

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
May 21, 2008**

The May 21, 2008 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:

John Scott, Vice-Chairman, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS)
Erich Ferchau, At-Large, Development Community
Russell Japuntich, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Linda Joseph, Saguache County Board of County Commissioners (Saguache BOCC)
Sue Navy, High Country Citizens' Alliance (HCCA)
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association (GCSA)
Al Pfister, US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Paula Swenson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Vicki Spencer, At large Member, Alternate,
Sandy Guerrieri, Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association (GCSA- Alternate)
Lars Santana, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS – Alternate)

Staff Members Present:

Jim Cochran, Gunnison County Sage-grouse Conservation Coordinator
Ruth Dukeman, Administrative Assistant III

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Scott called the meeting to order at 10:05 am.

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

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: There were no modifications to the agenda.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

DOW Lek Numbers Report: Navy requested an update and Division of Wildlife representative Jeff Oulton explained that due to the inaccessibility of the leks the figures are not yet compiled. Cochran noted that activity was observed at every lek except for Razor Creek, because of snow cover.

McDaniel Absence: Japuntich announced BLM Field Manager Kenny McDaniel would be absent for the June meeting due to a special detail assignment, in Denver.

Sage-grouse Summit in Montrose, May 14-15, 2008 Update: Pfister, who was on the event committee, felt that this summit was very successful due in part to the participation of the many Strategic Committee members. The diversity of issues presented and the science involved allowed for an open exchange of ideas. Cochran reported that the final count of attendees appeared to be over 100. It was suggested that in the future it may be helpful to hold the event on an annual or bi-annual basis allowing attendees to schedule in advance. It was agreed that the Summit expands to a larger audience for those with the time and interest to participate. It was also noted that with additional time and planning it may be possible to have greater landowner participation.

Suggestions for the Summit steering committee to consider were given as follows:

- 1.) The timing of the event may be modified, allowing for hunting season and winter travel issues.
- 2.) The steering committee could possibly meet on a more frequent basis.
- 3.) If the location were changed to Gunnison, landowners participation might improve as travel needs would decrease. It would also allow for on-site field trips.

Spencer noted that she is new to the committee and agreed that there was a great deal of variety in the information presented, that all the presentations were well informed and the summit was a beneficial opportunity to meet people.

MINUTES APPROVAL: Modifications to the April 16, 2008 minutes were discussed and agreed upon. Swenson moved to approve the minutes as amended. Navy seconded. Motion carried unanimously.

CCAA UPDATE –FWS, CDOW Pfister reported that correspondence addressed to the CDOW, included a proposal to use rangeland health assessments to determine if a property should be classified as Type 1 or Type 2; this letter indicated intent for CCAA success. Habitat transects would be completed to determine a baseline, then local habitat monitoring would occur for each population. All vegetation data will be used in combination to determine a management prescription as appropriate. Type 1 and 2 habitat assessments would be completed in conjunction with habitat transect and local habitat monitoring. Cooperative efforts will be needed to complete the specifics, including the methodology. To avoid confusion in the future a written document will need to be created for each scenario, versus attempting to use a generic version. It was noted that the introduction to Pellant's publication clearly states that health assessments are not to be used to determine changes in management. Information and insights provided to Pfister was beneficial, and he is thankful to the Habitat Sub-committees contributions.

Scott stated that the rangeland health assessments are needed to determine health of the land and to show the potential habitat improvements. Peterson indicated that landowners are willing to perform improvements. The process would use habitat transects to determine what improvements would be recommended. Currently the revised proposal is working up the "chain of command" in hopes of getting a final answer. It was agreed that this is a cooperative effort between all involved and there are some fine points, including additional language that are needed before it is finalized.

Discussion moved to recent comments published in the newspapers indicating that agriculture is beneficial to sage-grouse. Agriculture has some beneficial aspects when the land is managed properly. The literature indicates that some forms of agriculture can be a cause of fragmented sage-grouse habitat. Cam Aldridge's paper currently in press for Greater Sage-grouse states if 25% of the landscape is cultivated crops it can show a negative correlation to sage-grouse population persistence.

Nathan Seward with the Division of Wildlife (DOW) clarified that rangeland health assessments will be used to determine Type 1 and Type 2 lands going forward. Pfister proposed that the habitat transects will need to be conducted with the hopes that approximately 70% of transects will meet the guidelines. After transects are completed, local habitat monitoring will be used in combination with all vegetative data available to monitor sage-grouse habitat population conditions.

Peterson feels that the information presented sounds positive, and stressed the importance of communicating the process clearly to landowners. The definitions, collection methodology and the process were proposed as a discussion topic for a future agenda.

Browse Data – Presentation by Russell Japuntich, BLM: An easy to understand interpretation of complex statistics was presented. Japuntich covered the impacts of big game browsing of shrubs. Data collection was started in 2001 when there was a change of shrub condition. Bitterbrush, Serviceberry and Mountain Mahogany were evaluated in the study. All three are browse stimulated plants, meaning

that browse encourages growth. However, changes will occur when these shrubs are being browsed to point that they can not recover. Mountain Mahogany is estimated to have almost double the nutritional value of sagebrush and being the preferred plant to be fed on by big game could be called "candy" to the elk and deer.

Allen Moores of the Gunnison County Public Works Department shared that he participated in a similar presentation nine years ago. He expressed his concern that these types of topics can lead to confrontation, and recommended taking a cautious approach with how this information is shared with others. It was determined that further discussions, specifically if this presentation would be given to the Colorado Wildlife Commission from the Committee, needed to take place in the next agenda topic.

Sage-grouse Habitat Preservation Presentation to Colorado Wildlife Commission in June, 2008: As of meeting time the possibility of making a presentation to the Wildlife Commission at their Gunnison Workshop June 12th and 13th was unknown. An invitation was extended to the Committee to attend a DOW invitation only pre-meeting on June 11th. This meeting would not be public noticed.

It was decided that big game browsing can affect sage-grouse habitat; however the browse data is a single aspect. Peterson commented that this topic is similar to livestock issues and he suggested stressing the importance of the impacts these issues have to the sage-grouse specifically, and that drought issues and potential solutions to these problems may also need to be included. Other topics are big game effects on riparian, the supplemental feeding efforts and their overall effects this year which may need to be addressed. Further clarification was made that the Committee is not trying to directly influence big game numbers, or request big game reductions. However the Committee would like to show the variety of data that is being used, and also be able to provide this information to others for consideration when big game numbers are being decided. It was agreed that presentations from the Committee relate back to the sage-grouse needs and habitat issues.

Landowner comments were appreciated and valued by the Committee. It was decided that further exploration of presentation expansion was needed. After further discussion it was determined that the Committee would like to pursue these opportunities:

1. If possible, having a Wildlife Commission workshop presentation and to be listed on the workshop agenda;
2. Invite the Wildlife Commission to the June 11th 2008 Strategic Meeting, time of the meeting could be changed to later in the day;
3. Attend the private invitation only meeting and give a general presentation if none of the above would be possible. Scott volunteered to work with Cochran to put together a presentation to cover the overall mission of the Committee and the issues it is currently faced with if needed.

2008 Road Closures update: All agreed that overall it was a better year than in the past. Some road closures were affected by the heavy snow. Several deterrents including "tank traps" and locked gates did not stop the usage of several closed roads. Concern was shared that road travelers arriving at a locked gate may want to go through, around, or damage the gate versus traveling back the way they came. It was noted that BLM did use signage to communicate the road closure in advance of the gate closure. It appeared that dramatically less damage occurred to BLM gates and fences this season than in previous years when the signs were not used.

2008 Antler Shed Season update: It was discussed that the current regulations are challenging to enforce. Observation showed that many shed collection areas were worked heavily. Several groups of violators were contacted in closed areas and claimed that they were not aware of current regulations. Other collectors cached antlers returning when the season opened. A Forest Service officer near Cochetopa Pass encountered a violator with 7 elk sheds. Japunitch personally encountered a violator on the morning of May 16th who had antlers on the back of a horse.

Several citations were issued, primarily for going around closures. Many warnings were issued for the human activity closure. The typically stance during the first year of new regulation for law enforcement is to issue more warnings than "tickets". Several citations were issued and antlers were seized for violation of the closures. Concern was expressed that collectors were using private land to access the public lands.

Randy Clark further commented that he feels collector activity will continue unless all human activity is prohibited. Clark was expecting a huge increase in business on May 16th when the season opened, but he has not had the expected response.

Cochran reported that he lives in what is typically a popular antler shed collection area. He did not notice any activity until May 16th. He further observed that there were not many animals in that location but that the normal collection activity appeared to be affected by the closure.

Navy cautioned that this is the first year of the closures, and rather than recommend major changes to the current regulations, it may be beneficial to wait until next year because people will know more about the restrictions and when they occur. Seward noted that to help enforcement in the future it may be possible to require collectors to purchase a low cost permit for antler shed collection and the funds generated may go into a conservation fund for the benefit of sage-grouse.

After discussion the Committee determined that creation of an Antler Shed Issue Sub-committee to explore this topic further was appropriate. Sub-committee members were appointed as follows:

Paula Swenson
Gary Hausler
Russ Japuntich

Randy Clark and Navid Navidi were invited to attend the subcommittee meeting on May 28th, 2008 at 2:30pm in the Board of Commissioners boardroom. Swenson proposed to have additional information prepared for the June 11th meeting for further discussion. This information may be used to prepare a proposal to the Wildlife Commission for enactment in 2009.

FUTURE MEETINGS: June 11th 1pm to 5pm – Regular meeting and work session.
July 16th 10-2 – Regular meeting and work session

ADJOURN: Scott adjourned the meeting at 12:36pm

Certification of Approval:

Ken Stahlnecker, Chairperson

Greg Peterson, Secretary

Minutes Prepared By:

Ruth Dukeman, Administrative Assistant III