

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

Date: March 26, 2019
Place: Tooele County Health Building
Individuals Present: Jason Robinson (UDWR), Karen Hartman (USFS), Paul Gauchay (USFS), Jim Priest (BLM), Brad Jessop (BLM), Guy Wilson (USFS), Tom Becker (retired UDWR), Hugh Hurlow (UGS), Boyd White (UDWR/NRCS), Shane Hill (NRCS), Terri Pope (UDWR), Matt Philippi (NRCS), Reneé Chi (BLM), Jared Reese (BLM), Elizabeth Mitchell (Landowner), Robby Edgel (UDWR), Melissa Chelak (USU), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, by phone)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Intros and updates

The group hasn't met since last year, due largely to the government shutdown this winter. The landowner dinner in January was very successful and well attended. Elizabeth noted that it was well received by the landowners, who appreciated the acknowledgement of their important role on the landscape in the West Desert.

During intros, several personnel updates were shared:

- Matt Phillippi now has a new position in the state NRCS office
- Dax Mangus is temporarily filling in for Jason Robinson's position; Avery Cook is still in the same position.
- The Spanish Fork Ranger District range conservationist position will be open soon
- George Garcia's at USFS role is currently being filled by Paul Gauchay, on detail
- Karen Hartman will be on detail in California for 120 days this year

Research Updates

Melissa provided research updates, including winter locations for 7 marked birds. Last year, they found a new lek with 9-16 males, north of Benmore, which is being called the Frederickson lek for the time being. One bird was trapped on that lek, and spent time in nearby ag fields.

Field season this year began March 11, with 4 technicians in the field. At the current time, McIntyre lek is not accessible due to snow, but other leks are, so trapping can begin. This will be the 4th year of translocations. This year, birds are only being brought from Parker. Also, no artificial insemination this year, as it did not appear to have increased the rate at which the birds settled down, as it was hoped it might. They are trying to trap 10-12 resident birds as well as the translocated birds. There are 15 GPS collars that will be split between resident and translocated birds; others will receive VHS collars. Melissa noted that anyone interested in trapping should contact her, as help is appreciated.

State of Utah plan update

Jason Robinson provided highlights of the new state plan, which took effect January 1 of this year.

- It is a plan for the whole state, developed by PLPCO, not just DWR, so it looks different than many other species plans, and involves more agencies: there is lots of focus on partnerships and stakeholders
- Core concepts are the same from the previous plan: same SGMA boundaries, focus on habitat projects, and population goals
- Highlight changes include:
 - Opportunity areas are no longer mapped, but remain a concept for project planning. Determination of that designation relies still on local ground-truthing.
 - Seasonal habitat maps are now based on VHF data, modeled, and are colored pixels, not polygons. Previously, different agencies each used slightly different maps; now all agencies will be using the same one. It is available online.
 - Now using a 20-year trend instead of a 10-year rolling average, to monitoring population trends. This will be used at both statewide and SGMA levels. This will allow us to capture two population cycles. It is intended to do a better job of helping with adaptive management: seeing trends, figuring out why any declines might be happening, and addressing it, then monitoring.
 - Mesic areas have been added
 - The disturbance cap is not finished, but will be done in coordination with the federal agencies

Jason noted that many people are watching the Sheeprocks to see how the sage-grouse do. Lorien will send the new state plan out to the listservs.

BLM plan updates

Jared Reese provided a quick recap of the BLM changes, the Record of Decision for which was just signed on March 14. This is the final step that started with Secretary Zinke's secretarial order early in the new administration. Writing the BLM plan revisions was an excellent collaborative effort with the state. Lorien will send the final plan information to the listserv, and Jared will come present again in the fall with more detail and the new maps. Key components of the new amendments include:

- Waiver/exceptions/modifications are now more flexible
- The GHMA designation was removed (this was only supporting 5% of Utah's birds). Now it is just called "sage-grouse habitat outside PHMA."
- Changes to kel buffers and avoidance requirements: it is now as "assess and address" buffer, not only avoidance.
- Density and disturbance: as noted by Jason, habitat disturbance measures will be developed jointly with the state. This will include resolving whether the cap is at 3 or 5%, and what is included in that cap.

- Project impact now looks at “area of influence” rather than just lek boundaries.
- As Jason noted, the “one-map-to-rule-them-all” will be very helpful. The final map should be out from USU this summer.

Project Updates

Robbie Edgel will be doing more BDA projects, and is working through the complexities of the temporary water rights (a one-year right is now required). He is working with Eric Anderson to figure out how much water to claim for that time. The group discussed strategy and partnerships for moving forward on future projects, how to figure out the water issues, etc. Robbie will follow up with a number of individuals.

Brad Jessop discussed the Grasshopper Bullhog and Railroad Springs PJ projects. Railroad Springs will be a very large project. A lot of the land there is slated to become state land; that was just signed into law but we don’t know exactly when it takes effect. BLM is having a meeting the second week of April to decide how to move forward with projects. Cultural clearances are already done for many areas; NEPA is still needed. Some more discussion about how to move forward is still needed given the landownership change. Likely, BLM will only put BLM money onto lands that are going to stay BLM, and transfer money to WRI for projects on land that will become state land. (This was part of an Emery County state land exchange, which involved swaps in the Tintics, Emery, Rich County, etc.)

Other projects discussed included Cow Hollow and Cherry Creek. At Cherry Creek, lots of ATVers camp there, so put off for a while as the recreationists like the trees. Those projects may be years out. USFS also discussed project stipulations and some long term plans for 3000-4000 acre projects planned out to 2024.

UGS Water Study Update

Hugh provided a brief update, and noted that it will be very interesting to see how the high snowfall impacts the areas being monitored. The discussion included questions about whether monitoring weirs require stream alternation permits. One of the weirs is actually in a trough.

Other updates and discussions

- The recreation research by Ben will be continued for another season by Melissa, although Ben is finishing up his masters and moving on. Last year they stopped on Labor Day, but it would be nice to go later in the yea to learn about hunting season users. Melissa explained the path they took, and noted that they would like to get more info on the Pony Express this year. BLM also still has traffic counters out that is helpful data.
- Suggestions for increased landowner attendance at these meetings included:
 - Paying landowner mileage

- Listening to landowner concerns
- Holding meetings at the BLM service station or the USU bunkhouse, so they are closer for landowners than Tooele.
- Suggestions for getting info out to Vernon landowners about the meetings:
 - A Facebook page called the Vernon Yard Sale (run by Roseanne McCall)
 - The Vernon Relief Society Facebook page.
 - Mailing letters is also an effective way to inform.
- Ways to include local youth in sage-grouse conservation conversations or activities would also be appreciated; that has not happened much yet.
- Field tour ideas:
 - visit Fredrickson lek
 - visit Government
 - visit/help in BDA (Robbie will be planting vegetation in May)
 - visit a nest site for hatched GRSN nests

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will send the state plan out to the listservs.
- Lorien will send the final BLM plan info to the listservs.
- Jared will present more BLM map and plan detail in the fall.
- Plan a field tour for mid-April in 2020 so the group can do a field tour then.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will probably be the field tour unless there are policy changes that require updates before that. The group would like to visit an active lek and do a lek count, but it is too late for this year. Plan this for spring 2020.