Waunita Watchable Wildlife Subcommittee Meeting Minutes
August 28, 2017
CPW conference room

Subcommittee members in attendance: Greg Peterson (Chair), J Wenum, Pat Magee, Matt Vasquez, Jonathan Houck, Nathan Seward, Peter Caloger, Brooke Vasquez (staff)

Mark Brennan, USFWS, was not in attendance.

Wenum provided the meeting minutes from the 2015 subcommittee meeting and the Gunnison Sage-grouse Watchable Wildlife Program Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site 2017 Final Report for context, history, and current use.

The traditional lek was not used through the entire viewing season (4/1/17-5/10/2017). Grouse were using the North Meadow and East Ridge making it difficult for counters to get an accurate grouse count. Lek viewing was open for 5 days and closed 2 days during each of the viewing weeks. Gunnison County put up signs prohibiting parking along the side of County Road 887.

Peterson asked the questions, at what point do people stop wanting to come to the viewing site? At what point do we shut down the viewing site?

Magee said people keep coming to the viewing site even though the grouse have shifted lek locations. There is still a quality viewing experience. Viewing trailer use has increased and the number of random vehicles have decreased. 99% of protocol violations were by individuals, not groups at the viewing site. Most violations of viewing protocols are not intentional, but through lack of knowledge/preparation. Viewing protocol has been maintained even though the grouse have shifted lek locations in the hopes they may come back to the traditional lek site.

Peterson requested that the minutes show the subcommittee discussed several factors that might be impacting the Waunita lek such as: increased traffic/noise on Hwy 50 and County Road 887, increased road noise from road resurfacing and rumble strips on Hwy 50, changes over time in land use in the general area (grazing, housing, fences, flooded lek area in 2014), lek viewing site use, decreased use on traditional lek and increased activity on other nearby locations. There was a group consensus that there is not a single identifiable source of impact on the Waunita lek.

Seward commented that lek attendance throughout the Basin is cyclic, numbers fluctuate naturally and grouse often shift lek locations. The subcommittee suggested CPW try to get a “better” lek count at the Waunita lek in 2018. This will require at least 2 observers in a coordinated count. This will help to get a better sense of grouse attendance. Peterson suggested checking with the Irbys for access via the old access road (Lorraine’s).

The Committee discussed the costs and benefits of the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site.
SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats):

> *Strength* – the viewing site is located along an existing and open county road, having this site available decreases viewing pressure on other leks, there is a desire form the public to see Gunnison sage-grouse (333 visitors this year and it continues to increase even with reduce access).
>
> *Weakness*- grouse have changed their lek use (shifted location), viewing opportunity still exists but it is further away (at what point does distance/quality of the experience cause public use to decrease/cease).
>
> *Opportunity* – the changes that have been documented may present the opportunity for new data on change of use and help establish thresholds for use/changes/non-use science.
>
> *Threats* – possible abandonment of lek area and other unintended, unanticipated consequences

What is needed next:

USFWS involvement is needed, they have authority for the species. USFWS was not able to participate in today's discussion. Question about CCAA or CCA – did either address viewing or other recreational impacts? Not directly.

Enforcement of violations is needed - County Sheriff for parking/county road issues, CPW for harassment of wildlife, USFWS for harassment/take of threatened species. It is difficult to tie violations of viewing protocols to harassment without egregious violations/impacts.

Need to focus efforts in 2018 to check area east of Ridge and do a more thorough assessment on grouse numbers and locations of use.

Houck will check with CDOT on traffic use on Hwy 50 and with Marlene Crosby at Public Works on traffic use on CR 887. Houck is meeting with Ann Timberman later today and will bring up topics discussed at the subcommittee meeting.

CPW will work with CDOT to remove Watchable Wildlife Site signs when the site is not open. Greg commented they are still in place now.

Should changes be made to the viewing days?

> Peterson - possibility of having site open 4 day and closed 3 days per week? Discussion on this.
>
> Houck – possibility of having site open for a week and then closed for a week during the viewing season? Discussion on this.
>
> Have public viewing days vs. organized group viewing days to address protocol violations & impacts? Discussion on this.

Wenum said he would consider 4 days open and 3 days closed, but wants the CDOT and Gunnison County traffic count information and lek information on amount of use and activity areas east of the ridge (Monson Creek drainage) before moving forward. Seward said that having a few years of info on

management changes would be better than continually changing and not understanding what is or isn't working. Seward would like to continue with 5 days open and 2 days closed since it has only in place for 1 season. Changes could be implemented in 2019. Sisk-a-dee already has reservations for 2018.

Wenum requested that Magee give commercial groups a heads up on possible changes in 2019. Possible options:

1. Shut down the site entirely (no apparent support for this, there is a concern that shutting down the site will cause people to seek out other leks and will spread impacts to other lek sites).
2. Close site more days per week – open for fewer days (4 open, 3 closed), CPW would like information on current lek use and CDOT/County information on traffic and busier days (noise, traffic) to coordinate closed days to lessen overall impacts (ie are weekdays busier/nosier than weekends?).
3. Separate individual users and commercial group use (confine impacts to smaller window of time and those most likely to violate protocols-individual users).
4. Creation of a new lek viewing site - private lands with CCAA/CI would not be allowed to have commercial activity, Miller Ranch SWA, Centennial SWA, other public lands where access could be available, but controlled. Peterson requested that the minutes show he would not support moving the existing viewing site or creating a new viewing site on a formal basis at a different lek. Wenum shared similar concerns. The subcommittee does not support this option.

Peterson requested that the minutes have a statement on the value of the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site.

> A high value is placed on the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site because it provides an opportunity for people to view a lek without going out on their own and finding a lek, thus providing an outlet without increasing impacts to other leks.