



STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

Written by

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For the

**UINTA BASIN ADAPTIVE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
LOCAL WORKING GROUP**

UINTA BASIN ADAPTIVE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT LOCAL WORKING GROUP STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

Purpose—*To implement procedures that standardize the community-based conservation process in Utah and enhance coordination and communication between community-based adaptive resource management working groups, specifically the Uinta Basin Adaptive Resource Management (UBARM) Local Working Group, Utah State University Extension (USUEXT), private, and public partners.*

I. Introduction

USUEXT in cooperation with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) and Jack H. Berryman Institute, have entered into a cooperative agreement to implement a community-based conservation program in Utah. As part of this effort, USUEXT has hired two community-based conservation extension specialists (CCES) to develop a state-wide sage-grouse conservation planning process. These specialists have been tasked to support local working groups and prepare sage-grouse conservation plans for specific geographic areas in Utah (Figure 1). Mr. Todd Black has been hired to support working group efforts in the Uinta Basin, North Central Valleys, Strawberry, Parker Mountain, East-Manti-Carbon, San Juan, Uinta Basin, Box Elder, and Cache-Rich geographic areas. Ms. S. Nicole Frey has been hired to support working groups in the South Uinta Basin and Color Country geographic areas.

The sage-grouse conservation plans developed for each area will identify strategies which, when implemented, will improve overall rangeland habitat and watershed conditions, increase sage-grouse populations, and sustain local economies. Each plan will contain information on the area's current status of sage-grouse populations and rangelands, local community issues and concerns, and agreements or actions required to implement management strategies. Local working groups will be responsible for completing, implementing, and monitoring the plans and agreements.

In addition to this effort, the UDWR is facilitating a sagebrush/sagebrush-steppe habitat initiative through the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development (UPCD). The purpose of the UPCD is to provide coordinated leadership in natural resource management and public service. The UPCD will serve as a clearinghouse to coordinate partner conservation concerns and priorities while supporting regional and local habitat projects. Increased communication and coordination between the UPCD and local working groups is essential to the success of both processes.

II. Background

Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus spp.*) are restricted to the sagebrush rangelands of western North America. Sage-grouse once inhabited fifteen states and three Canadian provinces. Currently, populations exist in only ten states and one province. In Utah, sage-grouse inhabit sagebrush habitats of the Colorado Plateau and the Great Basin geographic regions. There are two species

of sage-grouse in Utah. All birds located north and west of the Colorado River are known as the Greater Sage-grouse (*C. urophasianus*). A newly described species, the Gunnison Sage-grouse, (*C. minimus*) is found only in San Juan County in southeastern Utah (south and east of the Colorado River). The largest sage-grouse populations in Utah are found in four general areas, Rich County, the Park Valley and Grouse Creek area of Box Elder County, on the Diamond and Blue Mountains in Uintah County, and on the Parker Mountain in Wayne County. Other smaller populations are scattered throughout the state.

The UDWR estimates that sage-grouse in Utah currently occupy less than 50% of their previous habitat and are one-half as abundant as they were prior to the 1850s. These declines have been largely attributed to land use practices that reduced, eliminated, or fragmented suitable sagebrush habitats and have prompted several environmental organizations to petition the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the sage-grouse as an endangered or threatened species.

Prior to these petitions, USUEXT began working with concerned Utah stakeholders to organize local working groups in potentially affected areas to increase local involvement in sage-grouse conservation planning. The working groups assist state and local governments and private landowners in conserving these species, while also achieving local, social, and economic objectives. Given the continued decline of sage-grouse populations, and the increased interest of state and local governments, as well as increased involvement from private citizens in species conservation planning, there is a need to expand this process throughout Utah and the region.

Species conservation planning efforts can be time-consuming. The success of the local working group is directly related to the involvement of local leaders and support organizations. Neutral facilitation is needed to bring together diverse stakeholders to discuss issues, concerns, strategies, and build consensus. Administrative support is needed to schedule and organize meetings, prepare and distribute meeting minutes, prepare draft local conservation plans, prepare funding proposals, and guide implementation and monitor management actions.

Public land managers, because of increasing workloads and reduced staffing, may lack the resources to establish and facilitate local working groups. Although they must participate in working groups, their involvement in leadership roles could be perceived with suspicion by local communities because of their regulatory authority. This perception is not necessarily held about specific individuals, but more so of government in general.

Strong local working groups are paramount to sage-grouse conservation. Facilitation of local working groups can best be achieved through an independent program solely dedicated to this effort. This program will be directed by USUEXT which is generally perceived as non-regulatory, and having strong ties to local communities and agricultural producers. Based on past experience, we believe this approach will be viewed as neutral, not representing any specific government agency or mandate, but working to the benefit of affected communities as well as the species. Furthermore, we believe implementation of local plans may mitigate the need for listing a species, assist in recovery if a species is listed, and provide affected communities with increased ownership of the conservation planning process.

III. Process

A. Local Working Group Development and Facilitation

Memorandum of Agreement/Understanding—Each local working group will develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will be used to guide the working group process. This MOU will identify local concerns and issues and set forth standard operating procedures (SOP), governing group operation and decision-making. The MOU will be signed by local working group participants or, in the case of an agency or organization, the appropriate representative. Each MOU should cover a minimum five-year period and include the following components.

Meeting Ground Rules—Each local working group will develop a set of ground rules or policies under which they will operate. The ground rules will identify how business and meetings are conducted, and the decision-making process. The ground rules should be written out on poster-board, displayed, and reviewed prior to each meeting.

Meetings—Local working groups will meet as often as needed, and at a minimum of quarterly, to plan and review progress. Monthly meetings are recommended until the local working group becomes fully operational and the MOU is finalized. The meetings will be scheduled at least a month in advance and will accommodate working group participant schedules. A standard time and place should be scheduled, for example, 6:00 pm, third Friday of each month, USU County Extension Office. Meeting participants will be notified by email and letter at least one week prior to the scheduled meeting. The notice will contain another copy of the previous meeting minutes which includes information on specific tasks which needed to be completed. Meeting minutes will be prepared and distributed no later than one week after a meeting has been completed. Action items to be completed prior to the next meeting will be highlighted in the minutes.

In addition to regular meetings, local working groups will host annual community forums to discuss activities and progress. Further, subcommittees may be formed to complete specific portions of the local sage-grouse conservation plan. Subcommittees may meet outside the regularly scheduled local working group meetings.

Working Group Chairs and Administrative Support—A chair and vice-chair should be identified. The chair should not be a public agency representative. Ideally, the chair will be a landowner, an elected county official, or someone who lives and works in the community. The vice-chair may be an agency representative. The terms for each chair and an explanation of the selection process will be identified in each local working group MOU.

USUEXT/CCES faculty and staff will provide administrative support. This includes arranging the meeting room and providing for meals or refreshments. Meeting minutes should be recorded by someone who is not a direct participant in the meeting. We recommend that the county office where the meeting is held also provide staff support to take and compile the meeting minutes. Support for staff time dedicated for this purpose could come from the local working group budget.

Local working group participants will be provided a three-ring binder that contains tabs to hold meeting minutes, a copy of the SOP, the MOU, and other important documents. Each binder also will contain a list of working group participants, their mailing addresses, past correspondence, newsletters or working group reports, and working group ground rules.

In-service Training—USU/CCES faculty and staff will receive in-service training on small group facilitation, Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP), Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) cost-share programs, and other public and private programs that are available to support local working group efforts. USUEXT faculty and staff will develop and provide additional in-service training for working groups on federal, state, and private species conservation programs as needed.

Reporting—An Annual Report and quarterly summaries will be prepared for each working group. The CCES will be responsible for ensuring that all reports are completed in a timely manner. The Annual Report will be completed prior to January 31 of each subsequent year. Quarterly reports will be completed in April, July, and September. The last quarterly report will be included in the Annual Report. The reports will be posted on the website and a hardcopy will be distributed to all local working group members for their binders. The Vice President for University Extension will submit an official copy of each Annual Report to the Chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ecological Services Division, Salt Lake City, Utah.

The Annual Report will incorporate the information requested under the U.S. Forest Service’s Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE) When Making Listing Decisions. Specific topics to be addressed in the working group management plan and presented in subsequent annual reports filed by each LWG include:

1. Staffing, funding, funding sources, and other resources necessary to implement working group management plan
2. Legal authority of the partners to implement the plan
3. The legal procedural requirements (environmental reviews) needed to implement the plan and how this will be accomplished
4. Authorizations or permits that may or will be needed, and how these will be obtained
5. The type and level of voluntary participation (number of landowners involved, types of incentives used to increase participation, etc)
6. Regulatory mechanisms (laws, ordinances, etc) that may be necessary to implement the plan
7. A statement regarding the level of certainty that funding to implement the plan will be obtained
8. An implementation schedule to include incremental completion dates
9. A copy of the local working group MOU and/or approved sage-grouse conservation plan

Additionally, the Annual Report will discuss the level of certainty that the management efforts identified and implemented will be effective. This is why a monitoring program must be

included in each local working group sage-grouse conservation plan. Specific topics to be addressed in the Annual Report and management plan include:

1. The nature and extent of threats to be addressed by the conservation plan and how management efforts will reduce the threats described
2. Explicit objectives for each management action contained in the plan and dates for achieving
3. The steps needed or undertaken to implement management actions
4. Quantifiable, scientifically valid parameters by which progress will be measured must be identified (i.e., change in lek counts, improved habitat conditions)
5. How the effects of the management actions will be monitored and reported
6. How the principles of adaptive resource management are being implemented

The CCES will be responsible for providing this information to the CNR Webmaster. The Webmaster will work with the CCES to develop a website and pages that report working group meeting minutes and progress reports. This website will be linked to all project partners' sites. Working group conservation plans and habitat projects will also be featured on the site. Working group progress and activities will be reported in USUEXT county extension newsletters.

B. Working Group Representation, Subcommittees, and Financial Support

Scoping—An important component of any community-based conservation program is adequate scoping to identify natural resource management, social, and political issues. Because sage-grouse occupy diverse landscapes, each landscape exhibiting different land ownership patterns and issues, a geographic area must be viewed as being unique. Thus, each working group will represent local stakeholders (Table 1). Working groups should have adequate representation from agricultural, business, sporting, and conservation communities. Each federal or state agency with interests, land holdings, or operational or management responsibilities in the geographic area, should be invited to participate.

Subcommittees—As previously mentioned, local working groups may choose to form subcommittees tasked with addressing specific issues or components of the local sage-grouse conservation plan. Subcommittees may include habitat projects, public and political relations, monitoring, etc.

Funding—Each agency, organization, or group represented by the working group will be requested to provide financial support (actual or in-kind) to support the group. Although USUEXT and CCES personnel will assist the local working groups with preparing the local management plan, grant writing, coordination of management projects, and public relations, the key to the success of working groups is local ownership in the process.

Local Working Group Budget—Each local working group should develop an annual budget. Working group chairs will work with USUEXT/CCES faculty and staff to develop an annual budget. This budget should reflect the costs associated with hosting meetings, correspondence, photocopying, hosting annual community forums, and any travel costs associated with sending

local representatives to statewide meetings in the event their travel costs are not covered by an agency or organization. A business account should be set up through USUEXT and maintained by the County Extension Office hosting the regular meeting. Start-up funds to support the local working groups will be provided by a grant from the Berryman Institute at Utah State University. These funds could be augmented by local working group participants through memberships dues, donations, challenge grants, etc. A separate budget should be developed for project implementation and monitoring.

Table 1. Potential participants in local working groups and their potential roles

PARTNER	ROLE
USU Extension	Project Administration, Reporting, Working Group Facilitation and Administration, Monitoring program coordination and implementation
Private Landowners and Local Community	Work group leadership and participation, cost-share, project sites
County Commissioners	Work group support and participation
NRCS	Work group participant, technical assistance, WHIP, EQIP project proposal preparation
BLM	Work group participant, funding support for monitoring and work group operations, project challenge grants, technical assistance, project sites
USFS	Work group participant, funding support for monitoring and work group operations, project challenge grants, technical assistance, project sites
UDWR	Work group participant, funding support for monitoring and work group operations, project challenge grants, technical assistance, project sites
Indian Tribes	Work group participant, project sites, cost-share, funding support for monitoring and work group operations
US Fish and Wildlife Service	Work group participation, funding support for projects and monitoring
Utah School and Institutional Trustlands	Work group participants, funding support for operations and monitoring
Utah Farm Bureau	Work group participant, communications with FB membership
Utah Partnership for Conservation and Development	Working group information clearinghouse, project funding
Utah Cattlemen and Woolgrowers	Working group participants, communication with membership
Utah Department of Agriculture and Food	Working group participant, communications, funding support for projects
Utah Rural Conservation and Economic Development Offices	Working group participant, project funding support, communications
Utah Soil Conservation Districts	Working group participation, communications with SCD members, endorsement of projects
Sportsmen Organizations	Working group participants, cost-share to support projects
Conservation/Environmental Organization	Working group participants, funding to support projects and monitoring
USDA Wildlife Services	Working group participant, in-kind support, technical assistance

IV. Sage-grouse Conservation Plans

Each local working group will develop and finalize a sage-grouse conservation plan for their local area. These plans will identify actions to improve habitat quality for sage-grouse and other species of concern. Each area plan will contain information on sage-grouse populations, other sensitive wildlife species, habitat conditions, local community issues and concerns, population and habitat management strategies, habitat and population objectives, proposed completion schedules, and implementation agreements. The working groups will be responsible for completing, implementing, and monitoring local plans.

Habitat projects will be implemented following the scientific method. Each project's experimental design will ensure the results of the work can be published in a peer-reviewed journal. Each project will include methodology on establishing baseline population and vegetation conditions and assessing the impacts of the project. The results will also be reported in annual reports, on the website, USUEXT bulletins, and scientific manuscripts.

Habitat project funding will be generated from grants, state and federal cost-share programs (WHIP, EQUIP, LIP), private conservation organizations, legislative appropriations, and contributions provided from partners.

Monitoring Sage-grouse Populations, Vegetation Conditions, and Responses—Although sage-grouse habitat guidelines have been published, this information may not be directly applicable to certain areas because of climatic and vegetation variation. In addition, the impacts of land uses are extremely variable across these areas and often require site-specific management information. In many areas, our ability to manage may be hampered because insufficient sage-grouse habitat-use information exists. Although historical lek counts may provide information about population trends, they often do not provide a true picture of the population status. Consequently, the best way to guide management efforts may be through the use of short-term, radio-telemetry studies that provide information on habitat use and avoidance.

The status and response of sage-grouse, as well as other wildlife populations and vegetation, to rangeland habitat projects implemented by each working group, will be monitored using standard surveys. To determine habitat use and movement patterns of Greater Sage-grouse hens, we will monitor radio-collared hens during nesting and brood rearing seasons. Information obtained on nest site selection, nest success, hen mortality, brood survival, and brood habitat use will be used to develop habitat projects. Vegetation measurements will be taken at all habitat-use sites. Lek counts will be conducted to establish baseline populations. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of vegetation diversity in sage-grouse production. The CCES will ensure that the baseline vegetation composition of rangeland sites that are proposed for habitat improvement projects are documented.

Anticipated Results and Benefits—For community-based conservation programs to achieve their potential, local ownership in the decision-making process is essential. In addition, these efforts must identify and implement activities that, while beneficial to sage-grouse, also generate or sustain economic returns to the local communities. We believe the current community-based conservation process identified in this proposal will achieve sage-grouse conservation, improve rangeland and watershed conditions, increase local community ownership and involvement in working on conservation issues, increase coordination and cooperation between natural resource management professionals and private landowners, and improve agency cost-share program visibility and dissemination in Utah.