

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

Date: Sept 9, 2015

Place: Tooele County Building

Members Present:

Elizabeth Mitchell (landowner/rancher), Janet Larsen (Shambip CD), Chris Bryan (BLM), Mark Farmer (DWR), Ben Nadolski (UDWR), Terri Pope (UDWR), Matt Howard (DWR), Jessica Henrie (Tooele Transcript Bulletin), Boyd White (UDWR), Wayne Greenhalgh (NRCS), Loralie Cox (UACD), Karen Hartman (USFS), Jay Martini (USFWS), Alan Clark (UDNR), Jimi Gragg (DWR), Wade Bitner (Tooele County), Keeli Marvel (DPG), Chris Perkins, (USDA-WS), Alison Whittaker (DWR), Eric Reed (BLM), Avery Cook (DWR), Alyson Eddie (Logan Simpson), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Brief Updates

- As mentioned at previous meetings, the Sheeprocks population has very low population numbers, and many efforts to improve habitat and population situations are in progress.
- BLM is working on its road inventory, as a first step toward travel management planning in the Sheeprocks area. The next step will be labeling routes. The exact timeline is not certain at this time.
- Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs) are still an option for the sage-grouse. Anyone interested can contact Jay Martini.
- There may be a listing decision coming from USFWS soon (in the next few weeks).
- The BLM/Forest Service will be finalizing their plan amendments EIS for sage-grouse in the coming weeks as well. One feature of this is that, due to the low sage-grouse population in the Sheeprocks, the boundaries of “priority” habitat will be expanded in comparison to “general” habitat in this area.
- The large-scale NEPA funding that is available through Alan Clark is currently ongoing funding, each year. As yet this year, no one has applied.
- Wade Bitner noted that it is difficult to know – when one is on the ground – where the boundaries of the sage-grouse management areas, BLM areas, or other boundaries. It would be very helpful for management decisions to be able to have either GPS points, an app, or some other way to determine whether particular pieces of ground are inside or outside those various boundaries without having to return to the office and pull up GIS layers.

Proposed Large-scale Pinyon-Juniper Removal Project Plans

At the last meeting, a small team of DWR/NRCS folks agreed to draft polygons for a large-scale PJ

removal project that could guide implementation efforts and be submitted for the large-scale NEPA funding mentioned earlier. Avery Cook presented the preliminary polygons developed the team.

At first, they considered a large area surrounding all the Sheeprocks area leks, then narrowed it down based on where the fastest habitat turnaround could be achieved (areas with late Phase I and early Phase II encroachment), as well as areas where known bird movements suggest that the treatments would yield the fastest results for existing birds. For now, the polygons are only biologically based, and include many jurisdictions of land. They include a first year, second year, and third year of priority areas. A total of about 90,000 acres over the three years would be treated, according to these preliminary maps.

Several people suggested adjustments to the polygons:

- There is quite a bit of movement from the McIntyre leks into wintering areas on the southwest side, so make sure we don't lose that: make the strip they use slightly wider
- Karen is already working on NEPA for some of the areas.
- Elizabeth suggested moving the eastern boundary slightly further east.

A next step will be to coordinate between different landownerships to move project implementation forward. Boyd will be coordinating efforts on private land, as well as helping communicate with BLM (Salt Lake and Fillmore field offices) and USFS. He will also be responsible, with help from others in DWR, for submitting the project into the database for the NEPA funding application. Other comments pertinent to coordination included:

- Near the Gov't Wash lek, BLM has already done a lot of work, but it was not for sage-grouse, so there are still trees left. The NEPA is already done, however, so going back to retreat may be straightforward.
- Some private lands projects are already in the works: Jasperson's property is starting work this week, and the Vincents (Cow Hollow and Henry Creek projects) are being developed.
- The LDS church has a ranch in Vernon; they cannot participate but it is possible to work with any grazing leasees. There is also LDS church land just south of the Gov't Wash lek; past work done on Deseret Land and Livestock may provide a helpful model or ideas for how to work together.

As a next step, Boyd will send out a doodle poll to meet with BLM Salt Lake and Fillmore, USFS, and SITLA to move the project proposal forward. Alan noted that the deadline to submit the proposal is the same as for all WRI projects (very early January).

Predator Progress

Ben Nadolski gave a brief predator work update. He is still working with Wildlife Services to get a red fox control work beginning in the area this fall. He mentioned that one option under

consideration was to see if resources from elsewhere in the state could be reallocated. Chris Perkins explained that Wildlife Services is already spread very thinly, and it would not likely be possible to get enough coverage on red foxes here, given the need for a full-time person this fall, using reallocations.

Chris mentioned that the current raven take quota, 2200 birds, is being renegotiated currently. WDARM (probably via Ben Nadolski) should convey to Chris and others the need for additional take allowances in this area given the importance of insuring that any translocations are successful. Ben and Chris will communicate about appropriate next steps.

Translocation and Research

Avery Cook presented the basic proposal (from USU) that would accomplish both the translocations and the associated research. Details include:

- 10 males (to augment leks) and 30 females (to increase populations) would be moved each year
- Birds would be trapped in Box Elder (accounting for approx. 1.7% of that population)
- Radio collars placed on 20-30 of the released birds
- Birds moved in April 2016
- Birds released on Gov't Wash and McIntyre leks, with permission from landowners
- 10 trapping crews of 2 people each would be involved in the project

Avery would be the project leader. The project is likely to be funded, but also needs to go through the RDCC comment process, and then be approved through the relevant Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) and the Wildlife Board, which meet in December and January, respectively. Anyone from the LWG who wants to voice their support for the project at the RAC meeting would be appreciated. Lorien will send out a notice about the local RAC meeting so anyone interested in attending has the info.

Several people asked to participate or recommended individuals who might be able to help. Lorien will provide that list to Avery.

Boyd pointed out that a concerted lek searching effort in the area is overdue, and might yield information that was very relevant to the study and population tracking. Many people agreed, and there was discussion about focusing some lek search flights in the Sheeprocks area in the spring.

Wet meadows and water availability for sage-grouse

Lorien explained that some recent research has looked at the impact of wet areas on sage-grouse. In addition, a sheep rancher with the UBARM group created a very interesting map of current and former wet areas in the sagebrush landscape on Blue Mountain in the Uintah Basin, which

generated interest in that group. This group may be interested in looking at similar issues, given the importance of water in this area. The group had a good discussion, including the following points.

- Some PJ removal projects being proposed this year in the area may benefit wet areas
- Beaver reintroduction could be considered in areas where there is low potential for conflict with other uses. They are known to raise the water table and much lower cost than other interventions
- Stream hydrologists see the landscape of the west desert with very different perspectives than habitat biologist may, so there is a good potential to learn from other perspectives.
- Water improvements can be done in ways that help sage-grouse
- Further discussion within this group about how to improve wet areas for sage-grouse will be important.

Recreation Impacts Discussion

No one with direct, updated recreation information was in attendance, but the following updates and issues were discussed:

- As suggested at the last meeting, progress has been made toward joint enforcement between state parks and DWR employees. There will be both fall and spring efforts to get a lot of recreation enforcement coverage in sage-grouse areas.
- It might be wise to postpone marking or advertising of the dead-end routes up canyons where grouse may be using the area, given the potential for people to want to connect routes where it is possible, rather than turning back down the same road to get out.
- Improved (or in some cases, any at all) signage for recreationists needs to be put behind plexiglass – or some similar solution – because the wind rips many postings off kiosks.
- It is unclear whether Vernon reservoir is still being considered for improved parking. Elizabeth suggested that improving parking areas in areas closer to Vernon would be more logical for people parking long ATV trailers, as well as creating less damage at the Reservoir and promoting local economic growth.
- Ben Nadolski and Matt Howard will work together to ensure that appropriate coordination happens to get LWG concerns into the comment process for potential improvements.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will follow up with BLM, DWR, and others to discuss the possibility of having on-the-ground GPS information available publicly for the different sage-grouse habitat boundaries.
- Boyd will send a Doodle poll to relevant DWR, NRCS, BLM, FS, and SITLA people to continue planning efforts for the landscape level PJ removal proposal.
- Ben and Chris will communicate about appropriate next steps on fox and raven control.
- Lorien will send Avery the list of individuals to include in the translocation efforts.

- Avery will work to schedule spring lek search flights in the area.
- Water developments and wet meadows should be discussed at the next meeting.
- Ben Nadolski and Matt Howard will work together to ensure that appropriate coordination happens to get LWG concerns into the comment process for potential improvements.
- Lorien will schedule an October meeting with a Doodle poll.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be in October or early November, date TBD via Doodle.