

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

**Date: April 30, 2020**

**Place: Virtual meeting via WebEx**

**Individuals Present:** Melissa Chelak (USU), Steven Peterson (BYU), Trevor Schlossnagle (UGS), Nancy Williams (BLM), Jared Reese (BLM state office), Brad Jessop (BLM), Lucy Jordan (UGS), Dylan Tucker (SLFO BLM), Cjay Butters (USDA Wildlife Services), Keeli Marvel (Dugway P.G.), Mellissa Wood (BLM), Mikiah Carver (BYU), Terri Pope (UDWR), Jerry Bullock (SLFO BLM), Jimi Gragg (UDWR), Boyd White (NRCS/DWR), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Robbie Edgel (UDWR), Karen Hartman (USFS), Alan Clark (interested public), Lorien Belton (USU Extension)

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

The meeting was held virtually due to COVID-19 precautions.

*Sage-Grouse Research Updates*

Melissa Chelak provided updates on the field season so far and plans for the summer, to complement the March field report sent to the group a few weeks before.

- This year, only resident birds were captured and collared. All past collars that are still on air are being monitored.
- There is some good and hopeful news: new leks and a re-occupied lek have been found. The old lek hasn't had birds on it since 2012. There is a new lek in the Government Creek area, which I being called "Log Canyon lek" for the time being. It had five birds this spring. The Government Creek lek had 11, although they were very spread out. Another new lek, "McIntyre Divide", had 4 males.
- Across a total of 7 leks in the SGMA, that is 59 birds, in contrast to 37 last year. Last year had significant snow cover, making leks hard to count, so the numbers are probably not quite as dramatic as they look, but still good news!
- Birds have begun nesting.
- Melissa's techs will start raven surveys soon.

The group had a few questions:

- Someone asked whether the people on the ground in the area were seeing an increase in recreationists. Melissa, Nancy, and Lucy all noted that the numbers are VERY high this year, with lots of campers and lots of gunfire.
- Why the re-occupied lek? Melissa noted that it might be related to increased nesting habitat availability from past PJ projects.
- What is causing mortalities? Melissa noted that they have had a high mortality rate, 33%, and that it has been a mix of mammalian and avian predators, as far as they can tell.

## *Raven updates*

The group shared raven observations and other ideas.

- Robbie was out last week and saw several raven pairs near Benmore
- Jason noted that he has recently seen thousands out by Grantsville
- Cjay has been focusing on the Benmore area, putting out a few hundred poisoned eggs a week. Another Wildlife Services specialist is focusing on other areas. There are more in Skull Valley. He noted that if Melissa can share specific locations of nest predations, he can focus his efforts on problem ravens better. Melissa will get in touch with him after the meeting.
- The state cap on raven take has been raised to 2700
- Anyone with additional info on ravens locally can contact Cjay.
- Today (April 30) is the last day to add data to the web form for raven observations, impacts, and removal efforts.

## *UGS research updates*

Trevor Schlossnagle, from UGS, updated the group on the UGS research looking at the Vernon Creek BDA projects. UGS is monitoring Vernon Creek BDAs to see if water quality and quantity do improve after installation of the structures. They are hoping to understand how BDAs affect the local water budget, including ground and surface water. There is evidence from other research at USU that real beaver dams result in changes, such as higher groundwater storage in the banks, more late-seasons base flow, and reduced sediment getting to the reservoirs downstream. UGS is asking whether BDAs have similar impacts. They will be monitoring:

- Baseflow, for at least a year
- Surface flow (culverts)
- Groundwater, using piezometers
- Water chemistry – conductivity and temperature, which helps gauge bank storage as it helps show where the water has been
- Climate stations nearby
- Volume of sediment build-up

Data has been collected since January, and will be monitoring through the fall to determine the baseline conditions. They are using a paired design. From the top of the stream down, there is a control area, then a stream gauge, then the treatment area, then some existing BDAs, and ending with Vernon reservoir.

Lucy provided a quick update on the Tintics project. She was out yesterday checking on equipment during spring runoff. There was more water than two years ago, but less than last year. It is already really dry right now. Lucy is trying to communicate with local landowners about the research, and also trying to contact ranchers if they see anything of concern that a rancher would want to know.

## *BYU Research Updates*

BYU presented updates on their research questions and design for looking at the potential effects of wild horses on sage-grouse. They have been gathering information from many parties, including the February WDARM meeting, which was very helpful. They have also spoken to the BLM Salt Lake field office to make sure the research is helpful. They have also submitted their ideas to the National Horse and Burro research committee for their feedback. Terry Messmer and Melissa Chelak have been consulted on where late-brood-rearing habitat is in the area. The BYU research will also be sampling in other places, at the direction of the national BLM office.

One concern that has arisen many times is the complexity or having multiple influences on sage-grouse vital rates and other responses. To make sure that the measurements of horse impact are definitely correlated with horse presence, they will be doing dung pile analysis to measure ungulate densities. Right now they are working on the protocol for dung analysis. In Nevada, they will compare lek trends and horse numbers (using NDOW data). They may also be able to use AIM data. (Mellissa Wood noted that within a week or so, AIM data will be available online. At the next WDARM meeting, BYU researchers should have some preliminary data to discuss.

## *BLM updates*

The SEIS comment period has been extended again, to May 21. The links for the plan drafts and to submit comments has been mailed out several times in the past by Lorien, so should be available to everyone in email.

Mellissa Wood noted that she is moving out of state some time this summer, so will likely not be at future meetings. She will be leaving her position at BLM. Jared Reese will be a point of contact for questions for the time being.

Renee Chi has been working on the causal factors analysis for the Sheeprocks sage-grouse population. It includes major, moderate, and minor causal factors. The plan is to have a final internal BLM draft, then take it out to partners (including WDARM) for discussion. At the next meeting, Renee will present this to the group.

Brad Jessop is working on getting the cultural clearances done for the next round of projects for Erickson Knoll, Mud Springs, and McIntyre and Maple Springs. We should be good to go soon for those projects.

## *Other updates and discussions*

- Boyd is continuing to work with landowners to plan projects on both the north and south ends of the Sheeprocks, and is also working on cultural clearances.
- Jason Robinson provided an update on some of the other sage-grouse populations in the West Desert area. In Ibapah: there are 4 occupied leks this year in Ibapah, with a total of

43 males. That is down from last year but still in the normal range. Some sportsman may have seen grouse in a new area; Jason is following up with them to confirm. In the Tintics, there are also four leks, but the numbers were down dramatically. Only one of the leks had males, 2 birds total.

- Field tour ideas: A field trip to see the Vernon BDAs was proposed as a possibility. There is still interest in seeing the Ibapah habitat restoration projects and fire suppression water tank, but we will not bring outside visitors to the tribal area until concerns about potential coronavirus transmission to that remote population are able to be completely addressed.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Lorien will work with Robbie and the UGS team to discuss a field tour to Vernon BDAs.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting date was not set, but will likely take place once the causal factors analysis is ready for review. Other meeting topics include BYU research updates and information on changes to Mellissa Wood's position.