

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
June 17, 2009**

The June 17, 2009 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:

Ken Stahlnecker, Chairperson, National Park Service (NPS)
John Scott, Vice-Chairperson, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS)
Sue Navy, High Country Citizens' Alliance (HCCA)
Paula Swenson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association (GCSA)
Al Pfister, US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Russell Japuntich, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Erich Ferchau, At-Large, Development Community
Jon Muggelstone, Public At-Large, Alternate
Linda Joseph, Saguache County Board of County Commissioners (Saguache BOCC) via teleconference

Alternate Members Present

Keith Berger, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) (left meeting at 11:50 am)
Liz With, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS)

Staff Members Present:

Jim Cochran, Gunnison County Wildlife Conservation Coordinator
Ruth Dukeman, Administrative Assistant III

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Stahlnecker called the June 17, 2009 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:04 am.

PUBLIC NOTICE CONFIRMED: Stahlnecker verified that proper legal public notice had occurred.

DETERMINATION OF QUORUM: Stahlnecker confirmed that a quorum was present.

AGENDA APPROVAL: Cochran requested that the draft letter to the Colorado Wildlife Commission approved previously regarding elk management, be added. This topic was added to the agenda. The agenda was approved as modified.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS:

HCCA: Navy informed the Committee about how the Local Working Group (LWG) Information and Education Subcommittee (I&E) accepted and reviewed nominations for the 2008 & 2009 LWG stewardship award. Navy also reported that Leigh Robertson was in town and footage

from the LWG produced video was provided for possible use in Robertson's upcoming video production efforts.

A field trip is planned for early September in the Ohio Creek area. Coordination of an exact site location is still to be determined with an award presentation planned during lunch.

BLM: Berger advised of a pending geothermal energy production application for a site near Waunita Hot Springs. There appear to be several resource concerns, including Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat. Berger noted that this will be his last meeting as Brian St. George will be reporting to the Gunnison Field Office on Monday, June 22.

DOW Lek count update: Scott requested a report on lek counts. Nathan Seward, Wildlife Conservation Biologist with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, advised that the final report was not yet available.

USFS: The process of changing Committee members was discussed. A formal letter requesting the appointment change for new USFS members is needed for the Board of County Commissioners review/appointment.

USFWS: Pfister reported that the conditions for the remanded Gunnison Sage-grouse listing decision process were still being negotiated in Washington D.C.

APPROVAL OF MAY 11, 2009 MEETING MINUTES: Modifications to the May 11, 2009 minutes were discussed and agreed upon. **Moved** by Scott to accept the May 11, 2009 meeting minutes as corrected, seconded by Peterson. Swenson abstained as she was not present at the May 11, 2009 meeting. Motion carried.

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESSED TO DOW FOR 5-YEAR GAME SEASON STRUCTURE: Cochran provided a copy of a modified version of the letter to accommodate the status of Japuntich's publication. Text copy of the draft letter to the Colorado Wildlife Commission follows:

Colorado Wildlife Commission
6060 Broadway
Denver, CO 80216

June 17, 2009

Re: 5-year Big Game Season Structure Process As It Relates to Gunnison Sage-grouse

Dear Wildlife Commissioners:

The Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee, representing resource management agencies, Gunnison County, Saguache County, ranching, environmental interests, the development community, and the public-at-large in the Gunnison Basin, would like to take this opportunity to provide the Colorado Wildlife Commission with information regarding the interaction of wild ungulates, primarily elk, and the Gunnison Sage-grouse in the upper Gunnison River area.

We are sure you are aware that the Gunnison Sage-grouse is a State Species of Special Concern and was a Candidate Species for listing under the Federal Endangered Species Act, and is currently the subject of a lawsuit settlement as to its status under the ESA. Local, State and Federal agencies as well as members of our community have been working on conservation of this species since the mid-1990's.

At that time browse data from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the United States Forest Service (USFS) showed that shrubs critical to overall habitat condition and important to Gunnison Sage-grouse were damaged, hedged and even missing from key areas within sage-grouse habitat (Young, personal communication, 2009).

In 1998 the Division of Wildlife's (DOW) Habitat Partnership Program (HPP) Committee commissioned an independent group with the task of reviewing existing vegetation data, population data, and changing social-economic trends as related to big game population goals and objectives, and reporting back to the HPP Committee (Roath et al. 1999, attached). That study verified earlier concerns regarding big game impacts, on the shrub component of winter range, which is also critical Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat.

A peer-reviewed publication of BLM browse data (**Japuntich et al. 2009 – in review for journal publication; summary attached**) further corroborates concerns regarding decline of habitat important to both big game and sage-grouse in the Gunnison Basin.

The elk population objectives for the three Data Analysis Units (DAU) in the Gunnison Basin (E-25,E-41,E-43) were approved by the Wildlife Commission in 2001 for implementation by the DOW. Using 2007 DOW data, the DAU E-25 elk population was estimated at 3,930 animals, well within the 3,500-4,500 range specified in that DAU's Elk Management Plan. Of concern to this Committee are the other two DAUs. DAU E-41 was estimated to be 194% of objective in 2007 (6,790 animals with a DAU objective of 3,000-3,500). DAU E-43 was estimated to be 157% of objective in 2007 as well (5,481 animals with a DAU objective of 3,000-3,500).

This Committee believes it is outside our purview to recommend specific management actions to the Wildlife Commission, but we do have considerable concern that elk populations be managed, at minimum, to meet DAU objectives, however that is accomplished. Based upon existing information, and our experiences as resource managers, ranchers, environmentalists, and members of the public living and working on the land in our basin, we are observing that the shrub habitat in this arid, climatically extreme area cannot sustain the current level of browsing by wild ungulate populations without impacting habitat important to the Gunnison Sage-grouse. Studies in other areas have shown that habitat can decline to the point that it would not support big game, grouse or other wildlife at the levels currently being asked of it (Olechnowski et.al. 2008, attached.)

The Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee believes that the current 5-year Season Structure process will establish the basic "tool box" for management of big game in Colorado for the coming five years. The DOW's management options will be constrained or enhanced by your decisions on season structure. We urge the Commission to consider all options available to it that will provide the DOW with the necessary tools to manage big game herds, and in this case specifically, elk in the Gunnison Basin, to the level defined in the DAU plans.

Sincerely,

Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee

attachments

Moved by Swenson, seconded by Ferchau, to approve the letter and include the additional summary attachment and to approve sending the letter as soon as possible.

Peterson asked if the Committee planed to send follow up correspondence including the published article written by Japuntich when available. It was decided that a follow up letter and the publication could be provided to the Wildlife Commission. Confirmation that the signature page was complete was provided.

Motion carried.

GRAZING RESEARCH PROJECT: Jim Gammonley, Tony Apa and Mike Phillips, from the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) Avian Research Group, were also present for discussion. They reported that the Species Conservation Trust Fund bill appropriating funding for the Grazing Management Regime Research Project had been signed by the Governor. The funding is around \$300,000 and it is possible to roll the funds forward if the entire amount is not used during the initial fiscal year. The logistics of the location of the study, amount of grazing lands required, and the demographic study components were discussed. The researchers advised that for the study to have defensible results the collaboration of land managers, avian specialists and the land owners/permittees will need to be well planned and organized with an emphasis on communications between all involved. A meeting with agency representatives/researchers and potential stockgrower participants is necessary early in the project development to be sure the research design is realistic for implementation. Discussion about the needs of the project and desired direction ensued. It was determined that a project outline would be completed by the researchers and distributed to the Committee for review during the last week of June. That information could then be presented by Peterson to the Gunnison County Stockgrowers' Association Board of Directors at their upcoming meeting scheduled for July 6, 2009.

A Grazing Management Research Sub-committee meeting would also be necessary to organize and define the collaborative efforts of team. A meeting was scheduled for July 14, 2009 from 8:00am to 12:00 noon in the Board of County Commissioners Meeting Room.

It was determined that Peterson will communicate with the stockgrower community members who had expressed a willingness to participate in the past. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies may also be used to overlay maps of existing leks, grazing areas and other factors that could help focus efforts to areas that showed the greatest promise to meet the goals of the study. Additional discussion noted that the different grazing regimes will need to be in place for several years before the demographic component of the study can begin.

Pfister asked Apa for an update about potential support from Moffat County. This area was proposed to provide the needed Greater Sage-grouse populations for replication of the study. Apa advised that they were waiting to see how the project moved forward. Overall, they expressed optimism about the project.

FUTURE MEETINGS:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Thursday, July 9, 2009 | 10:00 am – 2:00 pm - Work Session Action Plan |
| Tuesday, July 14, 2009 | 8:00 am – 12:00 pm Grazing Management Sub-Committee Meeting BOCC Meeting room |
| Thursday, August 13, 2009 | 10:00 am – 2:00 pm - Regular Meeting (Action Plan Presentation – Committee recommendation to BoCC) |
| Wednesday October 14, 2009 | 10:00 am – 2:00 pm - Regular Meeting |

ADJOURN: **MOVED** by Stahlnecker to adjourn the meeting seconded by Scott. Motion carried unanimously. The June 17, 2009 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:34 am.

WORK SESSION: Action Plan development scheduled from 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm.

Certification of Approval:

Ken Stahlnecker, Chairperson

Greg Peterson, Secretary

Minutes Prepared By:

Ruth Dukeman, Administrative Assistant III