

Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management Local Working Group

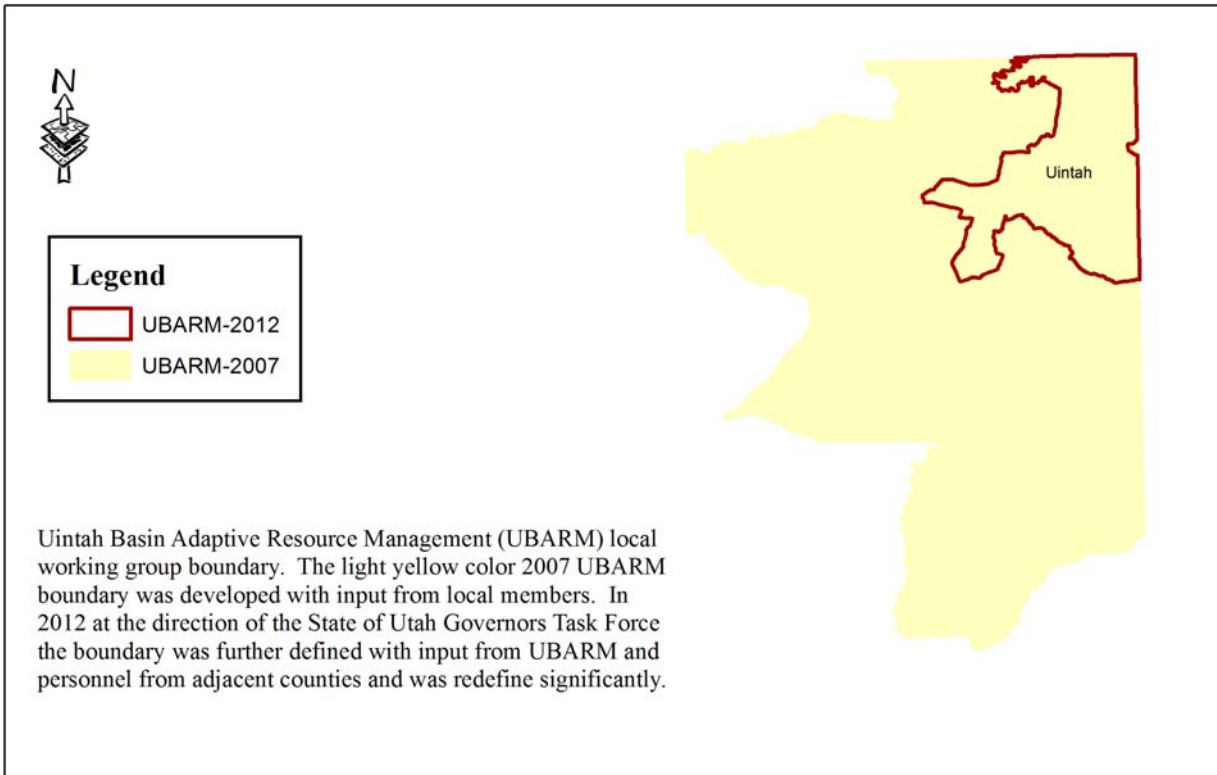


Figure 11. The Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management (UBARM) Sage-grouse Local Working Group and new Sage-grouse Management Area.



The Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management (UBARM) sage-grouse local working group is facilitated by Ms. Lorien Belton. UBARM meets three times yearly: a spring meeting, a summer field tour, and a fall meeting. The group may meet more frequently as the need arises. Upcoming meetings will address plan revisions and updates.

Description of Area and General Population Information

The Uintah Basin sage-grouse group covers parts of Duchesne, Uintah, and Daggett counties. A large population with multiple leks inhabits the Diamond Mountain area north of Vernal. This area has mixed landownership, including private, state, and federal lands, and is used primarily for agricultural purposes. The Diamond Mountain population is one of the few populations in Utah that is robust enough to support a limited sport hunt in the fall. Additional sage-grouse populations occur south and west of Vernal in areas including Forest Service land on Anthro Mountain, and BLM land further south. The southern populations in particular are in areas that have been highly impacted by oil and gas development. Some populations also occur farther south into the Book Cliffs. Populations on Seep Ridge, Deadman Bench, Little Mountain,

Anthro Mountain, and Diamond Mountain have been the subject of research studies in recent years.

2012 Conservation Strategies and Actions

The LWG continued efforts to improve sage-grouse habitat, engage private landowners, and learn about local sage-grouse populations.

Many UBARM members participated extensively in multiple conservation planning processes for sage-grouse taking place. This included:

- Discussions at meetings that contributed to revisions of both the threats chart and the strategies and actions sections of the local sage-grouse conservation plan – the guiding document for the UBARM group’s efforts.
- Participation in scoping meetings during the initial phases of development of the Utah EIS which will guide implementation of BLM and USFS amendments to include sage-grouse recommendations over the coming years.
- Active involvement and attendance by several UBARM members in the Governor’s Task Force sage-grouse planning meetings, including Uintah County Commissioner Mike McKee, who served on the Governor’s group; Brian Maxfield, who provided extensive input on sage-grouse mapping efforts; and UBARM co-chair Dave Allison, who provided thorough commentary on drafts and the effort overall. Additional recommendations on planning drafts and map boundaries from numerous group members were compiled from UBARM full meetings, UBARM sub-team recommendations, and individual comments.
- Considerable support from Uintah County, toward efforts to incorporate sage-grouse planning stipulations into county plans in the future.
- The facilitator kept UBARM members up to date with aspects of the various ongoing planning processes via email and at meetings.

In addition to extensive involvement with planning processes, UBARM participants individually and with their organizations continued to make progress on the strategies and actions outlined in the UBARM conservation plan. This includes:

- Numerous lop-and-scatter or bull hog projects to remove pinyon-juniper encroaching into sagebrush in sage-grouse habitat areas. Many of these project were funded by the Watershed Restoration Initiative, and reviewed by the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UBPCD) to ensure that the benefits to sage-grouse are clear during project planning. Relevant projects include Raven’s Ridge Phase 3, and Jeep Trail/Gilsonite.
- Strong efforts to involve private landowners in the Sage-Grouse Initiative, including pinyon juniper removal projects, water developments, and other projects to benefit sage-grouse.
- Ongoing research, much of which was completed in 2012 or is nearing completion. USU research on Anthro Mountain and BYU research on Diamond Mountain both engaged graduated students in collaring sage-grouse, tracking movements, and analyzing habitat.
- In March of 2012, Lorien Belton, the UBARM facilitator, met with the Uintah County Commissioners to update them on sage-grouse issues and the work of UBARM members.
- UDWR radio-collared several birds in 2012 on Taylor Mountain, and are actively tracking those birds to learn more about population movements in the area. DWR also

continues to track birds from USU and BYU research projects until the collars are no longer detectable.

- UBARM members joined other members of the UBPCD group on a field trip in June 2012. The group toured pinyon juniper removal projects throughout the Book Cliffs, including several designed specifically for sage-grouse.
- Education and outreach efforts to ranchers on sage-grouse. As part of a June 21st, 2012 workshop run by the Utah Department of Agriculture's Grazing Improvement Program (GIP), Natasha Gruber, the local SGI biologist, presented sage-grouse issues and habitat needs to a group of beginning ranchers in the UBARM area.

Project and Research Highlights

Utah State University graduate student Orrin Duvuvuei finished work on Anthro Mountain in 2012. After spring trapping and a final season of work to study all the collared birds, Orrin is now finalizing the results of his research. This research followed up on previous research in the same area begun by Natasha Gruber, who tracked local and translocated birds. Brian Maxfield of UDWR, will continue to track the birds. Orrin's 2012 annual report can be found on-line at <http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/uintah/Anthro2012AnnualReport.pdf>. Natasha Gruber's thesis can be found on-line at <http://utahcbcp.org/files/uploads/uintah/NatashaGruberThesisFinal.pdf>.

Brigham Young University researchers have also recently ended field work on sage-grouse research on Diamond Mountain. After final trapping this spring and a field season of tracking and monitoring chick survival, habitat use, etc., graduate student Josh Kaze is now analyzing data. Continued monitoring of collared birds by Brian Maxfield will help establish a greater understanding of seasonal habitat movements in the area.

Numerous projects with sage-grouse habitat benefit potential were funded in Utah's Northeastern Region in 2012. The majority of these projects were pinyon-juniper removal, although several sagebrush habitat improvements and riparian habitat work are also included. Many of the projects took place on Diamond Mountain. For reference, project numbers for these projects in the WRI database are as follows: 2301, 2300, 2298, 2274, 2283, 2273, 2266, 2268, 2230.

Revision of Threat Matrix and Strategies Sections of Local Plan

The threat matrix was revised by the group over a series of meetings extending through the past year and a half (Table 9). Each individual threat level (the intersection of a specific threat and a specific element of the sage-grouse life cycle) in the plan was considered separately. The group debated whether additional information was known, or if conditions had changed from when the plan was written, when considering adjustments to any threat level. Numerous threat levels were adjusted accordingly. Changes from the table developed in 2006 reflect:

- Increasing concern over weeds and drought conditions
- Decreasing concern over the impact of OHV recreation and West Nile Virus
- Decreasing concern over incompatible vegetation management, attributed to a large degree to increased awareness of vegetation management strategies to improve, rather than harm, habitat.

- Increased concern over impacts of oil and gas development, based on dramatically increased energy production, existing and proposed, in the UBARM area.
- Addition of a separate row for “fences,” which was disaggregated from the threat category with powerlines and other tall structures due to concerns about proposed high voltage transmission lines as well as additional information on fence strikes

The group has not completed the task of finalizing the revised chart, which is based on general consensus of attending members over several meetings. The current draft of the chart, which still has several unresolved discussion items in the energy development, is included here.

Map Revisions

During the Governor’s Task Force Planning process, draft statewide maps for sage-grouse management areas were developed. They received extensive comments from UBARM members at a well-attended meeting in May 2012, as well as during other subsequent opportunities. The proposed management area focuses primarily on the Diamond Mountain population. The draft boundaries exclude sage-grouse populations south of Vernal. Although the map boundaries have not been finalized, they will serve as the focus for implementation of the state sage-grouse management plan. Populations in those areas will be subject to stipulations, also still in draft form, for sage-grouse protections. The UBARM group will likely play a large role in the implementation of the plan, but will also stay aware of sage-grouse populations in other areas of the Uintah Basin. Those populations are delineated in GIS shape files available from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

Summary of Major Issues and/or Concerns

The UBARM group continued to develop projects, participate in multiple planning processes, and conduct outreach according to the revised strategies and actions in the local conservation plan. In the upcoming year, particular focus will be placed on:

- Understanding results of research on local populations, including analysis of data gathered toward understanding impacts of habitat work on sage-grouse
- Work to expand private landowner awareness of sage-grouse issues and encourage use of SGI funds for project implementation, particularly for pinyon-juniper removal projects.
- Revise the local conservation plan to address new information
- Continue implementing sage-grouse habitat improvements through the UBPCD process.
- Continue efforts to engage and assist counties in sage-grouse planning processes, particularly with respect to county-level participation in the governor’s sage-grouse planning efforts
- Develop strategies for how best to address the needs of sage-grouse populations outside the state sage-grouse management area.
- Find ways to coordinate with the Carbon-Emery working group (CaCoARM).
- Participate as appropriate (providing timely comments, etc) in the BLM/USFS plan amendment processes for inclusion of stipulations for sage-grouse into Resource Management Plans and Forest Plans.

Major issues for the UBARM group continue to include finding a balance between energy development (including extraction and other infrastructure, such as transmission lines). The inclusion of private landowners and in sage-grouse conservation and habitat improvement efforts, both via voluntary work and carefully planned county-level programs or stipulations, will be a primary concern and ongoing challenge. The group has a wide participation from many industries, agencies, levels of government, and private concerns, so has excellent opportunities to address these challenges.

Table 9. Relative importance/contribution of individual threats (given current and foreseeable scenarios) to reducing or degrading aspects of sage-grouse populations in the UBARM Resource Area. Threats are described in the “Threat Analysis” section of this Plan. Ranks are defined according to TNC (2005).

Threat	Aspects of Sage-grouse population in the UBARM Resource Area							
	Reduced population size	Population distribution	Reduced lek habitat quality	Reduced nesting/early brood-rearing habitat quality	Reduced summer/late brood-rearing habitat quality	Reduced winter habitat quality	Reduced connectivity of seasonal habitat types	Reduced connectivity of populations & sub-populations
Home and cabin development	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Powerlines & other tall structures	Medium	Medium	High	High	Medium	Medium	Low	Low
Fences	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low	-	-
Oil & gas development	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	High
Roads	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	High	Medium
Drought and weather	High	-	Low	High	High	High	-	-
Hunting pressure	Low	Low	-	-	-	-	-	-
Incompatible fire management practices	-	High	High	High	High	High	High	Medium
Incompatible livestock management (overgrazing)	-	Low	Low	High	High	Low	-	-
OHV recreation	-	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Low	-	-
Invasive/noxious weeds	Low	Medium	High	Very High	Very High	High	Medium	Low
Parasites and disease	Low	Low	-	-	-	-	-	-
Predation	Very High	High	-	-	-	-	-	Low
Incompatible vegetation management	-	-	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Pinyon/juniper encroachment	-	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	High	High	High