

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

Date: June 6, 2011

Time: 1:30 pm – 4:00 pm

Place: Tooele County Health Building, Tooele UT

Members Present:

Traci Allen (BLM SFLO), Heather Evans (BLM), Jason Robinson (UDWR), Alan Mitchell (Bennion Ranch), Boyd White (co-chair), Britney Bresee, Karen Hartman (USFS), Kim Hersey (UDWR), Renae Braganje (USFS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

The group focused its time on updating the strategies and threats in the plan. Discussions about different items in the plan are summarized below:

- Altered water distribution, the first in the threats table, was discussed at length by the group. Because livestock and wildlife both need water, there was considerable discussion about how to frame and understand the threat to sage-grouse, particularly since part of the concern relates to previous decisions about water management which may have longer term effects on sage-grouse populations in the area. Lack of water (and related vegetation) is one of the major issues for sage-grouse in this area.
- Of the populations in the WDARM area, the Ibapah birds are generally non migratory, so winter and summer ranges are not as clearly different as for the migratory Sheeprocks population in the eastern part of the working group area.
- The majority of the sage-grouse in the Sheeprocks area winter in a narrow area of sagebrush, so protecting that area is of great importance.
- Jason Robinson has reviewed the literature on sage-grouse and fences. Generally, it appears that larger lek sizes, certain less-visible types of fence, shorter distance of the fence from the lek, and topography (flatter landscapes) are related to increased fence strikes for sage-grouse. On Parker Mountain in Utah, sage-grouse fence strikes have been documented. The Benmore and Government Wash leks had nearby fences flagged this year by Jason. Benmore is surrounded by fences, so this will hopefully help the population. Alan expressed concern that the reflectors would become targets for shooting.
- Poaching is still a concern. The group would like to add a strategy on how to reduce poaching, and include public information efforts like a kiosk to explain that rabbit hunting is legal, but sage-grouse hunting is not. Such a kiosk could be placed near the FS guard station location.
- Predation would not be as much of a concern with high quality habitat, so both habitat improvements and predator control are important.
- Home development does not appear to currently be much of a threat to sage-grouse in this area at this time.

- Several raptor nesting posts were removed from near the Benmore lek.
- There is a wind power development proposed for near the Furner Valley. Group members will stay alert to concerns related to this project. New solar, wind, and transmission line projects all have the potential to be detrimental to sage-grouse.
- Fire is always bad if you have a Wyoming big sagebrush community with cheatgrass. Sometimes in Mountain big sage communities, fire can be okay. The group wants to add a strategy indicating that no prescribed fires should be used in this county for sage-grouse benefit because of the cheatgrass and vegetation composition concerns.
- The church ranch is interested in increasing grazing and may be adding fences to assist with grazing increases. This may be a concern to grouse.
- Sheep herders that follow the Pony Express Trail near the Government Wash lek are still in potentially problematic areas, such as being three miles outside the buffer where they are supposed to stay while trailing sheep. They have been given a map, but further efforts, including signage, may be needed. Traci with BLM will continue to work on this. The group discussed whether the sheep were really a problem for grouse, and it appears that although sheep presence may not interfere with strutting, if they do not leave enough vegetation for the grouse in nesting areas, that would be a problem. The group agreed that although grazing overall is quite limited as a problem for sage-grouse, it is of considerable concern when it does occur. Notes relating to the threats chart revision include: column 1: sheep trampling nests; column 3: overgrazing; column 4, riparian trampling avoidance by grouse.
- Recreation: mostly this relates to OHVs, but not exclusively. BLM does not have a travel management plan for the entire area, which is a concern, but they are working on a 10-mile buffer on the Pony Express Trail, which is at least an opportunity to restrict larger group activities in the area.
- BLM is working on a response to the letter WDARM send about the need for a travel management plan. She needs help ground-truthing areas of concern and prioritizing key areas. Several people agreed to assist with the project.
- This year, brood-rearing habitat is probably most limiting for these local populations
- Conversation to tilled fields from sagebrush is still a potential concern in the area.
- Benmore lek might have crested wheatgrass management needs.
- The group may be interested in discussing translocation opportunities. It would be interesting to know whether bringing birds to a drier habitat, unlike Strawberry where the habitat is relatively lush, could be successful.
- This year, statewide lek counts were down, but it was also very difficult to access the leks due to all the snow.

The group would also like to plan a trip sometime in the future to focus on recreation impacts to sage-grouse habitat. This will be added to a future meeting agenda. Individuals to involve in the planning include Jim Priest, Traci Allen, Jason Robinson, and Alan Mitchell. County involvement would also be good. It would be helpful to visit several highly impacted sites and look at impacts like habitat fragmentation, weed issues, and direct disturbance potential. Areas to stop include the Little Sahara and East Tintic, with a bathroom stop at UNEV pipeline.

Actions Taken

No formal actions were taken.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will forward the fence study to Traci
- Lorien will help the group coordinate a future recreation-focused field tour.

Next Meeting

The summer field tour will be held in conjunction with the Central Region Utah Partners for Conservation and Development group on July 14.