

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

**Date:** August 3, 2015  
**Place:** Tooele County Building  
**Members Present:** Wade Bitner (Tooele County), Mike Tamllos (USDA-WS), Ben Nadolski (UDWR), Alan Clark (UDNR), Elizabeth Mitchell (landowner/rancher), Tom Becker (UDWR), Boyd White (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Darrell Johnson (Shambip CD), Loralie Cox (UACD), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Paula Lee (Shambip CD), Bryan Nalder (PLPCO), Chris Haller (Utah State Parks), Rachel Brown (Rocky Mountain Power), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

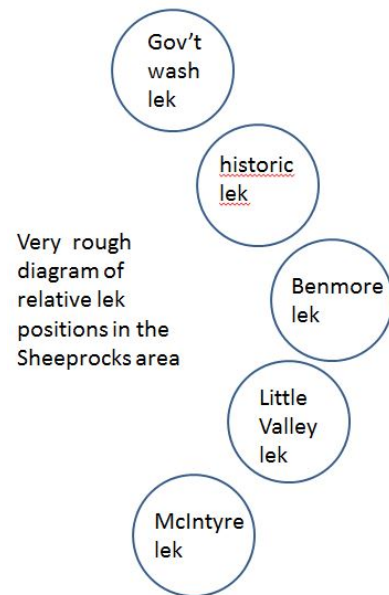
Brainstorm of Actions to Take for Sheeprocks Population

Ben Nadolski provided an overview of the current situation and task at hand. The Sheeprocks population of sage-grouse, as reported at the July WDARM field tour, has not recovered from recent low counts, unlike other populations in the state, and the formation of a taskforce to identify the limiting factors to this population is underway. The declines appear to be continuing, and are of considerable concern. This critical situation has garnered interest and support at the state level. Recommendations from the LWG will be taken and moved forward on a number of different fronts. The group brainstormed how to move forward on a number of specific projects to help the Sheeprocks sage-grouse population.

The LWG will act as the taskforce, with appropriate subcommittees that include LWG members and anyone else important for the implementation to be successful, in specific areas like predation management, expanding habitat improvement work, research and translocations, etc. Therefore, this meeting is considered the first meeting of the task force, and the next taskforce meeting will be held simultaneous with the next LWG meeting.

A very basic sketch of where the leks are in relation to one another was helpful during discussions and is included here.

The following notes were taken during the meeting, and organized into categories afterward.



## **Pinyon-Juniper Encroachment into Sagebrush**

### *Current situation*

- Critical areas between McIntyre lek (maybe 20 birds this year?) and the East Gov't Creek lek (maybe 15ish this year). Three leks in between are struggling. This is the second year in a row of no birds being counted on the Little Valley lek.
- Birds are year-round on the east side of the Sheeprocks
- BLM would need a programmatic NEPA for Southern Sheeprocks – was planned but got dropped because travel management planning started to take so much time/effort of BLM staff.
- Need snow: good cover next winter to help with range condition generally

### *Priority areas*

- PRIORITY: Phase 1 PJ near McIntyre and Gov't Creek leks
- Work mostly between the leks and the lower corridor that Boyd has already been working on

### *Considerations*

- Lop and scatter is cheapest, then other mechanical options
- On the LDS property, there are possibly some good bullhog projects that could be done. Any grazer could be a project manager for SGI funded work.
- Frank Vincent will be working on PJ
- Already, one fall treatment is planned: 625 acres (this is the Chicken Rock project in the WRI database).
- In the PJ priority areas, mostly FS land, some BLM, some Shambip, some other private.
- Alan has money to do large-scale NEPAs. County needs to be involved. Would be available in 11 months or so. Would need to be put into the WRI database as a project. This would help streamline and speed up PJ work in the area considerably as it would take a lot of burden off each federal agency to initiate and fund the NEPA at a large scale for PJ removal work.
- Forest and BLM need NEPA for future projects and every tool possible (fire, lop & scatter, bullhog, etc.) should be put into the NEPA to allow greatest flexibility during implementation
- Private landowners are interested in being able to use fire. It would have to be done carefully. It is not likely an option for the public lands. It is much more likely to be feasible in upper elevation. It would need to be done case-by-case so we don't lose sagebrush or spread cheatgrass.
- Could coordinate with grazers to do fuels reduction before any fires
- When fires do happen, find ways to strategically capitalize on them for the benefit of grouse.

### *Next steps*

- Boyd and Tom will propose shape files of needed PJ treatments across a wide area of the Sheeprocks, including federal, state, and private lands. This will be useful generally but mostly for the application for the funding Alan mentioned that could fund large-scale,

multi-agency NEPA. This proposal would need to go into the WRI database this winter. Boyd and Tom can reference Garfield's proposal in the WRI database as a template. They will use existing maps and previous mapping efforts as much as possible.

- Once Boyd and Tom have a map, have a specific meeting to discuss it, involve all federal agencies and landowners before it goes into the database. Lorien can help call that meeting, or we could coordinate with the monthly NEPA USFS/BLM coordination meetings that already happen.
- Boyd will contact the leasee who could get SGI on BLM land b/c Karen already did the NEPA on one smaller area
- Boyd will contact leasees on the LDS property to discuss possible PJ removal projects there.
- Boyd will follow-up and continue to work on projects proposed this year in the WRI database which had to be withdrawn for various reasons.

### **Predation (Red Foxes and Ravens)**

#### *Current situation:*

- There are a lot of red foxes in Little Valley, likely lowering sage-grouse nest and brood success
- Trapping foxes requires more traps in smaller areas, compared with coyote trapping
- Can't bring new birds to Little Valley unless the lek comes back, and it seems unlikely to come back without managing the fox situation
- Ravens may be a problem for sage-grouse locally also. Usually targeting them in the winter before they disperse is most effective, according to Mike. Additional efforts to control ravens for sage-grouse could be undertaken if the statewide limit of ravens that can be taken were increased.

#### *Priority areas*

- The Little Valley area has many foxes, so is the first place to target, but if birds are using areas higher up as it dries out, there may be other critical areas we are not yet aware of where foxes and grouse overlap.

#### *Considerations*

- Mike Tamilos explained that a combination of two methods for fox control is the only way to effectively handle the situation: 1) fall trapping by a dedicated private trapper focused on the Little Valley area, and then 2) spring denning work in association with other work already happening in the area.
- Results needed from a fox trapper's work include: GPS locations, documented numbers seen, killed. The trapper should be able to keep the pelts.

#### *Next steps*

- Tom Becker, Ben Nadolski, Mike Tamilos, and Jason Robinson will need to work together to get a contract set up to hire a fox trapper for this fall. Jason Robinson and Mike Linnell (Wildlife Services) will need to be involved also. The position would need to be focused on foxes only. Leslie McFarlane has a document that Tom can use as a template for the

contract. Ben will make sure that the contract happens and will explore funding for the position. Ballpark cost is \$10,000 for an 8-month contract. Tom and Mike will need to vet the hire to ensure it is someone with the right skill set. Mike will train them on where foxes have been seen in the past to increase their effectiveness.

- Ben will contact Mike Linnell to inquire about the process for increasing the number of ravens that can be taken.

### **Other Habitat Considerations**

#### *Current situation*

- PJ is not the only problem. Water availability is very important also. Although it is connected to PJ in some areas, water developments can be good or bad for grouse depending on how they are done.
- Areas of winter habitat need to be protected from fire (Particularly the south end of the Sheeprocks)

#### *Priority areas*

- Brood-rearing areas need to have small wet areas.

#### *Considerations*

- Water developments should take sage-grouse into consideration, and make sure that sage-grouse have areas where they can access wet meadow-type areas near springs.
- A PJ removal benefit might be more wet areas and improved spring flow
- Consider other creative ways to improve wet areas (like beavers)
- Are firebreaks in winter habitat under consideration?

#### *Next steps*

- NRCS make sure that water developments benefit or at least don't hurt sage-grouse in the Sheeprocks area. (Lorien will reach out to NRCS to see what water development considerations for sage-grouse are being implemented, and how to expand outreach efforts to ensure that more wet areas are made available to sage-grouse.)
- Those with power to do so should keep supporting the improvements in fire support and responses coordination between agencies. Ben is already working in this area and will continue to do so for sage-grouse.
- Learn what plans exist for fire prevention in the southern Sheeprocks and sage-grouse winter habitat generally (at the BLM and USFS level).

### **Recreation issues**

#### *Current situation*

- State parks already out marking signs
- County already getting feedback/pushback from ATV users about roads/routes that are marked as closed or not trails
- USFS has a travel plan from around 2008

- BLM travel management plan: target date (from a while back) of August 18<sup>th</sup> to have preliminary trails inventory data done

### *Priority areas*

- Overlap sage-grouse areas with areas with potential to expand recreation use (where it can be curtailed)
- Use google earth to key in on areas where recreation has been expanding recently; focus education/enforcement in those areas
- Focus education efforts on the large traditional family camps

### *Considerations and Suggestions*

- Trail maps on site at campgrounds would help support positive peer-influence because they would have information to reference
- Post a standard sign like “sensitive wildlife area—please stay on trails”
- Kiosk (use template from the Panguitch sign?) at 45 degree angle to reduce shooting
- Sign planning is a multi-agency effort: discuss it at the next LWG meeting
- Spring saturation patrol to remind people to stay on trails (could be popular with many agencies’ officers, as it is a chance to get outside)
- Piggy back on fall hunting checkpoints (noting that there really aren’t many) to learn what people know/think about recreation, sage-grouse, etc.
- Officers could pass out a pamphlet about sensitive habitat, maps, etc. while out checking camps
- Keep educating people and gauging its effectiveness

### *Next steps*

- Discuss sign planning (i.e. “sensitive wildlife area”) at the next WDARM meeting
- State parks ID those opportunity areas like large family camps to expand education first; Chris will take next steps on that

## **Research and Monitoring**

### *Current situation*

- Large need for research, but no one at the meeting was a researcher. Need someone to spearhead a project and propose it to the group.
- A local research and a monitoring system will be critical to have in place for any future translocations can be done most effectively and tracked
- This is a great opportunity to learn about how birds use marginal habitat

### *Priority areas*

- Leaks where there are currently birds, and the corridor between the largest leaks

### *Considerations*

- Plan ahead for more than just two years of research and tracking
- Use GPS collars so we can track more movements

### *Questions of interest to the group:*

- Identify where the gov’t wash birds winter; confirm assumptions about where others go
- Are sage-grouse using treatments we’ve done in the past?

- Do birds move between the leks?
- Identify where the gov't wash birds winter; confirm assumptions about where others go
- Generally need more info on where birds go: are there higher areas where they go as it dries out in the summer? (And if birds are going up higher, are there foxes up there too? It seems likely, but most of our fox conversations have been about lower elevation areas.)
- What can this population tell us about how birds use marginal habitat like the West Desert?

### *Next steps*

- Request for USU to present a research proposal to the WDARM group at the next meeting
- Jason Robinson and others will need to be involved in proposing an appropriate translocation plan.

The next meeting will be in September. Lorien will send a Doodle poll to find the best time.

### State mitigation plan update

Alan Clark provided a short general update on the mitigation program for sage-grouse habitat. He explained that there is a new program that starts this month (August 2015) for compensatory mitigation for disturbances in sage-grouse habitat. Alan is the contact for anyone with questions or a need for the program.

Alan also noted that we are less than 60 days from the federal decision deadline on sage-grouse.

### **Follow-up Needed (Summary of "Next Steps" outlined above)**

- Boyd and Tom will spearhead an effort to develop polygons for a very large PJ treatment area in the Sheeprocks. After coordination with the LWG, the county, and appropriate federal partners, this will form the basis of a proposal to be entered into the WRI database this winter. The proposal will specifically target available money for large-scale, multi-agency NEPA efforts where counties are involved.
- Boyd will reach out to multiple landowners and grazers about PJ project potential in the Sheeprocks area.
- Lorien will reach out to NRCS to learn about water development considerations for sage-grouse, and how to expand outreach efforts to ensure that more wet areas are made available to sage-grouse.
- Lorien will reach out to USFS and BLM partners to bring fire protection plan info to the LWG in September.
- Ben will continue to participate in fire response coordination. Group may want an update when they next meet.
- Tom, Ben, and Mike will coordinate with others to get a red fox control contract in place for Little Valley for this fall and into the spring
- Ben will inquire into increasing raven take numbers, via Mike Linnell.

- Chris Haller will look into expanding education efforts at large family camps
- Lorien will identify key individuals involved with sign planning in different agencies and identify next steps toward getting sage-grouse signs and/or a kiosk in sensitive habitat areas (next steps can be discussed in Sept).
- Terry Messmer will spearhead a research proposal to suggest to the group. This will involve consulting with Jason Robinson and others, as appropriate, to plan a long-term program involving future translocations.
- Lorien will schedule a September meeting with a Doodle poll.

### **Next Meetings**

The next meeting will be in mid-September.