

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

Date: April 25, 2016
Place: Tooele County Building
Members Present: Jessica Delph (NRCS/GIP), Rachel Brown (Rocky Mountain Power), Jessica Henrie (Tooele Transcript Bulletin), Masako Wright (BLM), Jim Priest (BLM), Erik Valdez (BLM), Ray Kelsey (BLM), Boyd White (NRCS/UDWR), Chris Bryan (BLM), Alison Whittaker (UDWR), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Brad Jessop (BLM-WDD), Jason Robinson (UDWR), John Giles Jr. (Giles Construction), John Giles Sr. (Giles Construction), Melissa Chelak (USU), Chris Perkins (USDA-WS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Media note

On April 21, WRI held a media event (this is an annual event somewhere in Utah, and was held in the Sheeprocks this year) to highlight projects and also announce new funding. Utopia, KSL, and others were present. At least one article was written already. Another longer feature is also expected from one of the media outlets.

RCPD funding

The Regional Conservation Partners Program has recently awarded around three quarters of a million dollars for vegetation treatment projects in the area plus some additional funding for program administration costs. This is an NRCS program, but the state of Utah was the awardee and will manage the funds. The project area is the Sheeprocks SGMA, and some additional area to the east. Projects must be completed within the next five years. Projects will be run through WRI but the landowners will need to apply through NRCS. Projects can be done on private and/or federal land. For federal projects, there must be a permittee who applies. The project is aiming to reduce 10,000 acres of Phase I and Phase II PJ and 5000 acres of Phase III PJ, fire breaks, and 2000 acres of weed and cheatgrass management. Allison Whittaker is the primary point of contact for anyone with questions. Once the regular WRI funding decisions are finished for this year (normally in mid-May), then applications for the RCPD funds will be taken. This funding will allow a much larger portion of the ambitious PJ treatment projects planned for the Sheeprocks to be done over the next five years than could be done with WRI funds alone.

Additional project updates

Brad Jessop reported that 6000 acres of retreatment on BLM is planned to occur this year. NRCS projects (which are also currently being ranked) may add additional acres in the same area. May 17th is the final WRI funding meeting, so projects should be starting shortly thereafter.

Research and translocation update

Melissa provided updates on the translocation and research plans. Forty birds were translocated to the area from Park Valley and Parker Mountain, and released on three different leks: Gov't Creek, Benmore, and McIntyre. There is also a goal to capture and collar ten resident birds. Six have been captured so far and the researchers will continue to try, but as at least one of the leks seems to have no more lekking this year, that goal may not be met. The peak lekking time in the area is usually around April 10. Counts are low but resident birds were counted on all three leks mentioned above (translocated birds are only released in areas where local birds are actively lekking).

For context, it was clarified that the Gov't Creek lek is on BLM ground west of Lookout Pass, benmore is on Forest Service, south of Vernon, and McIntyre is on private land near the Juab/Tooele county border.

Research questions for the project include: Is translocation a good plan here? Are birds using past treatment areas? Where do the birds go seasonally? Jason also noted that an important question will be whether the translocated birds increase the local lambda value to greater than one, which will help determine the viability of translocations as a strategy in this area.

BLM and USFS suggested that the researchers come to internal meetings to present the data on sage-grouse movements so the information can be used to refine management and project goals.

Recreation update

One kiosk was installed just before Easter weekend, since the last WDARM meeting. Jointly funded by Tooele County and State Parks, it has three panels with maps, safety info, and a short section on sage-grouse with pictures and some basic information. Jessica Henrie noted that she was asked to edit the sage-grouse text, which was based on other kiosks in Utah put up by other LWGs. No one from Tooele County was at this meeting to provide additional detail. There was some confusion since at the last meeting, there had been discussion of getting LWG feedback on the kiosk design before putting it up. Since additional kiosks are planned, changes to the messaging or information should still be possible if changes appear to be needed. DWR is working on a consistent message for sage-grouse/recreation statewide.

Suggestions for future sage-grouse messaging and information included:

- Small map showing generally where the sage-grouse areas are (like the SGMA)
- QR code on the kiosk for additional information, such as videos of grouse strutting
- Additional pictures, possibly of a sage-grouse brood

The group discussed some of the organized recreational activities that occur or have occurred in the West Desert. These include a wilderness therapy group which operates on the Pony Express

trail near Government Creek on BLM land. Ray Kelsey explained that that group uses PJ for thermal cover. Also, the LDS church used to run handcart treks near Gov't Creek; those have been relocated to Skull Valley and Ensign Ranch. There is an ultramarathon in October on the Pony Express Route. Public information and education will be key to minimizing impacts from that activity. Ray noted that Pony Express Route has a very high visitor volume: 75,000 visits annually. There are also challenges with people interacting with wild horses in that area. In addition, there are three different 100-miles motorcycle races on the Filmore Field Office side near the Tintics.

BLM is working toward the development of a travel management plan for the Sheeprocks area, as mentioned in previous meetings. A route Inventory has been completed, but the follow-up steps, including public scoping meetings and the many other components of a full NEPA process, will unfold gradually over the coming years. The next phase is the "route evaluation" phase, where an in-house team will need funding to piece together the information gathered through the route inventory, and determine the primary purpose of each road/trail. After that, possible alternative for each route can be determined. (Those alternatives might include open/closed/seasonally closed/admin use only, etc.). Public scoping is another future step.

The group agreed that a bigger picture of how recreationists use the area would be very useful, since there seems to not be a central location for that information currently. For example, it would be helpful to have a map of frequently used campsites and large events, in relation to where sage-grouse habitats are. Someone recommended a flyover to document camping locations on Easter weekend, although there are currently no funds available for that.

Overlap in recreation and vegetation management goals

The group discussed a complexity between vegetation management and recreation. Someone observed that when "cultural leave" sites result in juniper trees standing in an otherwise open area, people camp under the remaining trees, destroying the cultural sites. Understanding the recreation dynamics may be important to ensure that cultural sites are not damaged by recreationists due to treatments for sage-grouse. This brings up an additional possible tool in recreation management, as strategically located tree removal might help manage recreation impacts near sensitive sage-grouse areas. How best to use that tool, however, would require further discussion.

Another concern is that recreational shooting increases fire risks, especially with steel core ammunition and steel targets. There are USFS studies indicating that this risk is real and that these activities can increase fire starts.

Predation Management updates

Jason Robinson provided a brief update on predator management. Wildlife Services (primarily Chris Perkins) has only been able to locate a few red foxes. Approximately 20 coyotes have been

trapped, and another 70-80 targeted with flights. After raven baiting, an estimated 30 ravens have been removed. Jason reminded the group to get any fox siting information to Chris as soon as possible, particularly during the upcoming months during the nesting season when they are most destructive to ground-nesting birds. Anyone who notices red foxes in the sage-grouse area can call Chris directly at 385-228-0900 to help him locate them.

BLM update

BLM is working on drafts of Instructional Memoranda (IMs) for mitigation, vegetation treatments, oil and gas, grazing, and monitoring. They will have additional detail on how decisions will be implemented. When they are released, the instructions will be valid for a year and then will be able to be revised. When these are released, we will discuss them in the working group. The BLM had a listening session on April 22nd in Salt Lake that was designed to help them understand possible issues and concerns to be aware of as the IMs are developed. Jim Priest noted that BLM is going to be initiating "Assessment Inventory and Monitoring" 9AIM at a landscape scale, with a standard protocol. More information on all these topics will hopefully be available in the coming months.

Field tour

The group agreed to aim for Wednesday, July 27th for a field tour, to coincide with a visit from the UC Davis researcher doing a project in the area. A focus on the areas where the birds have been congregating, to look at the habitat, would be valuable. Melissa's information will be critical to determining what areas to visit once more data is available. Brad suggested that we include a visit to a riparian or wet area as part of the tour as well. A presentation on the "fourth order" element (i.e., the field work portion) of the BLM's sage-grouse Habitat Assessment Framework would also be a useful component of the field tour. The possibility of a separate trip to Ibapah in the late summer or early fall is still in development with NRCS, with a possibility of a field component to that meeting/event.

Follow-up Needed

- Get researchers to internal BLM/USFS meetings to present preliminary data.
- Anyone who sees red foxes in the area should contact Chris Perkins directly
- Lorien will follow up with DWR to see if the group can provide feedback on additional kiosk materials.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will probably be the field tour on July 27, unless new information indicates a need for a June meeting.