

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE  
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES  
December 13, 2006**

The December 13, 2006 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was held in the Commissioners Meeting Room in the Courthouse at 200 E. Virginia, Gunnison CO 81230.

**Regular Members Present:**

Kenny McDaniel, BLM

Greg Peterson, GCSA

Sue Navy, HCCA

John Scott, NRCS

Paula Swenson, Gunnison County BOCC

Ken Stahlnecker, NPS

Al Pfister, USFWS

**Staff Members Present:**

Jim Cochran, Sage-grouse Conservation Coordinator

Keri Hodgkin, Administrative Assistant III

Alternate Members Present in Audience: Sandy Guerrieri in at 11:00.

Others present as listed in text

**CALL TO ORDER:** Meeting was called to order at 8:40 a.m.

**QUORUM & PUBLIC NOTICE CONFIRMED:** Proof of publication was presented by Keri Hodgkin. Quorum and public notice was confirmed by Chairman Stahlnecker.

**INTRODUCTIONS:** Connie Rudd, Superintendent of the National Park Service at Curecanti introduced herself and was asked by Cochran to submit a letter of interest to the Board of County Commissioners to serve on the committee as an alternate for NPS.

**AGENDA APPROVAL:** The agenda was approved as presented.

**MINUTES APPROVAL:** Sue Navy requested a change on page two and one on page three.

**Moved** by John Scott, seconded by Paula Swenson to approve the November 8, 2006 minutes as amended.

**GUNNISON COUNTY PROCEEDINGS FOR FURTHER REGULATIONS REGARDING GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE:** Jim Cochran handed out the preliminary agenda for the Planning Commission meeting to be held December 15<sup>th</sup> at 9:00 a.m. regarding the possible incorporation of this year's temporary regulations into the LUR (Land Use Regulations). He said the proposal would also amend the Major and Minor Subdivision process to incorporate the temporary regulation standards for ISDS, driveway, building, and land use change permits.

The Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) are also trying to develop an incentive based review process for parcels 35 acres or larger. This will likely be a separate process which is recognized and addressed within the LUR. He asked group to get their thoughts and comments to the Planning Commission prior to the meeting. The Planning Commission would like to finalize their recommendations to the BOCC by December 15<sup>th</sup>. Paula

Swenson said the BOCC would try to adopt these amendments before the temporary regulations sunset and before building season.

Chairman Stahlnecker asked if there was unanimous agreement that the temporary regulations worked well. Cochran said that the Division of Wildlife (DOW) and the County thought it went well. He said they received no complaints other than the general grumblings about another set of regulations to comply with. There were no delays to those who went through the process. Cochran said he and DOW may submit separate reviews to the Planning Commission for the Major and Minor Subdivisions.

Cochran said that of the 38 application reviews most were minor additions with no impact determinations. Sue Navy asked what will be done when something will have a negative impact. Cochran said the County would probably have to buy a parcel if they take all value. He said there was one 35 acre parcel reviewed this year which did not have a known building envelope. The recommendation was to move it from the likely spot to protect the sage-grouse. He and DOW reviewed another parcel which had a lek on it and determined that if the owner follows recommendations the impact to the lek will likely not be significant. Cochran also noted that if the owners do not follow the recommendations then the permits may not be granted without more discussion about what the owner can do.

Kenny McDaniel asked what the significance of the 35 acre parcel is. Cochran answered that larger properties can be divided into 35 acre parcels without review from the County. The County only has a chance to give approval for the roads. He said it's much easier to have positive impact on all habitats before those acreages are split into 35 acre parcels. Al Pfister asked if the process addresses the habitat outside the .6 mile radius from a lek. Cochran said they consider all occupied habitat. He said that other areas can be elevated to the land use change review if he or the DOW finds critical habitat on the property. He clarified that the permit application for the parcel within 0.6 miles of a lek is a land use change application. John Scott noted that the wording on page two conflicts with Cochran's statement that all projects within the sage-grouse habitat will receive administrative review. Cochran agreed that additional wording was needed to make that clear.

Cochran said the pre-application process is helpful in identifying any critical habitat so the owner knows the review will be bumped up during the permit application. Navy questioned the wording on Page 4 (little d) regarding referrals and on site consultations which says someone from the Planning Department, the Public Works Department, the Sage-grouse Coordinator and someone from the DOW will attend if available. She asked about ensuring that someone with a biology background reviews this and making the wording more definitive to that end. Cochran answered they do not have a definition of a "qualified" sage-grouse biologist and the County is very uncomfortable trying to define that in the LUR. Navy suggested that the 'if available' wording be dealt with, adding that someone from the DOW should be there. Cochran answered that the County can't control the DOW, they can only request an on-site visit. The County is not willing to let the process get dragged out beyond 21 days if the DOW can't get comments in by then. Scott suggested changing the word if to as, since it would have the same meaning but not sound as negative.

**FEDERAL BUDGET REQUEST TO CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION:** Cochran noted the table in the packets listing the Ranch Conservation Easement Projects with sage-grouse habitat. John Scott has been working on a summary for habitat improvement and research to submit as a funding request to Congressman Salazar's office. He asked the group for input about tying monitoring to the habitat improvement. The group discussed and modified the

document with the intent of keeping it brief and having it finished by January 10<sup>th</sup>. Scott said he used the 15,000 acre number from the Rangewide Plan and figured 5 years, which came out to \$91/acre. Greg Peterson said that the group should justify those costs in a simple way and consider asking for less if there is a better chance of having it granted. Scott also questioned if a three year request might have a better chance of being approved than a five year request. McDaniel suggested a cover letter stating that treatments will be conducted according to the funding received, "if we receive 25% of the request, then we'll do 25% of the treatments." Cochran said he'd like to incorporate a statement on the ranking saying that every working group recommends habitat protection, which would enable Congressman Salazar to tie it to the whole range, not just Gunnison Basin. Cochran also recommended submitting separate requests for research and habitat. He recommended submitting a fourth request for USFWS funding to administer the CCAA program. McDaniel and Pfister agreed. Chairperson Stahlnecker confirmed a consensus from the group to submit four requests to Congressman Salazar.

Pfister said they don't have the budget for pro-active projects and could use a couple extra staff members (not necessarily permanent positions) for implementation of the CCAA program. He said they usually figure \$100,000 per staff member. Scott thought there could easily be a need for three people. Cochran said that request doesn't need to be overly complicated and that he could work on that request with Pfister. He also recommended getting some Certificate of Inclusions (CIs) done and including their actual costs into requests for next year as cost justification.

Peterson requested that wording be added to the CCAA request to make it consistent with viable agriculture. He expressed concern that easement money language restrictions might be so tight it might make it impossible for the land owner to continue their day to day agricultural activities. He would like there to be an understanding that the lands have sage-grouse habitat but are still viable agriculture lands. Pfister asked if the wording 'maintain viable agriculture and sage-grouse population' works since it doesn't emphasize one over the other, but maintains both. Peterson agreed. Cochran agreed that good agriculture and good sage-grouse habitat go hand in hand. Peterson reiterated that if money is available, but is so restrictive that a land owner can't continue day to day operations then they'll not want the money and could look to other means, such as development.

Cochran recommended using the Steuben Creek and Gold Basin properties shown in the packet for the habitat protection request, because it's justifiable and all the background information is available. There was discussion on whether the larger proposal should say public and private for clarification and how different wording might be interpreted. Cochran suggested adding Gunnison County as responsible party. McDaniel suggested providing a success story example if there's room. Pfister recommended including the monitoring component of habitat treatments, noting that planning, on the ground implementation and monitoring are the three components of habitat treatments. McDaniel offered to check into dollar amounts for habitat treatments cost per acre. Scott reworded some of the document as suggested and confirmed that Peterson's concern was addressed. Chairman Stahlnecker asked for and received consensus that the Committee approved the first three points before moving to the research proposal.

Chairman Stahlnecker offered to get consolidated information to Scott for the research proposal. Scott said he included the high and very high strategies that came from the ranking done by the Local Working Group. Peterson requested that the proposal be project specific in detail if possible. McDaniel felt that was possible. Chairman Stahlnecker also said there were three efforts currently taking place which are inter-related and consistent with the priorities. He

suggested using: BLM working on road use for recreation, DOW working on demographics and survival and NPS working on habitat use and survival to make it more concrete. Cochran agreed with that approach. Peterson said the group needs to be prepared to provide Congressman's Salazar's staff with their highest priority if asked.

**BREAK:** The meeting was recessed for a 10 minute break.

**THREATS/ISSUES/STRATEGIES RANKING:** Chairman Stahlnecker reminded the group that the Working Group's ranking has already been submitted to Amy Seglund with the understanding that it needs approved by this Committee and may be amended. Navy explained how the Local Working Group arrived at their rankings. Peterson asked where the threats and issues came from. Scott said they were pulled from Page 304 in the Rangewide Plan. Navy then explained the rankings on the table in the packet. Navy said the two very highest ranked threats were lack of habitat protection from permanent loss and the risk from recreation. Chairman Stahlnecker explained that the threats and issues were ranked first and then the strategies were picked.

Navy said two strategies were picked for dealing with the lack of habitat protection. One was obtaining conservation easements and implementing management plans to maintain 90% of seasonal and important habitat. The second was working with county governments to discourage interference of urban development with seasonally important Gunnison sage-grouse (GSUG) habitats within each population. The strategies chosen to minimize the effect of recreation activities were closing roads during lekking season, discouraging some areas from being used in the winter, closing or relocating secondary roads where appropriate, keeping pets under control and distributing informational material on the harmful effects of certain recreation activities. Cochran noted that the strategies came out of the Rangewide Plan as well.

Navy then covered the high ranked threats and strategies. One was the high risk of disease and parasites. She noted the group's concern that people are bringing in exotic birds without having them tested, which could significantly increase this threat. The strategy associated with this threat did not come out as a high ranking. The second threat was lack of grazing management. One strategy picked for that threat was to manage big game habitat to meet sage-grouse objectives by regulating herd size and allowing plants to recover. The other was to implement livestock grazing management practices to solve problems with season, frequency, intensity and/or duration to meet Gunnison sage-grouse objectives. Navy noted that the wording for those two strategies was taken from the Gunnison Sage-grouse Conservation Plan (Working Group's plan) with the thought that it better clarified their intent.

Navy said another of the high priorities was lack of habitat enhancement and restoration mostly due to lack of funding and the uncertainty of success in habitat projects. The action associated with that was to utilize Mosen and other sources and selected, appropriate treatment options suitable for site characteristics and treatment objective when planning for vegetation restorations, etc. They want monitoring to be a part of that as well.

Lack of habitat monitoring was also rated high. Navy said there is a need to know where to do treatments and how to pull data together to make those conclusions. The group thought there is a need for better lek management and had a concern with noxious weeds, which were both rated high. Risk from predation was rated high, with a need for better understanding of habitat predator relationships, chick mortality, key predators, a landfill with raven problems, and the introduction of new predators. The next high rating was the risk of weather and drought with the associated strategy being to develop grass banks, help develop better water sources for

wildlife and livestock, manage invasive vegetation, and minimize impact to existing riparian wetland and wet meadow areas.

Chairman Stahlnecker asked if the group agreed with the two very highest rankings. There was discussion about the snowmobiling and the antler shed collecting. Chairman Stahlnecker said the group also considered how severe not doing something would impact an issue in the next seven years when they did these rankings. Pfister questioned the recreation being equally ranked with the lack of habitat protection and Scott said they aren't exactly equal if you look at the number of votes for each. Scott said what Seglund currently has does show the votes. Chairman Stahlnecker said the top 10 strategies really are what is important. Cochran also said the group was restricted to ranking the threats and issues without considering the reality of implementing strategies for those threats and issues.

Scott reminded the Committee that this ranking was done to help develop a way for the Rangewide Steering Committee to get all local working groups to think about their priorities and to track and report progress on those priorities. Chairman Stahlnecker said it was intended to help the local working groups focus. The Rangewide Steering Committee can then help facilitate accomplishment towards those goals as well as find common strategies for the groups to use. Cochran said it helped the local working groups find commonality with issues. He also said Seglund needs a database design expert to make this tracking database available to all who need it. Peterson asked if this information can be compiled into a format which is applicable to what USFWS needs to show progress and conservation efforts. Pfister said yes, the two main categories (of 15) from the PECE policy are implementation and effectiveness. Chairman Stahlnecker added that this reporting will not be limited to top 10 priority reporting, but will track and report all information.

Chairman Stahlnecker requested discussion of the strategies and explained that one vote was taken across the list of all strategies, then a second vote was taken on the remaining strategies after the list was pared down. Navy said some categories might look like a higher vote but there might have been fewer choices within that category. She noted that more choices in some categories divided the votes up. Chairman Stahlnecker suggested treating these rankings equally as they are built into a strategic plan, but said the absolute numbers may need considered for funding proposals.

Peterson recommended adding an additional strategy regarding implementation of the CCAA's. He also expressed concern with the wording used from the Local Working Group's Plan regarding the grazing strategies. He said that in certain circumstances those standards aren't going to be met by just cutting back grazing. He requested that language be added that in certain areas the strategy will not be effective in maintaining sage-grouse objectives in the Rangewide Conservation Plan without accompanying habitat enhancement projects combined with grazing management. Chairman Stahlnecker said he thought it would be acceptable for the group to submit an eleventh priority to Seglund. The committee agreed to send eleven. Pfister expressed concern that Greg's suggested wording might be interpreted as saying that it's okay to not meet habitat objectives. There was discussion about the wording and the group decided to use the wording from the Rangewide Plan instead. Navy noted that there was a reason why the Local Working Group used the wording from their plan.

**Moved** by Al Pfister, seconded by Paula Swenson, to approve and adopt the Threats/Issues/Strategies Ranking document as amended by the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to be presented to the Rangewide Steering Committee. Jim Cochran recommended making it clear that the votes shown on the table are those of the Local Working

Group and not of the Strategic Committee so it's clear in the future. Chairman Stahlnecker said that could be described in a cover letter as well. Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Stahlnecker said the priorities will be established for Congressman Salazar's request at the next meeting, so the group is prepared if he needs them.

**WILDLIFE ACTION OPPORTUNITIES FUND GRANT REQUEST:** Navy said that over 500 requests were submitted, so there was not yet a decision. Chairman Stahlnecker thanked Navy, McDaniel and Cochran for their work on that request.

**HABITAT ASSESSMENT SUB-COMMITTEE REPORT:** Pfister said that the sub-committee met December 12<sup>th</sup>. He said they are still working on the bulk height/leaf height terminology. Pfister said he will have a hard copy of the decision tree by the next Sub-Committee meeting which is January 16<sup>th</sup>. The decision tree is for implementation of different methodologies, collecting data and what that data can and should be used for. He said Theresa Childers gave a great presentation on Park Service sage-grouse research efforts which may show some promising and significant implications for the management of sage-grouse. Cochran said this would be a great project to tie to a research funding proposal to get it completed. Chairman Stahlnecker said the length of time for the project has been due to insufficient funding. Pfister said the Sub-committee also discussed the CCAA reference to rangeland health tech reference version three versus version 4 and decided that they would go with version 4 since it has the most current scientific information. He said Lars Santana did a presentation on different methodologies used to measure cover and said the decision tree should help clear up some of those questions. Cochran said that Santana is doing a really good job of getting information to the Strategic Committee and scheduling presentations. He added that Santana is a very good Range Specialist and a great resource.

**GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE CANDIDATE CONSERVATION AGREEMENT WITH ASSURANCES UPDATE:** Cochran reported that he hasn't heard anything. He said that the Habitat Assessment Sub-committee will try to have someone from DOW talk to them about how DOW'S contractor is collecting the base-line data.

**UNSCHEDULED CITIZENS:** Martha Greywal said it was a pleasure to be here.

**SCHEDULING:** The next meeting will be held on January 10<sup>th</sup>.

**ADJOURN:** Chairperson Ken Stahlnecker adjourned the meeting at 12:05 for lunch, then the Committee reconvened for a work session.

**Certification of Approval:**

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Ken Stahlnecker, Chairperson

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Greg Peterson, Secretary

Minutes Prepared By:

Keri Hodgin, Administrative Assistant III