

# THE COMMUNICATOR

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF UTAH'S COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION PROGRAM



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## The Sage-grouse Initiative – Conserving Sage-grouse One Landowner At a Time

By Randall Gray, IWJV Sage-grouse Initiative Field Capacity Coordinator

The Sage-grouse Initiative (SGI) was officially launched in 2010 by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Its main focus is to conserve sage-grouse and other wildlife through sustainable ranching. The initiative uses science to achieve the greatest biological benefits. In 2011, the NRCS teamed up with the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) and more than 30 partners to expand the field delivery, science, and communications capacity for SGI over the next 3 years. The NRCS and partners contributed \$10.6 million to the 3-year effort.

The partnership, known as the SGI Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT), enabled the hiring of 23 new range conservationists and wildlife biologists, plus a cultural resources specialist. These SWAT professionals have been strategically located throughout sage-grouse country to work closely with landowners and other partners to reverse population declines through the implementation of approved conservation practices on working farms and ranches (map below). They



*Logo and Map courtesy of Natural Resources Conservation Service.*

will help ranchers develop custom plans with practical conservation measures and habitat improvements. The NRCS provides day-to-day direction and field office space. Utah partners have collaborated with NRCS to fund three positions in the state.

Utah SWAT professionals and their locations are, Tammy Koldyke, Ogden NRCS Office, Steve Weaver, Roosevelt NRCS Office, and Taylor Payne, Randolph NRCS Office. Their photos and contact information can be found on page 2. They are eager and ready to talk and work with Utah's sage-grouse local working groups. Please join us in welcoming them.



IN THIS ISSUE

THE SAGE-GROUSE INITIATIVE.....1

CONTACTS FOR SGI IN UTAH.....2

AUDUBON AND MSARM MEMBERS  
 INSTALL FENCE MARKERS NEAR  
 IMPORTANT LEK.....2

BLM ANNOUNCES RANGE-WIDE  
 SAGE-GROUSE PLANNING EFFORT.....3

BLM SCOPING MEETING SCHEDULE.....3

BILL BARRETT CORPORATION  
 IMPROVES GREATER SAGE-  
 GROUSE HABITAT .....4

CBCP MISSION STATEMENT.....4

Photo not available at press time.

Steve Weaver

**Steve Weaver**

I will be examining habitat improvement opportunities in conjunction with private landowners, tribal authorities, state, and government entities. We will be looking for ways to increase sage-grouse numbers using habitat improvement methodologies. Currently I will be working mostly in northeastern Utah, but may be working in an expanded area as needs arise. Contact me at: NRCS Field Office, 240 West Highway 40, Roosevelt, UT 84066; Phone: 435-722-0884 x115. Email address pending.



Tammy Koldyke

**Tammy Koldyke**

In my new position as the SGI biologist for NRCS, I'll be working with landowners and ranchers to provide technical and financial assistance through NRCS to promote SGI in northern Utah. I'll be meeting with property owner's onsite, conducting an inventory and evaluating their habitat to determine the limiting factors for sage-grouse on that particular site, and then working closely with the landowner to address these issues through cost-share programs. The conservation practices that have been determined to enhance grazing lands also benefit sage-grouse habitat as well, and include a well-designed grazing plan, removal of encroaching conifers, brush management to provide a diversity of grasses and forbs, and enhancement of springs and wet areas, just to name a few. I look forward to meeting and working with landowners to accomplish the conservation goals of a healthy, productive, and sustainable landscape. Contact me at: NRCS Area and Field Office, 2871 South Commerce Way, Ogden, UT 84401; Phone: 801-629-0580 x123; Tammy.Koldyke@ut.usda.gov.



Taylor Payne

**Taylor Payne**

In my new assignment with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food's Grazing Improvement Program (UGIP) I will be excited to come back to Rich County and revisit old acquaintances and friends from my previous work time spent in the County. I will be specifically working within the county which holds some of the best sage-grouse populations in the state. I will live in Randolph and have moved back from the Southeast region of Utah where I was the coordinator for the Utah Grazing Improvement Program. I have worked with the Rich County CRM committee in the past through previous employment positions and plan to have a pretty easy transition back into the group. I will plan to utilize my relationships and contacts already built to accomplish a lot of good work for the grazing rangelands, permittees who use them, sage-grouse, mule deer, and other interests. I believe that grazing, along with proper management, is the best tool we have to accomplish projects that will benefit sensitive species like sage-grouse. Contact me at: NRCS Field Office, 195 North Main, Randolph, UT 84064; Phone: 435-793-3905 or 435-797-6115; taylorpayne@utah.gov.

**AUDUBON AND MSARM MEMBERS INSTALL FENCE MARKERS NEAR IMPORTANT LEK**



Photo courtesy of Nathan Darnall.

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

Great Salt Lake Audubon recently teamed up with the Morgan-Summit sage-grouse group (MSARM) to attach markers to barbed-wire fences by an important sage-grouse lek south of Henefer, Utah. The goal of installing the markers is to make the fences more visible to sage-grouse. When sage-grouse can't see wires or posts in time to avoid them, they can be injured or even killed by collisions with a fence.

The Henefer Divide sage-grouse lek is on private land on the Morgan/Summit County line. Because of its proximity to a state highway, the lek receives many visitors each year who pull over to the side of the road to watch the sage-grouse strut in the spring. The birds in the Henefer Divide area are frequently disturbed by highway traffic and sometimes even by visitors to the lek, causing them to fly up suddenly, possibly into the nearby fences.

Local ranchers run cattle and sheep in the area – the lek is an old sheep bedding ground – and fences necessarily criss-cross the landscape. Audubon financed, created, and coordinated installation of the markers, which are made from small pieces of vinyl siding. The project leaders worked closely with the MSARM group to ensure that the landowners gave approval to have the markers placed along their fences.

The increased visibility of the fences should reduce the likelihood of sage-grouse injuries and deaths in the area.

# BLM ANNOUNCES RANGE-WIDE SAGE-GROUSE PLANNING EFFORT

By Steve Madson, Bureau of Land Management State Office

The Utah Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages approximately 34% of the currently occupied sage-grouse habitat in Utah, second only to private landowners who manage about 40% of Utah's sage-grouse habitat. The US Forest Service manages another 10% of the habitat, so between the three entities, nearly 85% of all sage-grouse habitat in Utah is split nearly evenly between federal land-managing agencies and private landowners, which highlights the importance of the federal agencies, UDWR, private landowners, and others working together to conserve, enhance, and restore sage-grouse populations and habitat.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, in their March 2010 "Warranted but Precluded" listing decision, identified the continued loss and fragmentation of sage-grouse habitat as a listing factor, as well as the fact that federal agencies did not have adequate regulatory direction in their BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) or Forest Management Plans (FMPs) to assure the Service that sage-grouse habitat could be adequately conserved on public lands in the long-term.

To remedy that situation, the BLM and Forest Service in Utah, as well as the other sage-grouse states across the west from the western Dakotas to northeastern California, are embarking on a land use planning effort that will ultimately revise or amend up to 98 RMPs and FMPs in the range of the greater sage-grouse by September of 2014. In Utah, that will involve the amendment of at least 13 RMPs and 3-5 Forest Plans using one Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). A Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the Federal Register on December 9, 2011, that initiates the process. The initial Scoping phase of the planning process will last for 60 days during which the BLM and FS, with assistance from DWR and the Service, will hold eight Public Scoping meetings around the state, in those localities where the statewide revision or amendment of the respective land use plans to incorporate adequate and effective greater sage-grouse habitat conservation measures, will be undertaken. Additional information on the proposed planning process, including locations and times for Public Scoping meetings, as well other pertinent documents, maps, a copy of the NOI, and frequently asked questions can be found on BLM's new sage-grouse website at <http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sagegrouse.html>. The website will be updated as new information becomes available and will identify a link for providing comments and feedback on the public process.

The objective of the statewide EIS will be to propose a range of alternatives, to be developed following scoping, that will analyze the effects of establishing adequate and effective conservation measures for managing sage-grouse habitat on public lands, on the other uses of the resource, including; livestock grazing, renewable and non-renewable energy development and its resulting roads and infrastructure, OHV use, recreational activities, wildfire and fire rehab, utility rights-of-way, and vegetative treatments. During the 3-year planning period, BLM will manage sage-grouse habitat under a set of interim directions that are designed to conserve sage-grouse habitat in the short-term, so that planning decisions can be made that will ensure long-term conservation of habitat (i.e., adequate regulatory mechanisms will be embedded in all existing BLM RMPs and the appropriate Forest Plans). Following the BLM/FS planning effort, the Service will reevaluate the status of the greater sage-grouse and its habitat during 2015 and will determine if the species is no longer warranted for listing, or if it should be listed as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.

A powerpoint presentation explaining the range-wide process can be found at <http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sagegrouse.html>

## Timeline of Critical Steps

| Action   | When                    |
|--|-------------------------|
| Establish all teams                                    | Complete                |
| Issue national interim policy (Instruction Memorandum) | First Quarter of FY 12  |
| Publish Notice of Intent to amend land use plans       | First Quarter of FY 12  |
| Public scoping complete                                | Second Quarter of FY 12 |
| Draft EISs published                                   | Second Quarter of FY 13 |
| Final EISs published                                   | First Quarter of FY 14  |
| Records of Decision signed                             | Fourth Quarter of FY 14 |

## Scoping Meeting Schedule in Utah

Jan. 17 5:30 PM, Carbon County Event Center, 310 South Fairgrounds Road, Price

Jan. 24 5:30 PM, Snowville Town Hall, 20 W Main Street, Snowville

Jan. 18 5:30 PM, Western Park Convention Center, 300 E 200 S, Vernal

Jan. 30 5:30 PM, Sevier County Bldg., 250 N Main, Richfield

Jan. 19 5:30 PM, Hampton Inn & Suites-SLC Airport, 307 N Admiral Byrd, Salt Lake City

Jan. 31 5:30 PM, Kanab City Library, 374 North Main, Kanab

Jan. 23 5:30 PM, Randolph Senior Center, 5 North Main, Randolph

Feb. 1 5:30 PM, Heritage Center-Festival Hall, 105 North 100 E, Cedar City

## *If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.*

### **BILL BARRETT CORPORATION IMPROVES GREATER SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT**

By Nicole Nielson, UDWR and Makeda Hanson, UDWR



*Photo courtesy of Daniel Eddington.*

The West Tavaputs Plateau (WTP) in Southeastern Utah is part of the Castle Country sage-grouse local working group. It is a unique area with steep canyons topped with sagebrush mesas. These mesas are crucial to the local population of sage-grouse during the winter months. Over time, due to fire suppression and other factors, pinyon and juniper encroachment into the sagebrush makes the areas less suitable to sage-grouse. Such encroachment has not only led to reduced habitat, but has also increased the risk of predation from perching raptors or mammalian predators such as coyotes.

The need for habitat improvement projects in the area is discussed in the 2006 sage-grouse conservation plan and specific actions were addressed in 2010 by the West Tavaputs Plateau Natural Gas Full Field Development Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As part of the EIS, Bill Barrett Corporation (BBC) committed to improving habitats for wildlife and specifically sage-grouse. One project funded by BBC was a large scale tree removal or “lop and scatter” project to maintain and improve greater sage-grouse winter range was completed in 2011. Approximately 1,300 acres of pinyon and juniper trees were removed. The removal was done by a crew of eight to nine men with chainsaws walking around cutting the trees in a natural mosaic pattern, taking care to leave trees greater than 16 inches in diameter for other wildlife in the area. In addition to tree removal, maintenance was done on shrubs to increase forage production leading to even greater benefits for multiple wildlife species.

BBC has been involved with many other projects on the WTP and the company is fully committed to helping restore more sage-grouse habitat in the future. We are already starting to see positive results in sage-grouse use due to these projects and we look forward to more work with BBC and other partners.

#### **Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission**

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

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[www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org)

#### **Warning Wildlife on Road**

New Road Signs at  
Henefer-Divide Lek

MSARM group members from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources have worked closely with the Utah Department of Transportation to install two folding road signs along the highway on either side of the Henefer-Divide lek. Now, when birds are strutting, these signs will warn drivers nearing the lek to watch for wildlife on the road ahead. This is particularly important as many birds spend time on the pavement, but are not visible from a distance due to the landscape.