

**LOCAL WORKING  
GROUP**

**Date: 11/17/09**

**Time: 9:30 am**

**Place: Uintah County Building**

**Members Present: Kirk Wood (Duchesne County), Diane Coltharp (Uintah County), Drew Crane (USFWS), Bill Rasmussen (UACD), Natasha Gruber (DWR), Boyd Kitchen (USU Extension), Stephanie Tomkinson (Questar), Ben Williams (DWR), Jason Robinson (DWR), David Allison (Uintah County), Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Dixie Sadler (BLM), Alex Hansen, (UDWR), Sherel Goodrich, USFS, Mark Chamberlain, NRCS, Mark Ewell (NRCS), Jim Spencer (NRCS), Bob Christensen (USFS), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, recorder)**

**Information Presented/Discussion Highlights**

**Updates**

Natasha Gruber provided a progress report on the translocations from Parker Mountain to Anthro Mountain. Of the 30 translocated birds, 10 are left. Of 12 resident collared birds, 3 are left. This adult mortality is much higher than would normally be expected. The movements of all remaining birds are being tracked. Most have stayed up on the top of the mountain. New trapping efforts have netted 5 hens caught in recent weeks. Of the 42 chicks captured and fitted with radio transmitters, only 1 remains alive. Most of the chicks dies within the critical first-three-weeks time frame.

Lorien noted that several habitat manipulation projects on Anthro and Deadman Bench are moving forward. The Anthro cattle-grazing study in brood-rearing habitat has been through its first season of data collection (pre-treatment) and the cattle have grazed the study plots. A sheep-grazing project on Deadman Bench is in the NEPA process. A lop and scatter project on Anthro is also ongoing. In each case, data is being gathered to provide data for eventual mitigation credit calculations, to determine how effective each treatment is at improving sage-grouse habitat. Both vegetation and sage-grouse data is being collected for the projects. The projects are being managed by Chris Peterson and Terry Messmer from USU, and are partially funded by the Watershed Restoration Initiative funds as well as an NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant provided to the Cooperative Sagebrush Initiative.

Ben Williams updated the group on the discussions about the WIC compressor station which was originally going to be located close to a lek. A new location appears to have been chosen as the company's final decision. The location is on private land and was originally considered to be too expensive but the company has now worked out a compromise. There will be less sound mitigation on the alternative site but as it is much farther from the lek, this will be less of a

problem. One concern is that they want to begin construction on April 1, 2010, which would be a significant concern and in the middle of the lekking season, because the road to the station's location goes immediately by the lek. It was noted that the county may have an agreement with the company about winter road maintenance, but no one was able to confirm that or provide details.

Jason Robinson noted that Leah Smith's thesis work is done and her thesis is available online. She found that sage-grouse avoided well pads and other specific sites as much as possible, but do not necessarily leave the general area due to site fidelity. The population in the area has recently experienced severe declines.

Drew Crane told the group that a new energy field has been proposed for the East Bench area (Leah's study area, as noted above). The BLM has been discussing doing a better job of protecting sage-grouse by enforcing larger buffers and working to minimize impacts. Dave Allison noted that since we know that population is already in decline, even before additional energy develop occurs there, we should perhaps be discussing habitat projects for the area. Drew explained that the very low precipitation in the area makes it more risky to do habitat projects due to the long recovery time.

Lorien explained that Eric Thacker is also done with his field work on fire on Anthro Mountain and is currently writing his dissertation.

Sherel Goodrich noted that in addition to the lop and scatter project related to Terry Messmer's CSI work, the old chaining units on Anthro mountain are due for lop and scatter. Thousands of acres will be treated over the upcoming ten years. The NEPA is complete for this project.

NRCS staff explained that several private land projects are also occurring. Mark Chamberlain referenced a 100-acre Dixie Harrow project in the Ruble cabin area off Jone's Hole Road. Also, an area up Jackson draw, where sagebrush was removed last fall, will be reseeded to increase the forb diversity and density. That project is approximately 600 acres. A third project, by Bonita, involves an historical migration route. Last year a PJ chaining was done and reseeded; this year more PJ was chained and will soon be reseeded. Jim Spencer notes that a small private Dixie Harrow project adjacent to tribal land has taken place to remove old sagebrush and pinyon-juniper, and has been reseeded as well.

Boyd Kitchen has been working with Bob Newhall on a plot hear Nehi, examining how to rehabilitate crested wheatgrass stands. Boyd is working with the data and will keep the group informed. The group discussed the possibility of changing grazing timing on that area to control the crested wheat. Sherel noted that spring grazing can help convert crested wheat back to a mixed sagebrush area. One challenge would be the lack of water in the Little Mountain area, so water would have to be trucked in for the cattle. The group supported the need for learning more and seeing how the area might be improved for sage-grouse and elk by reducing the uniform stands of crested. Dixie Sadler can check to see who has a permit on the area, in order to discuss further grazing project options.

Dave Allison noted that potential future development on Little Mountain could be a threat to sage-grouse in the future.

Dave asked Dixie if the BLM had distributed new sage-grouse recommendations yet internally. As yet they have not come across her desk.

### **Presentation by Jason Robinson**

Jason Robinson gave a 20-minute presentation which included a review of basic sage-grouse ecology and region-wide trends, Utah population trends, and the status of both the revised Utah state sage-grouse management plan and the federal endangered species listing.

One item he emphasized is that Appendix 5 in the state plan, which is the only remaining element of the plan which has not been approved by the RACs and Wildlife Board, should be of particular interest to the UBARM group. Appendix 5 addresses development concerns, including oil, gas, solar, wind, and other issues. When the opportunity to comment on the draft plan arises, it would be good to have the feedback of this group in particular since it is a greater issue in the Basin than for sage-grouse populations in some other areas of the state. Jason's hope is that this Appendix can be completed and approved by the end of January.

Jason noted that one of the challenges of the plan is to try to maintain some consistency with others states' regulations (which already may not be consistent), while still addressing the uniqueness of Utah's sage-grouse populations, which are more isolated and broadly dispersed than population groups in neighboring states, particularly Wyoming.

The current date for the federal listing decision to be published in the Federal Register is February 26, 2010. The Studies in Avian Biology chapters, which were one reason for the most recent delay of the listing decision, are now available.

### **UPCD Process and Project Review Changes**

Lorien noted that the Uintah Basin Partners for Conservation and Development process for commenting on Watershed Restoration Initiative projects has changed. All projects are now entered into a publicly accessible database at <http://wri.utah.gov>. Anyone with an account can comment on projects. To obtain an account, go to the website and apply for one (as a "project manager" regardless of whether you have any projects to submit yourself). The hope is that online comments will provide a public forum for constructive criticism of the projects, such as that found in the UPCD meetings when managers present their projects, but provide more time for everyone to leave thoughtful comments and give managers the opportunity to respond and make changes to projects if necessary before they are submitted for final funding review.

Dave Allison noted that the UBPCD group was concerned that local control over the process was being taken away by the new system. Several group members noted that local control had as

much to do with commenting on projects and proposing projects that we want to see as it did with the ranking system to prioritize funding. The previous ranking system was not used exactly the same way by those charged with funding the projects as may have been perceived by the UBPCD group, since in some cases, funders were interested in specific kinds of projects regardless of their rank.

Kirk Wood noted that there was some potential that future oil and gas mitigation money might be able to provide a local funding source for some projects, although several attendees expressed uncertainty about how much money would be available.

### **Strategies and Actions Planning Discussion**

Lorien asked the group to review a somewhat consolidated version of the strategies and action in the local sage-grouse conservation plan, in order to document what is being planned for the upcoming year. This will ease reporting on projects next year, as well as provide important evidence of the value that the UBARM group has.

**Strategy 1:** Increase **cooperation and coordination** between UBARM and public and private partners.

**Actions planned:** Tribal involvement: Lorien will contact Karen Corts of the tribe and discuss greater tribal involvement in the LWG. If the LWG should write a letter in support of tribal attendance, that can be done. Lorien would draft the letter if needed. To increase landowner involvement, Lorien will contact landowners who used to attend to ask them why they no longer attend. The LWG needs to communicate to landowners that their involvement has been and continues to be critical, maybe using a one-page flyer to encourage meeting attendance and review relevant reasons to attend, past and present. One meeting per year will also be scheduled in the evening, and be focused on landowners. The upcoming March meeting should be that meeting, both as a reminder that the group exists, and information on how to manage whatever the listing decision is, which we should know by then.

**Strategy 2:** Increase **information/education opportunities** with local community and UBARM partners.

**Actions planned:** The group will explore the possibility of doing a PAWS-ON program, as well as inquire about having a sage-grouse focused station at the farm field day through Farm Bureau. Lorien will communicate with Brian Maxfield and others regarding PAWS-ON, and Boyd Kitchen and Andrea Schoenfield for Farm Bureau field day activities. In addition to active outreach, the group wants to inform the public of the listing decision once it happens, in a format to be determined. Also, the group requested that Lorien work to get an article in the local paper prior to the decision, noting that it is coming up, that UBARM is working to prevent a listing, and possibly how industry might be affected. Nancy Spurlock is the contact for the paper.

**Strategy 3:** By 2016, **increase brood-rearing habitat quality** in the Resource Area.

**Actions planned:** Work by Chris Peterson on Deadman bench, the lop-and-scatter on Anthro Mountain, and work being done on tribal land is all focused on improving brood-rearing habitat areas. In addition, a 600-acre seeding on Diamond Mountain (an NRCS project) could improve brood-rearing habitat, according to Mark Chamberlain.

**Strategy 4:** By 2016, **increase population and habitat monitoring efforts** in the Resource Area

**Actions planned:** Upcoming and ongoing monitoring efforts in the area include Natasha Gruber's collaring and translocation work, ongoing yearly UDWR lek counts, and UPCD project monitoring on some projects, including burn usage. Chris Peterson's studies will be monitored for sage-grouse. Lorien will ask Karen Corts what monitoring the tribe is doing. The group noted that much of Connolly does not apply well in the Basin because it was not written for lower precipitation zones.

**Strategy 5:** By 2016, work with public and private partners to **reduce invasive/noxious plant species**, especially in areas used for nesting and brood-rearing

**Actions planned:** Forest Service does ongoing weed control, the UWDR has weed control projects on Diamond Mountain and works to control spotted knapweed and musk thistle on DWR property (re: Matt Warner). The BLM reclamation team will also be addressing weed issues.

**Strategy 6:** By 2016, minimize **effects of roads and utilities** in areas used by sage-grouse

**Actions planned:** Work continues to mitigate the effects of the compressor station. Power lines will be buried related to that project. Two large power lines, TransWest and South Gate, are scheduled to come through the Basin. It is unclear how that may affect sage-grouse, but the FWS has a division that is reviewing possible impacts.

**Strategy 7: Monitor impacts of hunting** on sage-grouse population in Resource Area

**Actions planned:** Standard UDWR wing barrels continue to be used. Hunt limits will be reset as needed based on spring lek counts.

**Strategy 8:** Provide for a level and **system of domestic livestock grazing** that maintains and improves both the long-term stability of sage-grouse populations and habitats and the livestock industry in the Resource Area

**Actions planned:** The tribe may be putting in troughs that would help move cattle away from sage-grouse areas. UBARM will further discuss going a spring-grazing project to see if early grazing on crested wheatgrass can improve sagebrush cover, possibly a Little Mountain project. Boyd will lead this effort and coordinate with BLM.

**Strategy 9:** By 2016, **key public and private lands in the UBARM Resource Area** (specific locations to be selected) **are protected** and/or managed so as to conserve/improve sage-grouse nesting and breeding habitat.

**Actions planned:** A possible easement on Little Mountain is under discussion. Miles

Hanberg, David Allison, and Boyd Kitchen will be discussing this further.

**Strategy 10: Manage pinyon/juniper stands** to reduce encroachment into sagebrush/grass communities

**Actions planned:** The lop-and-scatter on Anthro mountain, as well as the Cedar Camp and other UPCD projects for lop and scatter, will help reduce juniper encroachment.

**Strategy 11: Enhance existing riparian areas or create small wet areas** to improve nesting, brood-rearing, late summer, and fall habitat

**Actions planned:** The Tribe may be working on several water projects. Lorien will check when she calls Karen.

**Strategy 12: Improve lek vegetation conditions** to allow for predator recognition and visibility

**Actions planned:** One lop-and-scatter on Anthro mountain is close to a lek, so the project may alleviate predation concerns in the immediate areas. The tribe could also do some work on this strategy.

**Strategy 13: Minimize impacts of agricultural conversion** on sage-grouse

**Actions planned:** This strategy needs to be reworded, since the local concern is not about agricultural conversion, but rather keeping CRP land and working with private landowners to do grouse-friendly habitat work such as seedings. NRCS works with private landowners on wildlife habitat projects.

**Strategy 14: Minimize the amount of quality sage-grouse habitat eliminated by residential, cabin, and commercial land development** consistent with private property rights

**Actions planned:** Wintering Anthro birds are sometimes going toward the Moon Dance development, perhaps pointing to the need to educate county planners and developers. This is also an issue between Matt Warner Reservoir and Krause Reservoir.

**Strategy 15: Minimize sage-grouse habitat loss to oil and gas activities** while ensuring continued development

**Actions planned:** Related to the compressor station, two EIS's and an EA are in development.

**Strategy 16: Minimize the impact of excessive predation**

**Actions planned:** Contact Colin Rawlins to re-engage him in UBARM meetings. Raven control is ongoing in the area.

**Strategy 17: Improve knowledge of disease** in sage-grouse populations

**Actions planned:** Boyd will ask mosquito abatement folks if mosquitoes in Willow Creek can be tested for West Nile. Lorien will see if mosquito abatement folks (Kay Weight in Duchesne, Kirk Robbins in Vernal) want to be on UBARM mailing list.

**Strategy 18:** Increase **subpopulation numbers and genetic distribution** in Resource Area subunits (TBD).

**Actions planned:** Natasha takes blood samples to look at paternity of collared sage-grouse, which will help determine where the genetic pools are and where diversification might be valuable.

**Strategy 19:** Increase knowledge base regarding the positive and negative **effects of sagebrush habitat improvement** projects on other shrubsteppe species

**Actions planned:** Many projects (three by Chris Peterson, UPCD, and others) are being monitored this year for sage-grouse. This strategy may need to be rewritten into other strategies when the plan is revised.

### **Actions Taken:**

No formal actions were taken.

### **Follow-up Needed**

- Dixie Sadler will check to see who the permittee on the Little Mountain crested wheatgrass area is
- Many other actions are listed in the Strategies review section.
- Lorien will work to further consolidate the strategies into 10-12 categories rather than 19, to make them more manageable, in the upcoming plan revision.
- Lorien will plan the upcoming dinner meeting in March.

### **Next Meeting:**

- March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 evening meeting. Likely at West Park.