

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

**Date: April 16, 2013**

**Place: Goshute Tribal Headquarters, Ibapah, UT**

**Members Present:** Jerry Hurst (Tooele County Commission), Bart Parker (Ibapah rancher), Scott Pehrson (Shambip Conservation District), Paula Lee (Shambip CD), Desiree VanDyke (UACD), Mary Pete-Freeman (Goshute Tribe –NRC), David W. Smith (BIA western regional office), Milton Hooper (Goshute Tribe – NRC), Masako Wright (BLM), Patti Barney (NRCS), Tammy Koldyke (NRCS/SGI), Matt Phillippi (NRCS), Benjamin Hudson (NRCS – Tooele), Nathan Long (NRCS – Ogden), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Boyd White (co-chair, landowner), Darrell Johnson (Shambip CD), Chad Hunt (Shambip CD), Clell Pete (Goshute Tribe), Lavar Tom (Goshute Tribal Council), Jeff Roche (rancher), Genevieve Fields (Goshute Tribe – enrollment), Tarina Bishop (Goshute Tribe), Corey Murphy (Goshute Tribe – NRC), Ashley Hansen (UGIP), Tom Becker (DWR), Kim Hersey (DWR), Traci Allen (BLM), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

The meeting was held at Goshute Tribal Headquarters in Ibapah, Utah. Earlier in the morning, approximately nine people visited the leks in the area to conduct counts. At the meeting (10 am-12 pm) the tribe very kindly provided breakfast and lunch for the large number of attendees.

After introductions, Lorien Belton explained how the West Desert sage-grouse local working group (WDARM) functions. Meetings are held approximately four times each year or more often if needed. The group does not have any decision-making power, but it is a great forum for sharing information, solving problems together, and pooling resources and proposing projects. Anyone interested in being on the mailing list for the group can contact Lorien and be added to the email list. It includes meeting announcements, information updates on sage-grouse issues, and, when relevant, documents to comment on.

*Information Sources Shared*

- The West Desert sage-grouse conservation plan, finished by WDARM in 2007, was passed around. Key elements include the threats chart and the strategies and actions. Extra copies were passed around to the group with a copy of the full plan.
- A new pocket guide to sagebrush is now available. Several copies were passed around at the meeting. If anyone is interested, Lorien can provide contact information for obtaining them.
- A reference guide of *Conservation Programs for Private Lands in Utah* was passed around at the meeting. Lorien will provide the group with information on how to obtain electronic copies.

## *Planning Updates*

Lorien provided a brief update on the State of Utah sage-grouse planning process, as well as the current status of the BLM planning process to amend the Resource Management Plans.

The State of Utah is writing a plan for sage-grouse management. It includes the Goshute Tribe's land, at the tribe's request. Hopefully, that plan will be publicly available very soon. It includes maps of core areas where sage-grouse conservation will be a focus. Ibapah is one of those areas. Lorien will provide the maps to everyone once final versions are available.

The draft state plan contains several specific goals, including minimum numbers of sage-grouse to maintain, and targets for increasing the population across Utah. The plan will also focus on making sure that populations in each of the 12 mapped areas around the state are maintained – sage-grouse should not be allowed to disappear in any of the 12 areas. In addition, there are specific goals for habitat improvement and conservation, via projects, easements, and other opportunities. Pinyon-juniper removal will be a big part of the goals and a key way to expand and improve sage-grouse habitat. Once the final plan is available, we will have a meeting (probably one in Ibapah and one in Tooele) to discuss the specifics.

Simultaneously, BLM is working toward amending Resource Management Plans so that they contain sage-grouse protections. Currently, an Environmental Impact Statement is being prepared. The anticipated time for public comments will be around July of this year. The WDARM group will coordinate comments from many individuals at a meeting during the comment period.

## *Pilot projects in Box Elder and Elko Counties*

Jerry Hurst provided an overview of two pilot projects for sage-grouse that are being promoted by counties. Box Elder County has recently kicked off a pilot project for sage-grouse that will include predator management, pinyon juniper removal, and greenstripping, among other things, in Box Elder County, Utah. Their goals are to improve sage-grouse habitat, increase sage-grouse populations, and protect against catastrophic fires in sage-grouse habitat. A similar project is going to take place on a large private ranch in Elko County, Nevada. The County Commissioners in both counties are supportive of sage-grouse conservation measures like this. Jerry noted that he appreciated that both areas are focusing on predator management.

## *Coordination Efforts*

Several people noted a clear need for cross-border cooperation between the tribe, Utah, and Nevada. This would include the White Pine local working group communicating with the WDARM group, BLM field offices in Utah and Nevada coordinating with one another, and everyone coordinating with the tribe. The group was supportive of additional efforts to coordinate. Lorien will contact the White Pine group and others to find out about any existing coordination and offer additional support for this through the working group. Traci Allen of

BLM will communicate with the BLM office in Nevada. Ed Naranjo and Mary Pete-Freeman provided contact information for several key people to contact in Nevada.

Traci Allen explained that there is a project currently proposed to study cross-border sage-grouse movements in Box Elder County, Utah, and adjoining Nevada and Idaho land. If a similar study is needed to understand the Ibapah population, there may be funding opportunities. Several individuals suggested that it would be valuable to know more about seasonal habitat movements in the area. The group was also unsure of whether leks in the local area, but technically in Nevada, are being monitored by Nevada biologists. Lorien will look into this question when contacting the White Pine working group.

### *NRCS Program Opportunities*

Tammy Koldyke and Matt Phillippi explained some of the sage-grouse project funding opportunities through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) has funding for a wide variety of projects that can help sage-grouse. There is a primary focus on reducing pinyon-juniper encroachment into sagebrush. This can help improve sage-grouse habitat and also expand the areas for grouse to use. Other projects that will help sage-grouse include improving grazing management, and improving wet areas so that sage-grouse chicks have access to new green plants and insects, especially in the first few months of their lives.

NRCS is also spearheading an effort to put fence-markers on all high-risk fences in the areas used by sage-grouse on private land. Fence markers reduce the risk that sage-grouse will be injured or killed by flying into wire fences, by making the fence more visible. The group saw several pictures from a Wyoming site where sage-grouse had been killed by colliding with a barbed wire fence. Anyone interested in fence markers or other NRCS projects for sage-grouse can contact Tammy Koldyke. She is based in the Ogden NRCS office.

### *Grazing management and sage-grouse*

Ed Naranjo inquired about the impact of grazing on sage-grouse. Lorien explained that grazing can be either good or bad for sage-grouse, depending on how it is done. Overgrazing, which leaves no food or cover for sage-grouse, can be bad for grouse, but well-managed grazing is very compatible with sage-grouse. Dave Smith explained that the tribe has historically allowed grazing by 600 cow/calf pairs, but has recently reduced that to 140 pairs. Matt Phillippi reiterated that NRCS is able to assist with grazing management plans that can benefit sage-grouse. Matt noted that NRCS is being very careful not to disturb sagebrush in sage-grouse wintering areas, because sage-grouse need tall sagebrush in the winter for cover. Also, sagebrush is the only thing sage-grouse eat in the winter. Anyone who is interested in getting technical assistance with this can contact Matt or Tammy.

## *Population Information*

Kim Hersey and Tom Becker provided an overview of the morning's lek counting trips. Six birds (at least four males) were seen at one of the three leks. At the other lek, one male was seen. The weather was cold and somewhat windy/snowy, so the birds may not have been very active and were difficult to locate. Kim explained that the populations in the area are currently low. The drought may have had an impact. The leks we saw birds on this morning had similar numbers of birds last year as we saw this year, but in the past they have had high counts of 16 or more birds. The numbers peaked most recently in 2005.

It is always helpful to identify new leks. One way to do this is to fly low in a helicopter over areas to see if strutting birds can be seen. This year, we missed the window this year for flying to look for sage-grouse, because of military flight airspace regulations. DWR employees will try again next year. Tom explained that one indication of a lek is that the males leave black, tar-like droppings in the areas. That is something to watch for if there are sage-grouse in an area but we are not sure if it is a lek or not.

Milton explained that the tribe is looking for money to help with sage-grouse and habitat monitoring. Round River Conservation is assisting the tribe with the proposal. Lorien will forward any information on possible funding sources for sage-grouse research to Milton.

## *Questions regarding sage-grouse*

- Lekking: Several people asked about leks and lekking behavior. The birds dance/strut on the same area, called a lek, each spring from about March to May. This is where the mating occurs. The group watched a short video of a strutting male sage-grouse.
- Sage-grouse research: Someone asked if there were any sage-grouse currently with radio collars in the area. Tom Becker explained that no current research was being done, and that birds involved with past studies, such as Jason Robinson's work a number of years ago, are no longer monitored. [Radio collars only last a few years before the batteries die, and any collared birds have likely died since the study finished.]
- Predation: A local rancher asked about the impact of predation on sage-grouse. Ravens and red foxes are a particular problem for sage-grouse. Coyotes and eagles, while they may occasionally kill an adult, are less of a problem for the populations as a whole since raven and red foxes are nest predators and reduce the number of offspring that a hen produces, by eating eggs or chicks. One way to address the raven problem is by putting out poisoned eggs.

## *Tribal involvement in sage-grouse conservation*

Several ideas for tribal involvement in sage-grouse conservation efforts were discussed:

- Local lek monitoring could be done by tribal members or local ranchers. Each lek needs to be visited at least three times each spring, and local individuals could assist with counts. Kim Hersey is the contact within DWR who does many lek counts and

coordinates the data collection.

- Several members of the Tribes' NRC were in attendance. The tribe might be interested in developing an overall wildlife plan. The tribe had a comprehensive vegetation inventory done in 2006-2007, and all management plans use that information as a baseline.
- Currently, sage-grouse are not specifically named in the tribes' hunting proclamation, but one idea was to specifically remove them so they would not be hunted on tribal ground. It was felt that this is probably not a big impact to grouse currently, but it would be an opportunity to be specific in the hunting proclamation. Currently, the only sage-grouse populations in Utah that are hunted are in areas where the local population trends will not be affected by minimal hunting. In the West Desert outside tribal, no sage-grouse hunting is permitted.
- There is currently a range-wide genetic study being done on sage-grouse, using feathers collected at the leks. If anyone finds sage-grouse feathers, make sure to note the location and then feathers can be sent for analysis. Contact Tom Becker or Kim Hersey for more information. They search for feathers after lek counts. The goal is to find 20 feathers per lek but it can be difficult. When there are more males on a lek and they are fighting, there tend to be more feathers. Feathers from dead grouse can also be analyzed.
- There seem to be many opportunities to work together on sage-grouse issues. Additional ideas can be brought to future meetings. Anyone with ideas or information needs can contact Lorien.

### **Actions Taken**

No formal actions were taken.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will keep the group updated with information about the state sage-grouse planning efforts, and notify everyone about any comment periods for that or the BLM/USFS EIS. Upcoming meetings will likely focus on the new State plan and the BLM draft EIS, once they are available. Lorien will coordinate comments on the BLM draft EIS during the comment period.
- Lorien will provide information on how to access each of the resources discussed at the meeting.
- Lorien will contact the White Pine group and others to find out about any existing coordination and offer additional support for this through the working group.
- Lorien will look into whether local Nevada leks are being monitored.
- Traci Allen of BLM will communicate with the BLM office in Nevada.
- Anyone interested in fence markers or other NRCS projects for sage-grouse can contact Tammy Koldyke. She is based in the Ogden NRCS office.
- Lorien will forward any information on possible funding sources to Milton.
- The tribe will consider discussing sage-grouse restrictions in the hunting proclamation.
- Anyone who finds a sage-grouse feather can contact Kim Hersey or Tom Becker.

- Anyone interested in helping with lek counts should contact Kim Hersey to get information on how to record data and where to send it.
- Anyone who is interested in getting technical assistance with grazing management in sage-grouse habitat can contact Matt or Tammy.

### **Next Meetings**

The next meeting will be held once we have additional information about the state plan. At this time, meetings in both Tooele and Ibapah may be appropriate.