

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

Date: March 24, 2015

Place: Goshute Tribal Headquarters, Iapah, UT

Members Present:

Matt Phillippi (NRCS), Tom Becker (UDWR), Boyd White (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Darrell Johnson (Shambip CD), Loralie Cox (UACD), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Jim Larsen (rancher), Charley Warr (Grantsville CD), Paula Lee (Shambip CD), Aaron Dalling (NRCS), Tony Beals (NRCS), Don Ashby Jr. (NRCS), Danny McBride (NRCS), Darrell Cook (UDAF), Rick Riding (UDAF), Jerry Caldwell (Tooele County), Tommy Pete (Goshute Natural Resource Committee), Genevieve Fred (Wetland/Cultural Advisor), Clell Pete (Goshute Environmental Dept.), David Hansen (NRCS), Curtis Bishop, Irvin Knight (community member), Robert Hamilton (Rocky Mountain Power), Scott Edmisten (Rocky Mountain Power), Wade Bitner (Tooele County Commissioner), Elvira Murphy (Goshute Business Council), Jacob Steely (Goshute Business Council, Goshute RCC), Richard Henriod (Goshute Business Council, Goshute NRC), Douglas Pete (Goshute Housing Authority), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Lek count report and population information

Tom and Terri shared the morning's lek counts. The early-morning crew visited two of the four leks in the area. 27 birds were present on the main lek near the road, and 7 more were found on one of the leks farther north. The group also drove through an areas where birds have been seen strutting, but did not see any this year. Only the first lek was visited starting before dawn.

Various people in the meeting asked Tom and Terri questions about sage-grouse. The information provided at the meeting follows:

- This is just the first of several visits to these leks. The highest number recorded at each lek for the year becomes the official count. Anyone interested in participating in additional lek trips this year should contact Terri Pope.
- Although most of the birds counted at leks are male, there is a calculation for how many birds are represented in the population as a whole, based on that number.
- Quality of habitat on the leks currently appears to be fine, although some birds were observed lekking in sagebrush that came up to their shoulders, so it is possible that some habitat work to improve visibility at the leks might be beneficial to the birds. Tom noted that the sagebrush in the area grows very slowly, so lek conditions do not change quickly. Also, any sagebrush treatments, like mowing, would need to be very carefully considered to make sure they are not detrimental to sage-grouse habitat or behavior.
- In response to a question about sage-grouse responding to fire in Box Elder County, Tom noted that it is important to distinguish between immediate bird behavior (such as

tolerating activity in an area) versus whether that area is a good place to survive and raise chicks long term. Sage-grouse might stay in an area, but not necessarily be strutting or reproducing.

- Juniper encroachment can be a major problem in sage-grouse habitat, as grouse have been shown to abandon leks in areas with encroaching conifers.
- Relocations of grouse have been shown to work when birds trapped in other areas are released where current small populations are lekking still. Moving birds to an area where no grouse exist already has not been effective. It appears that newly transplanted grouse need existing populations to show them how to use the landscape, or they do not stay or survive.
- Coyotes can be a predator for sage-grouse. They are controlled by the Wildlife Services agency of USDA, but usually only in livestock areas where coyotes are also causing problems for livestock.

Governor's Plan and Executive Order

Lorien briefly overviewed the Governor's plan for sage-grouse, which was put into place two years ago. Goals in the plan include maintaining populations in each designated Sage-Grouse Management Area (SGMA) and conducting habitat work to improve and increase sage-grouse habitat in the state. Just a few months ago, the Governor issued an Executive Order that provides additional direction to state agencies (such as Ag and Food, Oil Gas and Mining, State Parks, and others) about how to help implement that plan. It basically says that projects in sage-grouse habitat need to involve consultation with the Division of Wildlife Resources, and that DWR needs to track those consultations. Lorien will send the executive order out to the group with the finalized minutes. All Utah documents relevant to sage-grouse, as well as interactive online maps that show lek locations, habitat, landownership, and more can be found at www.wildlife.utah.gov/sagegrouse.

NRCS and SGI Updates

Matt Phillippi explained that there have been 4 signups for Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) project fund consideration in Tooele County. One is in the Ibapah area, and will include improved water distribution in a grazed area of sage-grouse habitat. Matt is the primary contact for that project, and will be in the area frequently this spring, so if anyone wants to meet with him, they should. Matt also explained what kinds of projects, such as pinyon juniper removal, grazing improvement, could be funded by SGI. The deadline for ranking all the submitted projects, to see which projects will receive funding, is May 29th.

Matt explained that when NRCS is working on a grazing project funded by SGI, the first step is a basic inventory of what's currently in the area (soils, plants, etc.). Then a plan gets developed for how to improve the range for both livestock and sage-grouse. Common techniques include changing the grazing plan, and using pastures differently to provide rest or differently timed use of the same pastures. Deferring grazing around sage-grouse areas, especially after reseeding, is

often a component of grazing plans also. For individuals who sign up and have a plan with NRCS under the Sage-Grouse Initiative, NRCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service have a Memorandum of Understanding that provides private landowners with assurance in case the species is ever listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The landowners will be able to continue implementing plans approved by NRCS without fear of repercussions from a listing. This is referred to as “ESA predictability.”

Tom and Matt explained that 15-20% sagebrush cover is good for sage-grouse for much of the year. During winter, they use thick stands of sagebrush that can serve as both cover and food above the snow. In the spring, young chicks need places to hide and eat bugs that are associated with plants and flowers. A key is to have a good diversity of different age classes of sagebrush, some old, some young, and some intermediate ages. Small wet areas, like wet meadows, are really useful for the young birds in the first few weeks before they can fly.

A question was asked about how sensitive birds are to habitat treatments. It depends on how they are using the area. They might move just temporarily, but if a treatment disturbed an active strutting ground, the birds might be more inclined to abandon the area.

Don Ashby noted that Natasha Gruber is the SGI biologist for this area, although she is currently on maternity leave. There is an open position for a similar SGI biologist based in Tremonton. Don also explained that NRCS is working between different western states to coordinate more. He reported that there will likely be a lot of money available to address sage-grouse in the coming year.

Nevada updates

Lorien provided a brief update of issues faced by some of the sage-grouse local working groups across the state line in Nevada. The sage-grouse populations in this (Ibapah) area are likely much more connected to Nevada than to other grouse populations in Utah. The White Pine Group is working on updating (rewriting) its local plan. They meet tomorrow (March 25) in Ely. Contact Lorien if you are interested in talking more with this group. Other groups across the border include Lincoln County, which is currently working on an addendum to its current plan, and a group called SANE (the Stewardship Alliance of NE Nevada), which has also just completed a plan.

Recreation and Sage-Grouse Overlap

At the last WDARM meeting in Tooele, the discussion focused around recreation impact to sage-grouse habitat. The tribe explained that although they have some recreation impact concerns in the area, it is not anywhere near as much of a problem. They are just far away from Salt Lake and do not see the crowds that the Sheeprocks area gets. Tom Becker explained some of the problem and asked Wade, as a new County Commissioner, to do what he could to address the problem. Individuals representing both the Shambip and Grantsville Conservation Districts

indicated that recreation impacts were a concern on lands they own in Tooele County.

Summer Field Tour

Following the discussion about CD lands with recreation impacts, the group decided to have the next field tour visit their properties. Lorien and Loralie will work together to coordinate the tour, which could visit both the Benmore (Shambip) and Grantsville CD properties.

Co-Chair updates

Lorien asked for nominations for co-chair to replace Boyd White and Alan Mitchell. Darrell Johnson, Matt Phillippi, and Loralie Cox were nominated. Matt was informed he could not be a co-chair due to his NRCS position. Darrell declined. Loralie agreed to serve as co-chair for at least one year, at which point the group will revisit the leadership and see if others might be interested. Thank you to Loralie for stepping up!

Sage-Grouse Information Available online

There was not time to watch during the meeting, but Lorien informed the group that recordings from the international Sage-Grouse Forum in November are available online and might help answer some of their questions. Specific sessions of particular interest include one about SGI programs, and another with information on predation and habitat by Peter Coates.

Actions Taken

- Loralie agreed to be the new co-chair of the WDARM group.

Follow-up Needed

- Anyone interested in joining a lek-counting trip this spring should contact Terri Pope.
- Lorien will send the governor's executive order out to the group with the finalized minutes from this meeting.
- Loralie and Lorien will coordinate a field tour to the CD properties in Tooele County to look at recreation impacts and other habitat projects.

Next Meetings

The next meeting will be a field tour, likely to see both habitat improvement projects and recreation impacts on Conservation District lands.