GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
September 18, 2019

The September 18, 2019 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted in the Gunnison County Blackstock Government Center, 2nd floor meeting room, located at 221 N. Wisconsin #D, Gunnison, CO, 81230

Committee Members Present:

Voting Members:
Jonathan Houck, Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
J. Wenum, Vice-Chairperson, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large, by phone
Ann Timberman, US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Elijah Waters, BLM
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates
Jessica Frey, National Park Service (NPS), Alternate

Others in the Audience:
Craig Dremann
Brenda Sharp
Jim Mendonca
Dayle Funka
Pat Magee

Staff Members Present:
Rebecca Ricord, Administrative Assistant
Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Houck called the September 18, 2019 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:04 A.M.

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

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF JULY 17, 2019 MEETING MINUTES: **Moved:** by Wenum and seconded by Kugler to accept the July 17, 2019 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Navy reported on the Wet Meadow Restoration project. They worked with the Wildland Restoration Volunteers (WRV) crew on a project at Miller Ranch State Wildlife Area and other sites and got a lot done. They were able to get full days in, other than the first day because of rain. The Wings Across America group gave out awards at the ceremony they had there.

Rummel reported that Matt Vasquez sent an email with an update that the Gunnison Basin Wet Meadow and Riparian Restoration project was selected to receive the Climate Adaptation Leadership Award from the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. A Forest Service person from the Forest Service Washington DC Office of Sustainability and Climate nominated all the project partners for the award. [The Wet Meadow

Riparian Restoration project has] representatives from five partners attending the award ceremony next week. [Matt] will provide more information on this, including media info, for all partners to use. There will be award certificates forthcoming for partners as well.

If Tom Grant, Nate Seward, or Sue Navy is present, they can provide an update on the wet meadow restoration volunteer events with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers and High Country Conservation Advocates that took place this month. They were very successful, fun, and a lot of good work was accomplished on BLM, Miller Ranch SWA, and Forest Service Flat Top and Black Sage Pass sites.

Rummel reported that the agenda will no longer be printed in the paper for the meetings but it will be sent out on Thursdays and posted at the Courthouse and Blackstock buildings. They will also be online.

Timberman reported that the Gunnison Sage-grouse Recovery Plan is at the regional office and hoping that it is signed in the next couple of weeks. They have added a research and agricultural focus. Hopefully it will be ready by October 24, 2019.

Houck reported that the BOCC submitted comments on the Section 386 Energy Corridor Plan. The Energy Corridors are developed across the country and one of them cuts right through Southern Gunnison County. The BOCC made some pointed comments that the energy corridor drives right through essential sage-grouse habitat. They understand the need for designating these areas but they were clear of their concern that there was no reference to the protected measures in place. The comments are attached to yesterday's BOCC meeting packet.

Houck reported that Gunnison County, San Miguel County and the State's Department of Natural Resources had entered a protest on the Uncompaghre Field Office RMP. They were left with the ability to support it or contest it.

There will be a meeting coming up with Noreen Walsh, Regional Director, USFWS. She will be coming to Gunnison to follow-up from her June meeting with the County Coalition, on October 16, 2019.

UPDATE ON COUNTY COALITION MEETING

Houck reported they had a meeting on July 17th with the county coalition group in Montrose. They pushed that the county coalition have someone more connected to work on the recovery plan. They chose Robbie LeValley, the administrator for Delta County. Houck went over the different criteria of why they chose her; science, technical, etc. They also looked at the draft recovery objectives. They developed a schedule to work with each other and how they will work through the draft.

CHEATGRASS EFFORTS UPDATE

Magee gave update. 2019 has been the year of the cheatgrass efforts. They are working on coordination, inventory and mapping, on the ground treatments, following up with monitoring and research, various communication efforts, developing project database, and working on different areas. They had a cheatgrass pull event on May 18, 2019 and they had a great event, with about 50 volunteers helping. This fall they started a series of native plants seed collection. His class started in August on Nine Mile Hill. They collected 5 gallons of seeds in 35 minutes.

Rummel reported that the Conservation District and Bird Conservancy of the Rockies put on a cheatgrass treatment workshop primarily targeted toward landowners. They specifically talked about treatment options, they focused it on an integrative pest management approach. They also incorporated a lot of other subjects. They ended up with 42 people attending.

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WAUNITA SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING UPDATE

Wenum reported that the subcommittee met Monday. They discussed potential clauses to the change in lek location and some of the impacts. There is an increase in highway traffic on Highway 50. It's up over the last 10 years, per CDOT about 35%. There is an increase of traffic on County Road 887 (the Waunita road). There is also an increase in development and activity in the area. There are two new residences just north of the highway and a commercial greenhouse is being proposed. They tried different things over the last several years. Since it is a State Wildlife area, Parks and Wildlife Commission has authority over it. They need to get back into the regulatory process. They want to focus on drafting an issue paper to send to the Parks and Wildlife Commission with options and hopefully a preferred alternative. Ultimately it has to go through CPW's review process, then it would go on the Commission agenda and they will make the decision in regard to any potential changes.

They discussed closing the site, consequence, benefits. The viewing trailer is currently usually used by commercial groups. Currently the viewing season in from April 1 to May 10, 40 days. They discussed going to alternating years of viewing, open one year and closed the next. Discussed use of technology; video, live feeds etc. They talked about the use of other lek sites, access and impacts to that and how can those be addressed, associated risks and benefits. They discussed trying to develop thresholds for impacts, minimum lek number or minimum lek count over a three year period.

They got into more detailed options associated with the issue paper; they have a couple of options 1) status quo 2) closing the site 3) keep the viewing length the same and include two closing days during week or pick dates to close 4) shorten the season to 30 days, April 1 to April 30 and be open all of the days, or 5) shorten the season to 30 days and include two days for closure per week. After discussion followed on a variety issues, pros and cons of each. The group came up with having a 30 day viewing period and open on all days.

Houck appointed Alison Vendramel as a member of the subcommittee and removed Matt Vasquez.

Discussion of the Committee followed on whether they should have the site open for 30 days with no closures or open for 30 days with closures two times a week. The Committee decided to put this back on the agenda in October to decide what to do at that time.

I & E SUBCOMMITTEE UPDATES

Navy reported that if they want to do a Stewardship award they will have to do it soon to get it done for this year. They will put it on the agenda for the next meeting in October. Navy reported that they have thought about giving it to the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District Board. They would like to hold another festival occurring next Spring, a summit in the Spring of 2021 and they are looking at revitalizing the mural project in a more local way. Further discussion will occur in the October meeting.

SURVEY METHODS TO DETECT ZOMBIE ECOSYSTEMS IN GUNNISON AND IMPROVING GUSG HABITAT FOR SPECIES RECOVERY

Dremann and Sharp gave a presentation. Below is the synopsis of their presentation from Dremann.

BRENDA SHARP Native Ecotypes -- What Brenda talked about -- She is the daughter of one of the founders of the original Sharp Brothers Seed Company in Healy, Kansas, and she has a farm in Montrose, plus an Ecological Restoration Test Plot Site in Gunnison County, where she is working on methods to establish natives efficiently as possible, without wasting time and money. The name of her company is Brenda Sharp Native Ecotypes, with the HQ in Montrose.

GSG RECOVERED and REMOVED from the Endangered Species List in 2029?--What I talked about, was that all of the members of the various SGS Working groups, need to circle the date on their calendars, exactly ten years from now, September 18, 2029, because that is the date that the GSG could be reasonably recovered and removed from the Endangered Species list, if there is a desire to do so?

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And in doing so, along with the GSG, you would also recover the grassland ecosystem, and also convert the bare areas between the sage plus the cheatgrass areas, back to native grassland and native forbs.

WESTERN 1997 MEGATRANSECT--I explained that my 1997 Megatransect survey at <http://www.ecoseeds.com/megatransect.html> -- where I did a mile-by-mile survey of Colorado, from California to the Utah border, then across Colorado along US 50 to Gunnison, then over Cottonwood Pass, and north to Wyoming and out to South Dakota and back to California--and only found cheatgrass growing in only a few spots in 1997 in all of Colorado.

My complete 1997 Megatransect details is available for sale under a licensing agreement, if it would be useful for a Western-wide snap shot, of the exact cheatgrass locations, as well as the locations of the native species plus the intentionally sown exotics. The website has an example of that mile-by-mile data in a map-form, showing the section of Nevada, from Jackpot to Wells.

At the meeting on Wednesday, I suggested everyone look at the beginning of that Megatransect website, for each State that the survey went through. I listed the number of miles where I found natives present, and where cheatgrass grew, and also where exotics were intentionally sown. But the most important additional note, was how many miles where weeds, exotics and natives were ABSENT, that would be future vacancies where the cheatgrass and other weeds would potentially fill in the future.

And now, we are in the future, and the cheatgrass and other weeds are filling in those vacancies, doing exactly what was predicted 22 years ago.

REPLANTING NATIVES, NO CHEATGRASS in 6 Months?--Then, I talked about replanting a cheatgrass area and getting 100% native cover in six month and zero cheatgrass, in the 100-mile pipeline north of Reno in 1993 at <http://www.ecoseeds.com/greatbasin.html> -- and that native cover in a grazed area, is still 95% after 25 years.

ZOMBIE SURVEY--Then, I discussed the survey method for detecting Zombies in the ecosystem, by measuring the basal diameters of native grass populations, and produce an age-pyramid, to see if you have young seedlings or not, and if not, then you have a "Zombie ecosystem" and need to determine how to get that population to start reproducing again.

I suggested that a potential search pattern for Zombies, could be, to grid out each of the SGS Critical Habitat Units in 10 by 10 mile squares, and check each different native grass species populations in each square, to see if they have been converted to Zombies or not.

[UPDATE--Brenda and I last week, did one of those Zombie surveys in Gunnison County and found that a native grass species in one population was so completely Zombized, that the last time the plants produced seedlings may have been 100-150 years ago, based on the very unusual 2 foot wide basal diameters, and no seedlings plus very few seedheads being produced.]

TABLE-TOP TEST PLOTS? -- Then, I mentioned the 70% failure rate of native seeding projects in the Great Basin sagebrush ecosystem for the last 75 years, that was reported by the USGS in 2017, at <https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/70180019> -- so to solve that problem, for every native seeding project you include money for setting up small scale test plots like we did for the Reno pipeline project. Everyone doing any native seeding projects, need to prove out your methods on a table-top sized plot, before you use the whole seeding project as one gigantic test plot with only one treatment.

For example, when the USFWS GSG Recovery plan may suggest certain methods to replant native seeds for improving GSG habitat, then before any large scale plantings are made, that table-top sized test plots planted with those seeds at those sowing rates, to see if those projects can actually work?

NO MORE EXOTIC or NON-LOCAL Cultivar seeds sown?--I also mentioned last Wednesday, that each Federal and State agency in the West this year, needs to immediately stop sowing a single pound of

exotic seeds on public lands, and also stop sowing non-local cultivars of natives, because those sowings cause permanent environmental damages for the next 10,000 years, and therefore is a direct violation of NEPA.

And when any project on public lands can cause permanent environmental damage on massive scales each year, then, the sowing of exotic seeds can never be legally justified. Especially, when the use of local native ecotypes for projects, causes zero damage.

NO more CHEATGRASS Eradication Projects?--Also, I suggested that everyone in Colorado immediately stop any cheatgrass eradication projects, and go all-in on conversions of those cheatgrass areas, plus filling in any bare areas between the shrubs that could become cheatgrass prairies in the future.

What I mean, by everyone stop all cheatgrass eradication projects -- is no more pulling or spraying of cheatgrass. In the past 50-70 years, we have been placing losing bets on managing cheatgrass by solely using eradication methods, when we need to go all-in with Ecological Restoration Conversion Methods, and quickly get back to solid local native cover with diversity within six months, as the best alternative.

And to do that process, we need to start, by bulk out seeds the local genetic material ecotypes, especially the local ecotypes of native grasses from each of the GSG Critical Habitat Units, and also the GSG chick food plants.

List "ZOMBIE" SPECIES as THREATENED?--*Not talked about on Wednesday,* I would add one more item--Start listing sending in petitions to the USFWS, at least as Threatened, any native grass species where Zombie-populations are detected, after conducting any Zombie surveys.

If a native grass population is not reproducing and producing seedlings, that species is going extinct in that area, and that needs to be noted, by listing that species as at least Threatened with the USFWS, so that recovery efforts can be started, to reverse the extinction-trend.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

FUTURE MEETINGS: Future meetings will occur on the 3rd Wednesday of the month in the Planning Commission meeting room, located at 221 N. Wisconsin, Gunnison, Co. 81230, unless changed for a specific reason.

10-16-19	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
11-20-19	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
12-18-19	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The September 18, 2019 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:40 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Rebecca Ricord, Administrative Assistant

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