

**MSARM
LOCAL
WORKING
GROUP**

Date: November 29, 2011

Time: 3:30 – 5:30 pm

Place: Henefer, Utah, Town Hall

Members Present: Mike Welch (QRM), Arlin Judd (Landowner), Nathan Darnall (USFWS), Logan Wilde (Landowner), Eric Wilde (Landowner), Ron Greer (UDWR), Randy Wood (UDWR), Thomas Hoskins (NRCS), Patti Barney (NRCS), Craig McKnight (NRCS), Adryan Slaght (Summit County), Riley Peck (UDWR), Scott McFarlane (UDWR), Scott Walker (UDWR), Dave Rich (UDWR), Pam Kramer (UDWR), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension; facilitator)

Highlights

Lorien provided some general updates to the group, relating to policy, personnel, and resources:

- Riley Peck is the new Sensitive Species Biologist in the northern region. He has a great deal of sage-grouse field experience and will be a great asset to the group.
- The Mule Deer Foundation has funded a number of biologist positions across the West to help implement NRCS's Sage-Grouse Initiative, including three in Utah. Those biologists are currently training in Tooele this week. Tammy Koldyke is the biologist for the Morgan-Summit area and will be based in Ogden.
- Although it does not directly influence this working group, the BLM will be working over the next few years to revise their Land Use Plans to address sage-grouse needs. The policies they put in place may be influence other entities; for example, the release of Appendix 5 of the state sage-grouse plan is on hold until it can be determined that the BLM and Utah guidelines are coordinated. Because the guidelines should discuss many forms of development, there may be some that are relevant to the MSARM group.
- Hard copies of a pocket guide to sage-grouse and their habitat, put together by USU Extension, are available (also as an online pdf emailed to the group a few months ago).
- A resource document will soon be available through DNR and USU Extension that profiles the wide variety of resources available for conservation and wildlife work on private lands. It should be out by the end of the year.
- Pam Kramer has been involved with a process that Park City and the Synderville Basin have undertaken to better understand wildlife issues and values in the area, to help with planning for such things as open space, development recommendations, etc.

Project Updates

The road signs on either side of the Henefer Divide lek have been placed, and Pam was told that they are up; however, only was had been seen, and it had several bullet holes in it. Pam will look further into the situation and discuss it with UDOT to see if they had been stolen or not yet installed.

Nathan Darnall has been coordinating efforts by the Great Salt Lake Audubon chapter to make

and install fence markers near the Henefer Divide lek. Although weather has been a problem for installation, the markers will hopefully be put up next weekend. All landowners have been notified and gave their permission to place the markers on the fences.

There is a proposed easement outside Coalville. The landowner is interested in learning about sage-grouse on their property. Riley Peck and Dave Rich are working with Lorien to visit the property.

Project ideas for the upcoming year

Henefer Divide Lek Visitation Etiquette

Human disturbance during lek visitation is still an issue. Suggestions included making sure that the people who bring tours and provide directions to visitors, such as the Audubon chapters and the Wild Bird Center, promote proper etiquette. Another idea was to look on the web and see where people provide directions to the lek, and ask them to also include instructions for lek etiquette. A brochure might be helpful to have at the Wild Bird Center, but it is not clear that that would be the most effective strategy. Lorien will follow up with Bill Fenimore and also look on the internet (for example, Wikipedia) to see if directions to the lek are easily accessible. In addition, the DWR could possibly post a code of conduct for lek viewing on its website. Lorien will explore the option. The group also discussed possibly having UDOT plow in a way that makes the parking area across the road more accessible than the one close to the lek, but the group determined that that might create problems for landowner or rancher access, which we would not want.

A suggestion was made that the birds on the road during lekking season might be eating road salt, as at least one of the counties uses basic local sodium chloride to salt the roads. Someone suggested spreading salt off the road (possibly in the lekking area) to see if it would draw the birds away from the road. It is not clear what the next step would be, but Lorien may approach the Richins to get their thoughts since they are using the land.

Opening up the Henefer Divide Lek

There is still a need to knock back some of the sagebrush on the lek as it is slowly filling in and making the lek less appealing to the birds. Two ways this might happen: if the ranchers would be willing to hold their sheep on the lek area a few days before shipping them, that would help as the sheep would eat some of the sagebrush. Craig McKnight will take the lead on this contact. Otherwise, we can approach the landowner again (after the fence markers are installed) to discuss a mowing project that would help keep the birds off the road. Lorien will work with the new SGI biologist to discuss this possibility. DWR habitat biologists said that it would be relatively easy to get a mower to the property since it is right next to the road.

Research Needs and Funding

There is still a major need to learn more about the sage-grouse populations in the MSARM area, how the populations interact, and to get a better sense of seasonal habitat areas that are particularly crucial to those populations. The proposed research project to study three different lek complexes in the area is still on hold, pending money to match the Kern River mitigation money. Riley, Pam, and Scott Walker will look at the proposal to see if it can be winnowed further so that a useful project could still take place using fewer dollars. Right now, to fully fund the project would require at least another \$30,000 - \$50,000. We were hoping to be able to use Pittman-Robertson funding, but the amounts of those funds are very limited. In addition, the position at DWR responsible for helping fund this project is currently vacant, so decisions about PR funds are on hold. Lorien will follow up with Terry Messmer to see if he has any additional ideas for funding the work, possibly related to regional efforts to understand the effects of tall structures on sage-grouse, and if he has a student who could conduct the work, starting this spring, if money was found.

UPCD Projects and Bulbous Bluegrass Concerns

The group discussed several projects that could be submitted to UPCD. Some of the reasons that UPCD can be helpful on private lands:

- Can help provide equipment (like range mowers) at less cost to the landowner
- Can help pay for and design seed mixes that are more expensive – but better for wildlife – than a landowner might otherwise use if he/she was just trying to improve forage
- Can help address weed issues in sage-grouse habitat

The group discussed concerns with bulbous blue-grass, which acts similarly to cheatgrass in many ways, and degrades range quality for both livestock and wildlife. It was determined that a strategic approach to address bulbous bluegrass would be critical, to avoid wasting money on a project that would just get taken back over. Other discussion, particularly with the landowners in attendance, indicated that some had seen problems with bulbous, but others had not. Thomas Hoskins and Scott Walker will talk further about how to use the UPCD process (possibly this year, but more likely for next year's submission) to help with projects in this area. Thomas noted that private landowner can be uninterested in having one more layer of red tape to get through in order to do a project, so in some cases they might not want to go through UPCD despite other potential benefits.

Scott Walker explained that the DWR is working on a series of projects on the Henefer Echo Wildlife Management Area, which include some submissions to UPCD this year. Working with several hundred acres at a time, DWR is working to rehabilitate range on the WMA, which is in poor condition with many invasive grasses. They are trying many different techniques to reduce undesirable plants and restore the range, including reseeding, fencing, livestock management, etc. Walker noted that many of the projects are expressly for mule deer winter range, but there is a lot of overlap between good sage-grouse habitat and good winter range for mule deer. Scott McFarlane explained that although sage-grouse populations on the WMA area are not high, these projects are being done within a mile of a historic lek. A grouse was spotted in the last few weeks in that area, and grouse still use the same wintering area although the lek is not currently used. Knowing more about the population would enable us to better target seasonal habitat for

restoration efforts.

Sage-Grouse Initiative Projects

Last year, this area did not have any projects funded by NRCS's Sage-Grouse Initiative funds, which are specially designated EQIP and WHIP funds focused on sage-grouse-friendly projects that also meet the other requirements of those programs. Thomas Hoskins explained that in many cases, ranchers are willing to make some changes to improve sage-grouse habitat, but are not interested in being restricted by any program requirements, so opt for regular EQIP funds instead of SGI funds specifically. Thomas Hoskins explained that regardless of the funding, he works with landowners to make sure that work done is not detrimental to sage-grouse. One of the landowners present noted that mosaic treatments of sagebrush are difficult not to do because of the shape of the land in the area; large expansive sagebrush treatments are difficult to do.

Follow-up Needed

- Lorien will send Riley the draft proposal to see if there is any way he can find to reduce costs and still create a project that will help us learn about the populations here.
- Riley and Pam and others will look at the proposal to see if it can be winnowed further (cutting costs and/or project scope) so that a useful project could still take place using fewer dollars.
- Lorien will follow-up with Ashley Koehler to talk about a map for the group updated with new shape files.
- Nathan Darnall will lead a group of volunteers this Saturday (Dec 3) to complete the fence marker project, weather permitting.
- Pam will follow up on the missing road signs
- Lorien will follow up with Bill Fenimore and also look on the internet to see if directions to the lek are easily accessible.
- Lorien may approach the Richins to get their thoughts on salt.
- Craig McKnight will discuss sheep management for the benefit of the lek with the rancher soon, as the sheep are currently there are will likely be moved by the weekend.
- Lorien will work with the new SGI biologist to discuss a lek mowing project.
- Lorien will follow up with Terry Messmer to see if he has any additional ideas for funding sage-grouse research, and if he has a student who could conduct the work, starting this spring, if money was found.
- Thomas Hoskins and Scott Walker will talk further about how to use the UPCD process (possibly this year, but more likely for next year's submission) to help with projects in this area.
- Lorien will explore the option of having DWR post a code of conduct for lek viewing on its website.
- Lorien will circulate proposed updates to the sage-grouse plan to the full group, for discussion at the February meeting.

- The next fall meeting should be focused on possible UPCD projects. Lorien may need to prompt further in advance to make sure that people are ready to bring project ideas to the group.
- Lorien will draft a plan of work for MSARM for the upcoming year and circulate it for comments.

Next Meetings

The group tentatively set two dates for upcoming meetings: February 7th at 1 pm, to possibly be held in Coalville, particularly if we can meet over lunch, and April 3rd, sometime in the morning, in Henefer. The April meeting would follow a lek-viewing trip. It was noted that the County Council members will be invited specifically to join on the lek viewing trip.