

**UINTAH BASIN  
LOCAL  
WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date:** 12/12/18

**Place:** DNR office, Vernal, Utah

**Present:** Brian Maxfield (UDWR), Charlie Holtz (Pheasants Forever/SGL), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Greg Todd (Duchesne County), Terrell Thayne (UDAF GIP), Tory Mathis (UDWR), Chris Perkins (BLM), Natasha Hadden (BLM), Ben Nadolski (DNR), Nathan Hall (DEQ), Jason Kelton (USFS), Mark Ewell (NRCS), Ethan Hallows (STILA), Bob Christensen (USFS), and Lorien Belton (USU Extension facilitator).

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

*Personnel transitions*

Ethan Hallows is the new SITLA representative here. Scott Chamberlain is focusing on the southwest corner of the state, Slate Stewart on the southeast, and Ethan has everything from Juab County north.

Chris Perkins (formerly with Wildlife Services) is now a biologist with the BLM in Vernal.

*Conference save-the-date*

There will be a Utah sage-grouse conference in Salt Lake from February 5-7, 2019. It includes updates on Utah sage-grouse research and policy, as well as speakers from other states. An announcement will be coming via the CBCP listserv soon.

*Federal planning updates*

Lorien provided an overview of the ongoing planning efforts by Forest Service and BLM. BLM, USFS, and the state of Utah have all have been working on revising sage-grouse plans over the past year. Everything being revised at once has provided a lot of opportunity for working to align the plans, as well as making for a challenging planning task. The primary reason given for the federal revisions was to align more closely with state plans, so overall the three plans will work together more efficiently.

The Forest Service draft EIS proposes removal of SFAs. The preferred (“management alignment”) alternative proposes that Anthro Mountain become priority habitat, while the Utah alternative proposes that GHMA be removed entirely, as well as formal habitat designations for Anthro Mountain. Other changes proposed for the Forest Service plan include removing the 7-inch stubble height requirement and some grazing permit renewal considerations. A more locally-relevant set of desired conditions will replace the previous guidelines. It was noted that some grazing lease on Anthro Mountain have expired. Formal comments on the USFS amendments EIS are due January 3.

BLM's final EIS was just released December 6th. Major changes include the removal of Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) as well as the general habitat designation (GHMA). The boundary areas of Priority habitat will now match closely with the state of Utah's sage-grouse management areas (SGMAs). It is in the protest period right now.

### *Population and research updates*

Brian Maxfield presented to the group on the collared sage-grouse that DWR, BLM, and USFS are jointly tracking in the Basin. Highlights include:

- 43 collars is the most that have been out at one time this year. There were collars on Blue Mountain, Little Mountain, Taylor Mountain, Anthro Mountain, and Three Corners.
- Adult survival has been terrible this year. All the birds on Anthro either died or slipped out of their collars. There also appears to have been a lot of raptor predation; at least some from golden eagles. The poor survival wasn't unexpected, as that often tracks with lek counts.
- There were some birds that did long-distance trips, one to Colorado in the monument, and one into a treatment area.
- Hunting of the birds was down as well: 61 two-birds tags were issued (so 122 birds could theoretically have been taken), but only 15-20 wings ended up in the barrels. Hunting would be halted if the Diamond Mountain population went below 500 breeding birds.
- Transmitters will be put back out in the spring. Until BLM and USFS funding runs out, the collars will continue to be monitored and redeployed when recovered.

### *State plan updates*

Ben Nadolski presented to the group about updates to the state of Utah's sage-grouse plan. The state worked very closely with BLM and USFS during their revisions as well. Everyone has focused on getting plans that work well together.

The state plan from 2013 was due for an update. Major elements of the plan hasn't changed: still using SGMAs, it is still voluntary, and still based on threats and seasonal habitat considerations.

Structural changes include improved formatting and readability, goals and objectives more clearly linked to threats, threats categorized as either statewide (like fire, PJ, and invasive weeds) or local, depending on local issues.

Specific new changes include updated science, no longer providing maps of opportunity areas (the concept remains, but decisions need to be made on the ground), process clarity for authorizing and revising the plan, and clarified reporting requirements. Mesic habitat improvement goals are now part of the plan. "Other" habitat has been renamed "transitional" to be more clear. The roles of the LWGs is also clearer in the plan. Population viability and trend goals from the last plan have been combined into metrics that will allow the state to be more

proactive and stay in front of any hard or soft triggers that the federal plans might have. Seasonal habitat mapping is going to be based on a jointly funded new system that all agencies (BLM, USFS, and state of Utah) will be able to use.

The plan will be more adaptive as well. The appendices are now being kept online, so they can be updated with new science or map boundaries as needed. The disturbance cap still needs additional coordination work to be streamlined between the many agencies involved, so figuring that out is a goal from the plan, rather than writing the details in. There are also MOUs with other state agencies and the federal agencies in order to improve coordination and help one another implement each other's plans. The new compensatory mitigation program is included as well. There is more emphasis on invasive weeds, and the role of the PIC is clarified.

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### *Round-robin updates*

- GIP has an upcoming deadline; let Terrell know if you know of interested landowners.
- The tribe has completed the Towanna Flats mowing project, which was done in the hopes of moving strutting birds off the road in the area.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Anyone with comments about the USFS plans to submit through the working group should reach out to Lorien.

### **Next Meeting:**

The next meeting was not set but may make sense to combine with the UPCD project planning meeting (Jan 29) so as to avoid duplication of conversations; that worked well last year.