

**Monticello/Dove Creek Gunnison Sage-grouse LWG
Meeting Minutes
February 18, 2010
Senior Citizens Center, Dove Creek, CO**

Present

Lorien Belton, USU Extension
Sue Bellagama, TNC
Chris Kloster, Colorado DOW
Guy Wallace, Utah DWR
Bob Barry, Conservation District
Kathy Nickell, BLM
Marilyn Boynton
Leroy Mead, Utah DWR
Kelly and Porter Bradford

Information – Presented/Discussed

Review of previous minutes – Lorien Belton

Minutes from the October 2009 meeting were reviewed throughout the meeting as each topic arose.

Status Review

Chris Kloster provided an update to the status review for Gunnison sage-grouse. A determination is anticipated in June. Options for when the USFWS makes its decision could be: not warranted, warranted but precluded, threatened, endangered, or others. The annual status review information was provided to Amy Seglund for compiling across the range.

Marilyn asked whether it is true that more can be done for a species if it is not listed than if it is. Chris explained that this is true in part. Once a species becomes listed the jurisdiction for that species shifts from the state level to the federal level and the additional coordination can slow project implementation. The federal agency (USFWS) often relies on the local biologists in the state agencies to do much of the work. No extra money comes attached to federal listings, either.

Several individuals asked what landowner concerns should be if the grouse were listed. Chris explained that a listing can slow the issuance of “federal” permits due to the increased level of analysis. Also, if a threatened determination is made the Service may develop a 4D rule which would explain what could and could not be done, effectively spelling out the rules. Those rules would be what restrict actions (or constitute “take”)

that affect the species, so it would depend on what they contain once they are written for each species.

CRP Status

San Juan County has 26,000 acres due to come out of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) this year. Nationwide, CRP will be prioritized, and not all of it will be bale to stay in CPR. It would be interesting to see what affect a Gunnison sage-grouse federal listing would have on the prioritization of CRP lands, since CRP lands are crucial to grouse in many areas.

Lorien updated the group with information from Terry Messmer, who says that the new CRP rules have just come out. USU, DWR, and NRCS will be meeting with Lori Jones with Utah FSA to finalize rules and ranking. Also, the San Juan County Commission wrote a letter to FSA requesting that San Juan County be included as a priority conservation area.

Chris Kloster says he is working to make sure that we do not lose acres currently in CRP that are of benefit to sage-grouse. This Farm Bill program is critical to Gunnison sage-grouse in this area (Colorado). Some CRP as it ages becomes less valuable as sage-grouse habitat. The restoration priorities on the Colorado side are breeding habitat core areas close to leks. Bob Barry and Chris Kloster will speak after the meeting to discuss options for rehabilitating CRP back into sagebrush. The difficulty varies based on what kind of grass is currently there.

On the Utah side, almost half of occupied sage-grouse habitat is in CRP. For the recent status review, Guy noted that he tried to piece together specifically where ag conversion out of CRP happened, so he could look at its relationship to sage-grouse populations, rather than just counting total acres of CRP lost. He noted that it appeared that some ag conversion around one lek may be related to the lek having been abandoned.

One side effect of ag conversion is that smaller areas make sage-grouse more vulnerable to predation. When chicks are older, predation is less of a concern, but having sage-grouse populations concentrated in small habitat areas makes for easy targets for predators.

NFWF Proposal

The working group continued an ongoing discussion about a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grant. NFWF leverages private money with money from federal funds. NFWF had an interest in making Gunnison sage-grouse a keystone initiative species, meaning that they would fund multiple years of work for the bird. Initially, the first year of funding was to be \$800,000, but that is currently likely to be \$400,000 instead. The proposal had to be redone to accommodate that, and all research pieces and coordination were removed, leaving specific habitat enhancement and protection still in the proposal. The hope is that the yearly amount will do back up to \$800,000 in future

years. Although there have been encouraging signs that the money is extremely likely to be finalized, the agreement is still not completed, and it is not clear when the money might arrive. A new application will need to be submitted every year to receive ongoing funding. The money will also need to be matched with non-federal money. This may be possible using money from state sage-grouse efforts as match.

Someone asked who a group of private landowners would go to to get some of the money for a project. Right now that is not exactly clear, as the money has not arrived. A meeting will be called when the money arrives to determine how it will be administered.

Colorado Division of Wildlife – Annual Meeting

The Colorado Division of Wildlife held its annual sage-grouse meeting at the end of January. Topics included research updates and working on a protocol to improve lek counting protocols and assumptions. There may be a guide out next year. Lorien mentioned that Dave Dalgren, a postdoc at USU, is working on a similar project. Chris Kloster will contact Terry to learn more.

Roring Re-seeding Project

Marilyn Boynton presented an idea for a reseeded project on the Roring property. She has spoken with a number of individuals and concluded that hand-seeding to restore an area of range would be a great project for an Eagle Scout (Porter Bradford, who attended the meeting). The area in question has heavy grazing during a short time of the year and the range is in need of rehabilitation. There is currently very little understory. Reseeding would not be feasible via mechanical methods. Marilyn proposed a large community involvement project for reseeded approximately 300 acres by hand, using about \$10,000 in seed. An NRCS program could pick up three quarters of the cost but another \$2500 would need to be raised.

Leroy noted that the UDWR would be interested in helping fund a project like this but he that it would be important to learn from past experiences in similar areas to make sure that seeding was done in an effective way.

The group discussed the project idea, and expressed some concerns about the likelihood of germination given the range conditions. The group was very much in favor of removing cattle from the area to rest the rangeland. It was determined that further conversation and project planning was needed to get all parties on the same page and ensure a successful project. Marilyn, Sue, Leroy, and Guy will meet separately to address the details of the project.

Everyone agreed that getting the community involved in a project like this is a great idea, although given the funding timelines for NRCS and possible UPCD money, as well as the need to wait until later in the year to spread seed, this project might not happen on a

timeframe that worked for the particular Eagle Scout in question. Regarding general volunteer needs, it was noted that the Conservation Districts can find volunteers, and that there are also 500 boy scouts at camp nearby who might be looking for service projects.

Leroy noted that he has sagebrush seedling planting projects that might be of interest to volunteers or Eagle Scouts.

Flight ideas for helicopter surveys

Lorien mentioned that the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is looking for a list of possible areas to search for additional leks. Guy Wallace will send that information to Jason Robinson in Salt Lake.

Chris is interested to see how helicopter surveys of Gunnison sage-grouse go, because many birds he works with spend so little time on the leks in the morning that reaching very many leks while they are active, even with a helicopter, might be challenging.

Conservation Easement Updates

Sue Bellagama gave a brief update on the conservation easement under discussion at previous meetings. The situation is complicated due to sub-surface mineral rights. Because the landowners do not own all of the mineral rights, and they are not interested in giving up the potential to develop those they do own, The Nature Conservancy does not feel it is willing to take on this easement. Sue noted that they hope that the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources might be interested in considering taking it on, but due to past pressure TNC has regarding conflicts of interest on lands in easement, they are withdrawing from this project. Sue and Guy will meet to discuss possible next steps.

This raised the related issue that it would be very valuable to better understand if, or how, it is possible to extract oil, gas, or minerals without disturbing sage-grouse in an area. This will continue to be an issue with other easements in the future, and there is a need for more information on how to handle it appropriately so as to balance development and conservation. It is important also for TNC to be putting money into easements that provide the expected benefits. The best situation for TNC is when landowners own the subsurface rights and can make a complete easement without split estate issues.

Upcoming Meetings and Next LWG Meeting Date

The group set the next meeting date tentatively for May 4th, at a location to be determined, pending Terry Messmer's availability.

The FWS will be holding an informational meeting to explain HCP, the 4D rule, and other topic related to a possible Gunnison listing. Chris will arrange for a FWS person to come to a LWG meeting to present this information.

Guy noted that viewing days would be April 3rd and April 17th.

The annual rangewide Gunnison sage-grouse meeting will take place in Montrose, Colorado on March 19th. It was noted that one item of interest would be a discussion of how the Utah populations have been able to increase in recent years and what actions may have contributed. Neither Terry nor Guy will be able to attend. USU Extension folks will work to find someone else who can attend that meeting and represent this working group.

Submitted by: Lorien Belton