

**LOCAL WORKING
GROUP**

Date: 3/17/09

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), Pat Rainbolt (DWR), Jason Robinson (DWR), Jason Robinson (DWR), David Allison, Scott Chamberlain (SITLA), Brian Maxfield (DWR), Eric Thacker (USU), Dixie Sadler (BLM), Jim Brown (UACD/GIP), Lorien Belton (USU Extension, recorder)

Information Presented/Discussion Highlights

Jason Robinson updated the group on the current listing decision. The USFWS decision has been postponed until at least after an updated status review is completed. Also, the state sage-grouse plan will be done hopefully in June. Dave Allison asked if LWGs have been able to review the state plan as it develops. Jason noted that Terry Messmer and Brian Maxfield have been involved as representatives of the LWGs. Jason will let the group know when the plan is done.

Dave Allison asked if the rangewide MOU has been updated to reflect data guidelines, since there needs to be better standardization. Jason explained that that will probably wait until after the new guidelines mentioned earlier. [need to explain that better in terms of we just follow guidelines]

Drew Crane updated the group on the WIC compressor station proposed right in the middle of great lek/habitat. There was a January meeting with WIC, BLM, DWR, and USFWS. They decided to go out and look at additional sites. Currently looks like WIC is fairly committed to potentially moving it three miles away (onto BLM land), but a problem is that all the money that was going to be used for sound abatement would now go to road maintenance. There have been discussions about shared cost maintenance for the road with the county. The compressor station would be off the main road, which is already plowed by the county, but the problem is keeping it open all winter because it's up on top of Diamond. The company has pressure limitations in their pipe which limits how far they can go from their initial proposed site. The new plan moves it *away* from the site that is within a quarter mile of two of the two of the biggest leks. Hopefully, however, the company can still make some sound abatement concessions. They also wanted to start construction on April 1, which would be a big problem. FERC will still be the lead agency. Kirk inquired as to the concern with sound. Brian noted that during lekking it is crucial.

The main challenge with this controversy is that it is difficult to get information or communication during planning. If there is another NEPA review meeting, Drew will keep UBARM informed. Communication with the contractors is the challenge, not necessarily the companies themselves.

Research and West Nile

Brian gave a research update.

Leah Smith's research:

- Leah Smith is finished with research and writing up her thesis. In her study area, there was very poor survival, and odd timing when the birds were dying; this makes it very likely to be West Nile. There is very little energy development where the birds are dying. Boyd asked if we could get mosquito abatement involved. That area is tribal. It may be possible to test the mosquitoes. Although it would be useful to know for sure if it is West Nile, there isn't anything we can do about it if it is.
- Dave Allison brought up the point that it may be marginal habitat. There used to be 40 birds on that lek, and it had gone down before the WND issue.
- West Nile apparently is carried by mosquitoes that don't go above 6000 or 7000 feet. We have tested a lot of birds and not found WND. Dave Allison says it would be interesting to see if flood releases from the dam were associated with the die-offs or mosquitoes. Boyd recommended that Brian contact the mosquito abatement folks.

Deadman's Bench:

- All 3 collared birds died. We did, however, learn something about bird movements, such as to Thunder Ranch. There is also plenty of low-elevation habitat where these birds were, so this could also be WND related. We are trying again this year, but birds learn to avoid spotlights. The Division will keep trying.
- The DWR is also will be looking for areas to do sagebrush treatments.

Anthro Mountain update:

- Forest Service is still collecting data on a long-term study. There are two wells up there, only one active as far as we are aware. 400 more proposed wells are in the lek area. One proposed well on Nuttar's would actually go through a lek.
- Translocation: The plan is to translocate 30 birds there this spring and maybe more in late summer, then repeat next spring. Will help with genetics and give population a boost. Natasha will be working on this for a graduate research project.
- Eric Thacker's work on Anthro continues with burn histories, to look at how fire may affect distributions long-term.

Chance for more projects:

- USU will be doing more population work
- BYU is doing nesting and habitat modeling, so more info will be coming off of Diamond.

County Planning Issue

Counties could use good data to improve planning. All the data is protected and Brian has gotten reprimanded for providing data on where the leks are. Brian is working with the SLC office with Dave Olsen and Carmen Bailey to release data in a way that complies with state law. Several people wondered how challenging would it be to change the law to improve this. Brian will keep us updated.

Outreach Planning

Lorien handed out the CaCoARM brochure and asked what audiences might be good to reach here and good messages to send.

- Jason mentioned that issues unique to UBARM would be best. We could highlight research, oil and gas issues, noxious weeds and predation issues. We should add WND to the threats.
- Dave would like to get info on waste management (that draws predators) to energy development companies. Nothing is currently being done about that problem. Raven populations are increasing: control has lessened over the years, and they do really well around people.
- Boyd wants a brochure that focuses on a specific issue with a strategic purpose. Most people are not going to care about a general info on our plan. Maybe do predators and garbage control now, then weed control for wildlife later, and maybe ATV recommendations later.
- Dave Allison asks why we haven't given the energy companies the plan and maybe more info (brochure or otherwise)

It would be good to just get an article in the local paper. It comes out once a week. Nancy Spurlock is a good contact. Boyd says the local paper would rather publish something that comes from Logan than comes from Vernal. Introduce the issue of sage-grouse (sage chicken), potential listing, etc. Eric Thacker and Ron Stewart at DWR can help. Lorien will take the lead on this. Perhaps it would be good to have an annual article – like the yearly “leave the baby deer alone” article—that says please step back if you see sage-grouse. If you see birds demonstrating, call Brian! The RMP has the hours and other recommendations.

Stephanie noted that it would be good to explain why we still hunt them, given the concerns. Jason says most of the state is closed to hunting, only four areas in Utah are open, they all exceed the population numbers recommended for hunting, and limits are very conservative. Yearly permits are based on lek numbers. Demand far exceeds supply (by almost double). DWR would stop it immediately if any of those populations are decreasing. An additional benefit of hunting is the data gained. There's a benefit, and it also provides a constituency group that supports the grouse. Jason could provide Lorien with a paragraph explaining why we still hunt. Key points: it is very select populations, and we get data, and hunters are good conservationists because they have an interest in the bird. Lorien will send any article to the group for review before sending it to the newspaper.

Dave suggests that a booth that could go to different shows. The Garden Show would be a good place to have a brochure. It is in April sometime. Energy days no longer happening. Lorien asked Dave to keep her informed if he needs materials.

It would be good to coordinate the RC&D PAWS program with some sage-grouse info. Troy Cooper is the contact, or Tonya Neilson. Lorien will contact them.

Strategies and Actions Review

The group reviewed several of the strategies and actions in the plan. They decided that going through all the strategies was not appropriate given the large number of them. Boyd suggested strongly that we rework the plan to be less cumbersome and easier to go through quickly, and less repetitious. Lorien will work to figure out a way to accomplish that.

Upcoming Meeting Planning

At the fall meeting, Stephanie will give an update on Energy by Design, which Questar is currently working on in Wyoming, with The Nature Conservancy. It involves extensive data gathering and comparison to think about energy impact locations.

UBARM and the Uintah Basin PCD group will coordinate a field tour this summer. Boyd will be the point person. We will focus on Uinta since last year was more in Duchesne. Ideas included seeing bird dog work, possibly seeing birds?, visiting Blue Mountain and Deadman's Bench, and looking at some not-so-good areas in addition to good improvement projects. We would like to expand the participation in the tour.

Actions Taken: NA

Follow-up Needed

- Brian will work with others at DWR to get SG info released to the counties for planning
- Stephanie will present Energy by Design at the fall meeting
- Lorien will follow up with Jason to get an article in the local paper about sage-grouse.
- Lorien will consider out how to update the plan so the strategies and actions are less repetitious and easier to review and use.
- Lorien will contact PAWS program folks to see about integrating sage-grouse info
- Lorien and Boyd will coordinate the field tour for the summer.

NEXT MEETING:

- Field tour, date TBD