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GOVERNOR HERBERT ISSUES EXECUTIVE ORDER TO IMPLEMENT UTAH SAGE-GROUSE PLAN

Governor Gary R. Herbert was joined by his top cabinet officials as he issued an executive order (EO) to help ensure a healthy sustainable population for the greater sage-grouse. The EO ensures that state agencies in Utah do their part to prevent an Endangered Species listing. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is under court order to decide whether to list the greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act by September 2015.

Greater sage-grouse currently are found in 11 states with approximately 4 percent of the total bird population living in Utah. "Utah is committed to good environmental stewardship. Signing the executive order has to be done in a serious and thoughtful way, addressing the bird's habitat, as well as the needs of society, private landowners and the economy," said Gov. Gary R. Herbert. "Today is an important step forward for us and I believe it shows we are serious about protecting



Governor Gary R. Herbert (seated in center) signing an Executive Order to help ensure healthy habitat for greater sage-grouse balanced with the best interests of the citizens of Utah. Photo courtesy of Utah Governor's Office.

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the greater sage-grouse while balancing the best interests of the state.”

The State of Utah has already developed a conservation plan for greater sage-grouse that addresses the most significant threats to the bird population. It is a robust plan that protects 94 percent of Utah's sage-grouse and is based on decades of research and experience.

The EO prioritizes state agency actions when it comes to the greater sage-grouse. The order also sets up a series of proactive steps that will be undertaken by state oil and gas regulators when it comes to permitting any new activity and directs watershed restoration efforts to encompass sage-grouse areas.

Kathleen Clarke, Director of the Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, said the five-page order sends a message to the federal government that Utah is serious and puts in play a regulatory mechanism for state agencies to follow. Gov. Herbert's order validates local community efforts. The EO highlighted the efforts of Utah's sage-grouse working groups who have worked closely with researchers at USU and Brigham Young University to further knowledge of the bird's ecology and to provide science-based best practices to protect and increase

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BOX ELDER LANDOWNERS RECOGNIZED AT APPRECIATION DINNER

By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

“If it’s not good for the community, it’s not good for wildlife,” was the theme of the Box Elder County Landowner Appreciation Dinner held February 4 in Park Valley, Utah. The Utah Public Land Policy Coordination Office (PLPCO), Utah State University (USU) Extension, and Box Elder Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) teamed up to recognize the efforts of landowners to implement the Utah Greater Sage-grouse Plan and support research being conducted by USU to evaluate sage-grouse responses to conservation practices being implemented by private landowners.

Diane Tanner, CRM Coordinator, welcomed the 80 plus landowners and their families that attended the event. She introduced Kathleen Clarke, PLPCO Director, who provided opening comments. Ms. Clarke readily acknowledged she was among long-time friends and expressed her personal thanks for the commitment and dedication of the landowners in supporting the Utah Plan. She provided an update on Utah’s efforts to implement a plan balancing economic needs and sustainable sage-grouse conservation. She also discussed issues surrounding the upcoming sage-grouse listing decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Her take home message was that the Governor Herbert and her office remain committed to supporting local Utah communities.

Dr. Terry Messmer, USU Extension, spoke briefly on the science used to develop the Utah Sage-grouse Plan and the role of private lands in building that science base in Utah. Both Messmer and Clarke emphasized the importance of private lands on sage-grouse conservation and research efforts. Charles Sanford, USU graduate student, provided an update on research currently on-going in the West Box Elder area.

Box Elder County Commissioner Jeff Hatfield concluded the evening by expressing his personal thanks and support on behalf of the County Commission. He acknowledged and commended the community for taking the lead in demonstrating that conservation is also good for business.



Kathleen Clarke – Director, Public Land Policy Coordination Office updated the group on the Utah Plan implementation.



Terry Messmer, USU Extension Service, thanked the landowners for allowing access to their lands to document sage-grouse response to conservation practices.



Charles Sanford, USU graduate student, summarized his 2014 research results. Sage-grouse production was good in 2014.



Jeff Hatfield, Box Elder County Commissioner, expressed the continued support of the County’s elected officials for the efforts of the CRM.



Dinner was provided by the Park Valley EMTS as a fundraiser to support their program.



Landowner dinner participants.

Photos on this page courtesy of Leah Lewis, NRCS.

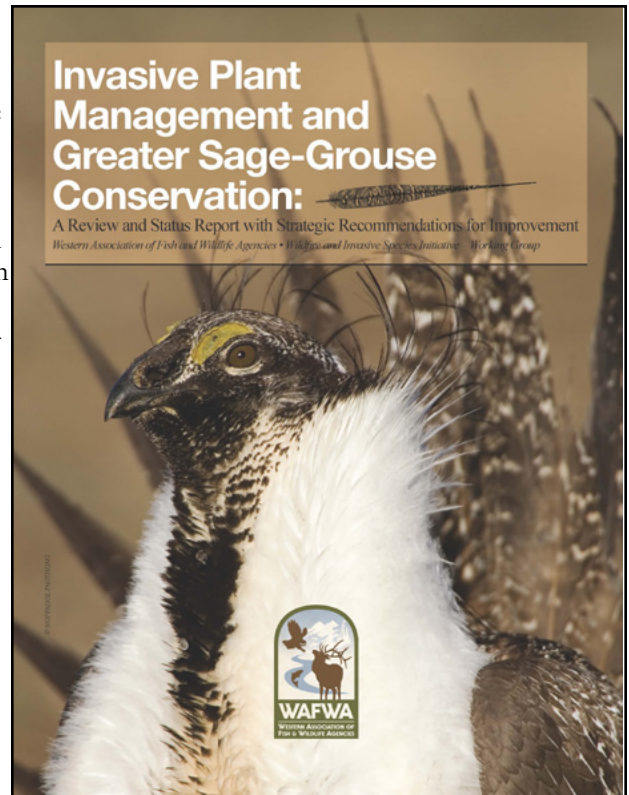
The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) recently released a report entitled “*Invasive Plant Management and Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation: A Review and Status Report with Strategic Recommendations for Improvement*”. This publication is a product of the WAFWA, Wildfire and Invasive Initiative Working Group.

The conversion of native sagebrush habitats to invasive annual grasslands has been an issue for western rangelands for decades. Wildfire has a direct effect on Greater Sage-grouse habitat and has been shown to have a significant association with invasive non-native annual grasses. In addition to altering the fire regime, invasive plants can significantly transform ecosystems by altering their basic species composition.

The purpose of this report is to provide a high-level review of information related to the effects and management of invasive plants across an 11-state area that currently provides habitat for sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate wildlife species. The report can be found on-line at (<http://wafwa.org/html/sagegrouse.shtml>).

Included in the report is a background section with a general overview of the threat of invasive species across the range and a description of impacts of invasive species on sagebrush habitats. The second section describes the current infrastructure and organization of invasive species management programs at the federal, state, local, and private-lands levels, including cooperative efforts and partnerships. The third section highlights the invasive species management program activities currently underway, and how well they appear to be working. The last section makes recommendations for improvement.

This report is the fourth in this series of reports and identifies and assesses the management of invasive plants within the range of Greater Sage-grouse. Other reports on the website include: *Near Term Sage-Grouse Conservation Action Plan*, *Interagency Sage-grouse Conservation Implementation MOU*, *Fire and Fuels Management Contributions to Sage-Grouse Conservation*, and *Wildfire and Invasive Species in the West: Challenges that Hinder Current and Future Management and Protection of the Sagebrush-steppe ecosystem – A Gap Report*.



EXECUTIVE ORDER, CONT.

sage-grouse habitat and populations.

“The executive order fully implements the Utah Sage-grouse Conservation Plan, which was built on nearly two decades of research and local working group involvement,” says Terry Messmer, Quinney Professor for Wildlife Conflict Management in USU’s Department of Wildland Resources. “It establishes a framework for increased coordination and communication among state agencies to benefit the species and sustain local communities.”

Messmer is quick to recognize Utah citizens who jump-started the conservation efforts. “Our research started in 1996 with a \$3,000 check given to me by rancher Andy Taft of Piute County’s Parker Mountain Grazing Association,” he says. “We have more than 40 public and private funding partners now, but that initial level of commitment and passion has sustained and defined our efforts throughout the years.”

Ken White, Vice President for USU Extension, congratulated Messmer and his team. “Terry and his colleagues are making a tremendous impact in Utah and across the region,” White says. “Their work is a great example of how Extension’s ability to get up-to-date, research-based information to people can help resolve issues that affect people and their communities.”

The governor’s EO directs state agencies to minimize the impact of activities on sage-grouse, consult with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources on decisions that could affect sage-grouse habitat, incorporate directives from the conservation plan into state operations and report on Utah efforts. Local working group involvement will continue to play an important part in the implementation of the Utah Sage-grouse Conservation Plan.

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

NEW RESEARCH BEGINNING IN MORGAN AND SUMMIT COUNTIES



Brandon Flack is a graduate student at Utah State University working toward a Master's degree in Wildlife Biology. Photos courtesy of Brandon Flack.

Brandon Flack, a graduate student at Utah State University, has just started a new research project in Morgan and Summit Counties to gain valuable information on sage-grouse living in the area. The Morgan-Summit Adaptive Resource Management (MSARM) sage-grouse local working group (LWG) has developed a conservation plan with the goal of maintaining, and where possible, increasing sage-grouse populations and improving habitat conditions in the area. However, very little is known about the ecology of these specific sage-grouse populations. In order for meaningful conservation actions to take place, sage-grouse nesting, brooding, and wintering habitat use areas, as well as migratory corridors need to be identified. Most of the land in these counties is privately owned and managed for livestock grazing.

From his study, Brandon will provide more information about sage-grouse habitat use on these privately owned lands as well as vital rates associated with those areas. He will also identify potential migratory corridors or habitat fragmentation by tracking and documenting seasonal movements of sage-grouse in these population complexes. With permission from many local landowners to access their properties, Brandon and his technician are beginning to collect data on sage-grouse marked with radio-collars equipped with a global positioning system (GPS) transmitter. The GPS transmitters will give us up to nine sage-grouse locations daily. Research updates will be provided to the LWG during the project and a thesis will be published when the project is concluded. This information will help the MSARM LWG develop effective management actions that will benefit sage-grouse populations in this area.

Special thanks to the landowners who have graciously allowed access to their properties. Without access to private lands, this research would not be possible.

Specific questions addressed in Brandon's study are:

1. What are the seasonal migration patterns and associated vital rates of the sage-grouse populations in the Morgan-Summit SGMA?
2. Are there specific travel corridors that these sage-grouse use to get from breeding locations to preferred nesting, brooding, and winter use habitats?
3. How are these migration patterns affected by differing land uses and habitat fragmentation?
4. What habitats are preferred by these sage-grouse populations for nesting, brooding, and winter use areas and do they differ from random sites in vegetation structure and composition?
5. How is preferred habitat selection influenced by land use and habitat fragmentation?
6. Given the various levels of land-use in the Morgan-Summit SGMA, what is the spatial extent of potentially available nesting, brooding, and winter use habitats and how much of the available habitat is being used?



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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