

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
November 14, 2007**

The November 14, 2007 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was held in the Commissioner's Meeting Room in the Courthouse at 200 E. Virginia, Gunnison CO 81230.

Regular Members Present:

Gary Hausler, At-Large	Erich Ferchau, At-Large/Development Community
Kenny McDaniel, BLM	J Wenum, DOW
Greg Peterson, GCSA	Paula Swenson, Gunnison County BOCC
Sue Navy, HCCA	Ken Stahlnecker, Chair, NPS
John Scott, NRCS	Terry Ireland, Alternate for USFWS, in at 10:47
Jim Dawson, USFS-in at Noon	Linda Joseph, Saguache County BOCC

Staff Members Present:

Jim Cochran, Gunnison County Sage-grouse Conservation Coordinator
Keri Hodgkin, Administrative Assistant III

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: The meeting was called to order at 10:03 a.m.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: The agenda was approved as presented.

MINUTES APPROVAL: Sue Navy requested 3 corrections.

Moved by John Scott, seconded by Paula Swenson, to approve the October 10, 2007 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee minutes as amended. Motion passed unanimously.

GUNNISON RISING ANNEXATION MITIGATION DISCUSSION: J Wenum reported that he was able to meet with the Gunnison Rising Consultant Tim Seibert, proponents Dick Bratton and Cliff Coghill as well as Paul Jones, with DOW, to discuss some possible options for offsite mitigation. He said the proponents' initial preference was to utilize onsite mitigation, but Wenum explained that they will accomplish more by going offsite. He said the options will be relayed to the remaining partners and a decision would be made. Wenum said he was not comfortable sharing any information regarding those options, but said they would be beneficial to sage-grouse.

There was discussion among the members regarding the timeframe for issuing comments to the City of Gunnison in regards to Gunnison Rising's Phase Two resubmittal. It was generally agreed that the Committee would wait for the proponents' decision regarding the mitigation options offered by DOW. If that decision is received prior to the December meeting, the Committee comments will be discussed at the December meeting. Peterson suggested delaying comments until January if necessary. Swenson said the County can submit their comment and add wording regarding the forthcoming Strategic Committee comments. Wenum committed to contacting the Gunnison Rising proponents and letting them know the Committee will hold

comments until a decision is made. Chairman Stahlnecker asked to have that discussion added to the December agenda.

ANTLER SHED ISSUE UPDATE: Cochran discussed the draft language which resulted from the October 24th meeting which included Jim Cochran; Committee members Paula Swenson and Kenny McDaniel; and DOW representatives Brandon Diamond, Tom Spezze, and Tom Remington. The language would be added to existing regulations and offered four alternatives for the Division of Wildlife to present to the Wildlife Commission at their November 8th meeting.

Wenum noted that the draft lists three options and the fourth option is to do nothing and leave things as they are. He said they tried to create a range of alternatives and explained that none of them would close the land they would just prohibit the antler collection. Sue Navy preferred alternative #3. Wenum and Swenson further explained the alternatives. Greg Peterson preferred the third alternative as well, since it would serve the dual purpose of preventing harassment to sage-grouse as well as deer and elk. Gary Hausler preferred alternative #2.

Cochran said the discussion resulting in the alternatives centered around the concern by some that closing the antler shed collection season completely might lead to significant enforcement problems. Another concern was that a total prohibition might cause greater activity before and after the closures. Erich Ferchau preferred alternative #2. Kenny McDaniel thought #2 or #3 would be better alternatives, but felt any of the three would be a step forward.

Cochran told the group that he didn't think the feedback from the Wildlife Commission was as positive as it was at the previous meeting he'd attended. Two of the Commissioners stated that they did not like the idea of the collection season and their packets apparently contained eight letters of protest. At that Wildlife Commission meeting Cochran presented a letter from the County and tried to clarify the mapping. He strongly urged the Committee Members to attend the January 10th meeting if possible.

Moved by Gary Hausler, seconded by Paula Swenson, that the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee recommend to the Colorado State Wildlife Commission the adoption of alternative #2 as submitted to the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee.

Further Discussion: Greg Peterson asked that the letter to the Wildlife Commission include wording that the adoption of alternate #3 would not preclude the protection of sage-grouse viability. There was more discussion regarding whether or not to comment on alternative #1. The motion carried, with J Wenum abstaining. Note: This letter was drafted, amended, printed and signed by meeting's end.

Local Working Group Research Subcommittee Presentation: Local Working Group (LWG) members Brandon Diamond, DOW; Russell Japuntich, BLM; Theresa Childers, NPS; and Mike Philips, DOW gave a presentation in response to the Strategic Committee's request to learn more about research activities occurring in the Gunnison Basin. These guests covered the following topics:

Brandon Diamond:

- Why do research at all? In 2000 the Gunnison Sage-grouse was identified as a unique species, and it was clear that there was a lot to be learned about the species, particularly when looking at some of the statistics. It is estimated that the range has diminished by as much as 90%. About 85% of the Gunnison Sage-grouse population is in the Gunnison Basin. There has been speculation about what was causing the decline in lek counts and population, whether it is impacts from recreation, development, grazing or predation. Scientific data is needed to address speculation, is more relevant than anecdotal

information, will provide a lot of the data used in regards to the five listing factors of the Endangered Species Act and aid in making management prescriptions.

Russell Japuntich:

- Are there potential impacts to the birds? Probably, because the birds get stressed. Studies show no significant impact to the population and show a very low mortality rate from the trapping. Indirect measures are used when possible to minimize impacts to the birds. Lek counts are done from a distance, for example, with the counters arriving before the birds and leaving after the birds.
 - Checks & Balances for when birds are directly handled:
 - The preliminary internal review is used to determine how the study should be done
 - IACUC (Animal Care & Use Committee) reviews the study proposal. This is a committee composed of internal and external (such as veterinarians) personnel.
 - External reviews are done. Other agencies projects are looked at and discussed. Inter-agency collaboration is utilized when possible so the wheel isn't re-invented
 - The LWG and it's subcommittees are utilized for collaboration, direction and refining methodologies.

Greg Peterson asked if research groups or local agencies have ever been denied a research project submittal dealing with Gunnison Sage-grouse, or if one has ever been dramatically changed. Mike Phillips said he's not aware of any being denied, but additional details are often required until the IACUC's concerns are satisfied.
- Research generally deals with the individual bird, rather than entire populations.
 - Goal is zero mortality.
 - There are thresholds to be met.
 - Post capture monitoring is done.
 - Less than 2% of the Gunnison Sage-grouse population is currently being researched.
 - Top priority is the animal's well being.
 - Research methods are continually re-evaluated.
- One to Three Year Action Plan:
 - Currently being worked on by the LWG.

Theresa Childers:

- The purpose of the National park Service (NPS) and US Geological Survey (USGS) project is to model seasonal habitat selection and produce a map of grouse habitat as well as provide a science-based framework for landscape-scale management of the Gunnison Sage-grouse across the Gunnison Basin.
 - US GS is providing assistance with satellite imagery.
 - NPS providing data to Division of Wildlife (DOW) for their demographic study.
 - US Geological Survey is also working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and sharing some of the expenses of developing the satellite imagery.
- The NPS project has four main components:
 - Marking & relocating, to provide information for the habitat selection study as well as provide survival data to DOW (relocating meaning tracking/finding the birds, not moving the birds to other areas) with regards to survival.

- Trapping is done at night, near some of the leks, and in March.
- Trapping is not done two nights consecutively in the same area.
- Birds are fitted with radio transmitting collars. The collars are tight enough to not slip over head, but loose enough to avoid restricting the airway. The collars weigh 1-3% of bird's body weight.
- Females are followed daily throughout the brooding season, and weekly or bi-weekly thereafter.
- Nest & Brood Monitoring (for DOW study)
 - Daily monitoring of females (locations done by triangulation).
 - Detailed nest habitat measurements after nests are hatched or have failed.
 - Two chicks from each brood are marked the evening after hatching. These dark grey radio transmitters are sutured onto the chicks' backs.

Greg Peterson asked if there is a higher chick mortality rate due to this research compared to adults that are trapped. Childers said they can only speak to the birds which are marked, since they have no way of following others. Mike Phillips said studies show no real impact.

- Mapping Vegetation Classifications
 - Aerial photos were delineated into polygons of potentially different vegetation communities.
 - Field visits are made to the polygon areas.
 - Ecological (site potential) & community (current seral stage) types are determined.
 - These categories will then be condensed into 10-12 categories which are hypothesized to be meaningful to the grouse.
- Mapping sagebrush structure
 - Goal is to map sagebrush cover and height class, herbaceous cover, bare-ground cover and any man-made features within the basin, using satellite imagery and remote sensing techniques.
 - Will develop models which ID habitat components by multi-spectral signature.
 - Will scale these models up to moderate resolution imagery to map sagebrush habitat across the Gunnison Basin range.
- Peer Review: Design & Protocols (History behind setting up NPS project)
 - NPS biologists initiated discussions in 1999 about Gunnison Basin sage-grouse research needs and has had input from LWG Research Sub-committee since that time.
 - The University of Wyoming was contracted for review of the study.
 - Review was done by DOW Animal Care and Use Committee for protocol approval. This Committee is provided yearly updates for the collection license renewal
 - Since the project is now collaborative, the methods and designs are continuously discussed and fine tuned.

Ferchau asked for clarification on the DOW's role in this project. Mike Phillips said it's parallel collaboration, with DOW working more in the West end of the Basin. Wenum said DOW is responsible for issuing the Collection Permits in regards to the handling of the animal, to ensure they are handled humanely and safely. Young said the researchers' commitment to work with the LWG Research Sub-committee in a non-

regulatory role is a large part why the collaboration and cooperation works. She said there isn't really any one entity which has oversight over research projects. Wenum said there is a limited amount of money and a lot of unanswered questions, so the data sharing and collaboration really allows everyone to get the biggest bang for the buck in regards to research.

○ Summary:

- Over 2,500 bird locations since 2000
- 157 captures, with 3 trap- related mortalities
- Average adult apparent annual survival (not formal analysis) - not related to capture.

- Females 53%

- Males 32%

The mortalities are from tracked birds only and are due to:

- 23% from avian
- 39% from mammalian (such as coyotes)
- 35% unknown causes (no way to determine cause)
- 3.5% from trapping
- 1.1% from power-lines
- Nest initiation 50% to 80%.
- 56 nests have been monitored.
- 1 re-nest attempt recorded.
- apparent nest success, with an average of 45%
- 38 chicks marked since 2005, with 8% apparent survival (from hatch to October).

○ Timeline:

- Hoping to wrap this up with a PHD student, who will likely start in the summer of 2008.
- Hoping to finalize dissertation and final publications by 2011.

Peterson asked if the chick survival was low, if the research was impacting that survival rate, and if that mortality was acceptable. Childers said it was acceptable because the chick survival is what they are measuring in order to answer the question of why it is low and what's causing it. Peterson said DOW should have a pretty good understanding of what the mortality rates were from the wing data from before hunting was eliminated. Phillips said the wing data is for fall, so they didn't have information for between hatch and fall. He stated that the research is not causing the mortality and that 10%-30% survival for chicks is pretty normal and is seen in game birds as well. He said the chick survival for Mallards is 15%, and 5%-10% is what is generally seen for waterfowl.

Phillips showed the survival curves graph which shows the curves for about 80 days. Most of the curve falls within the first three weeks, with very little mortality occurring in the first few days. Phillips said if their handling of the chick was causing the mortality, you would expect to see a much more rapid drop off in the first few days of the curve. He said you do see some mortality in the first few days which is in part due to the handling, but most of the mortality occurs later. Navy asked if the radio frequency used for the collars is audible to a predator and Phillips answered "no". Phillips also pointed out that predation still occurred in 2006, but it occurred later than it did in 2005. He said once these birds get through the early stage they have a really good chance for survival. Hausler asked what type of survival rate would be needed to have stability of the species. Phillips said they do not know, but it is 15% for mallards.

Peterson asked if the transmitters can be tracked to find what caused the predation. Chairman Stahlnecker said they've found transmitters in coyote scat. Phillips said they've found one in an owl pellet, but they often find nothing but the transmitter. There was some discussion about the budget for the DOW project. Ferchau asked why more research isn't being done with broods raised in captivity. Phillips said there are some birds being raised in captivity as part of the strategies set forth in the Rangewide Conservation Plan (RCP). Tony Apa, with DOW is doing a lot of the initial research on captive rearing with the Greater Sage-grouse and that research can hopefully be applied to the Gunnison Sage-grouse without doing the captive research directly on the Gunnison Sage-grouse right away. Linda Joseph asked about some research which was being done in Saguache County. Phillips said that was more of a management project than a research project.

Hausler asked what the difference was between the chick collars and the adult collars. Phillips said they use three different types of collars.

- The first one on the chicks only lasts a few weeks and weighs only 1 gram.
- The second, larger one is put on after the chicks are a few weeks old.
- The third collar is the adult collar which lasts approximately 22 months.

Hausler asked if the birds are handled three times and Phillips answered "yes".

Phillips said better information is needed on the chicks and the adults to determine what the thresholds are for the population. He said the structure of the habitat is extremely important in regards to the predators' ability to find the grouse. The collaboration with USGS and NPS works out really well because they are refining that type of information. He said the project will hopefully be completed in 2010 or 2011.

BREAK: The meeting was recessed from 12:20 to 12:49 for a lunch break.

Local Working Group Research Subcommittee Presentation, Continued Discussion: Terry Ireland asked if the researchers are looking at soils and site potential or just vegetation. Childers said they are looking more at vegetation. Stahlnecker said they are looking at what the sage-grouse are using, so it has to be based more on the vegetation that is there at that time, rather than the potential. Ireland said that as sacrifice areas are identified, it should be noted that areas which look poor now might still have potential with habitat treatments. Wenum asked if they were looking more at structural components and age of the sagebrush. Stahlnecker said the satellite imagery will have a structural component to it. Childers said they aren't really qualifying the age of the sagebrush but rather the height class. Wenum said if they can use the larger scale satellite imagery to figure out the areas that match, based on field work which is tied to the satellite imagery, and determine the age of the sagebrush, canopy cover, herbaceous under-story, etc. which seem to be favored by sage-grouse, they can then try find those areas for increasing sage-grouse numbers.

Peterson said he has supported the research from the beginning, but there has been a perception among some since then that there are negative impacts to the grouse from research. He asked the researchers to give this presentation to the Stockgrowers' Association to address those questions and concerns. He said that at some point, when researchers have definitive results that show what kind of information was taken from these studies and what the results will be used for, it would be very helpful to share those results.

Chairperson Stahlnecker said his hope is that if there are any concerns among the group, that those could be discussed and resolved, rather than passed on to the community. He thanked the Research Subcommittee for their presentation and expressed his hope that any concerns among the members would be discussed and resolved rather than passed on to the community.

LOCAL WORKING GROUP ACTION PLANS: Jim Cochran said this agenda item would be skipped, since the LWG does not want to present it in the draft stage.

ANTLER SHED ISSUE UPDATE, Continued Discussion regarding letter: Erich Ferchau drafted the letter to the Wildlife Commission and some amendments were made by the group. All Strategic Committee members signed the letter, except J Wenum.

CONSERVATION EASEMENT ISSUES: Jim Cochran reported that issues are coming up as Conservation Easements changes hands. He said the County has discovered one owner in particular who didn't appear to research his conservation easement before he bought his land. He said it will extremely important to educate the second generation of land owners on exactly what was actually granted. Wenum said some land owners are being audited by the IRS in regards to their easements as well, and was concerned that this might make the conservation easements less desirable to other land owners. He said the easement can be written very detailed to avoid the problems with future owners, but it's more difficult to get those started. They can also be written where they have a little more flexibility. Ferchau said the real issue involves the need for consistency in value assessments. McDaniel said one issue for their agency is checking up on the easements years later, and a strategy is needed for how to enforce those conservation easements. Peterson said the land trusts currently requires annual monitoring. He said the Strategic Committee sent a letter supporting the tax incentives being continued in the Farm Bill. The IRS appraisals are coming back with no value on the conservation easements, so owners' charitable contributions which are part of the tax incentives are then invalidated. Peterson said if a group advocates for continuation of tax incentives, but those can then be held against a land owner by the charitable contribution being invalidated it might become difficult for the Congressional Delegation to support. He said it is helpful for the land trusts to be able to step in and monitor what the future owners are doing and accommodate only what is written into the conservation values. Wenum said if the easement is written with careful detail, the problem then becomes the interpretation of what the first owner's intent was.

COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION: Administrative Assistant Keri Hodgkin provided the Committee members with the Board of County Commissioners' Boards and Commissions appointment schedule. The Board of Commissioners extended the members' terms to February, so they coincide with other Board and Commission Members' terms. The group then discussed staff's recommendations for changes to the Procedural Guidelines, as found in the packets and made some additional amendments.

Moved by Gary Hausler, seconded by Paula Swenson to make the amendments to the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee Gunnison County, Colorado Organization and Procedural Guidelines document, as discussed, and to recommend those amendments to the Gunnison County Board of Commissioners. Motion carried unanimously.

FUTURE MEETINGS: The Strategic Committee scheduled the January meeting for January 16th, instead of the 9th. December's meeting will be held on December 12th from 10:00 to 3:00, with part of the meeting being a work session for the Strategic Plan. Gunnison Rising recommendations will be done December 12th if possible, or deferred to January 16th if necessary.

ADJOURN: The meeting was adjourned at 1:56 p.m.

Certification of Approval:

Ken Stahlnecker, Chairperson _____

Greg Peterson, Secretary _____

Minutes Prepared By:

Keri Hodgin, Administrative Assistant III