attempts to collar at least five more birds will be made this spring, and the birds will be monitored by DWR. This will give us a better idea of basic habitat use locations by the birds in the East Tintic area.

A flight was done on the first of March by the DWR to find new leks. One possible new lek needs to be confirmed. Traci noted that the Magnum project and pipeline will result in the company flying 20 miles of sage-grouse habitat this April. Someone asked why we don't buy

GPS collars for the birds rather than doing on-the-ground radio tracking. Radio collars cost about \$180 each, whereas the GPS collars are still prohibitively expensive at several thousand dollars each. If the price comes down, it would be considered.

Jim Priest notes that there are three off-road races planned for the spring. The first will be on March 27th, one will be on April 15, and he did not have a date available for the third. They will be in the Sheeprocks/Tintic area. The off-road groups have been fairly cooperative about staying out of polygons designated as nesting or winter habitat. The groups have also offered to help with sage-grouse projects since they are concerned that the bird might limit recreation activities in the area. The BLM is currently working on a Resource Area Management Plan, although progress may be slowed due to Matt Fillipi taking a new job in Ely. BLM Fillmore may be starting a new Resource Management Plan in the next few years, as the old plan is close to 30 years old.

Lorien reminded the group about the content of the LWG's conservation plan. The Strategies and Actions update needs to be completed this spring again, reporting on projects from last year, and will feed into reports that the UDWR submits to USFWS as part of the annual status review now mandated because sage-grouse is a candidate species. Lorien will send this over email for everyone to respond to. Jason requested that people try to mention if a project is BLM specific, UPCD, etc. as it helps him find additional information on projects, such as acreage, to report.

The summer field tour will be scheduled soon. Jason will follow up with Karen Fullen to see if it makes sense to conduct the tour alongside the NRCS training. [Post-meeting update: the NRCS tour will already be too large to accommodate additional people, and it would be difficult to coordinate, so this will not happen.] It was noted that the SageSTEP project's meeting and field days will also be that same week in Tooele.

Lorien showed the group a handout designed for the WDARM area. Anyone who would like additional copies may request them from Lorien. She will also send out the pdf to the group with the minutes.

Actions Taken

No formal actions were taken.

Follow-up Needed

Lorien will send the info handout pdf to the full group, as well as the request for strategies and actions updates.

Traci Allen will send information to Burke on fence deflectors.

Lorien will send Traci resources for tall structures.

Next Meeting

The summer field tour will be scheduled for early summer, possibly at the end of May.