GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
July 15, 2020

The July 15, 2020 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted by Zoom virtual online meeting, 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
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA) (by phone)
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Elijah Waters, BLM

Non-Voting Members
Nate Seward, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Alternate

Others in the Audience:
Allison Hearne, USFWS
Dayle Funka, USFS
Leah Waldner, Park Service
Pat Magee, WCU
Jessica Frey, National Park Service (NPS)
Maddie Rehn, WCU
Jessica Young, WCU

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 July 15, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:06 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. **Moved:** by Navy and seconded by Houck to accept the agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF JUNE 17, 2020 MEETING MINUTES: **Moved:** by Wenum and seconded by Houck to accept the June 17, 2020 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Navy reported that HCCA has a couple of stewardship projects for wet meadow restoration, with people on the ground, lined up for August 29, 2020 with the Forest Service and September 10, 2020 with BLM restoring sections of the Signal Peak Trail in the Chicken Scratch portion of the trail. Houck recommended that she get an exemption from the Public Health Department.

Kugler reported that Gunnison Trails finished up their latest trail project in Signal Peak called Duane's World. It's a connector trail that gets you higher up in part of the system. They have another project that takes off from that trail that they will be working on next week.

Vasquez reported that they started sage-grouse habitat monitoring this month for the CCA. Two of their seasonal employees are working with their range employees on training. They are taking advantage of having extra seasonal help this year. They have been building relationships with HCCA by doing a CWBW grant. It is likely they will get an additional $40,000 for wet meadow restoration and is hoping they have two years to use it. They will find out this week if the board approves the funding.

Waters reported that they have a new range management specialist, Andrew Bryant, that will be here at the end of August.

Frey reported that the National Park Service is making progress on their North Rim project. Field work won't occur until 2021.

Caloger reported that he has not received any input about going out on public lands or restrictions. People seem to be using the public lands and not being hindered by anything.

Houck reported that Terry Ireland from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reached out to see if the County had interested in reviewing the Gunnison Rising PA. Houck thinks it would be a good opportunity for the Committee to look at the proposed PA and see the process. They would also get an opportunity to review the draft habitat conservation plan and the NEPA plan during the public comment period. Houck reported that there was a press release that came out with position on Gunnison Sage-grouse numbers and believes there are some discrepancies on the numbers within the Gunnison Basin. Houck requested feedback from the Committee.

Seward reported that there was a press release that went out from Western Watersheds, Wild Earth Guardians, and the Center for Wildlife Diversity. He believes they were jumping the gun because they didn't have the final 2020 lek count data. The current population estimate for the Gunnison basin alone is over 2200 birds, so the statement in the release that there are only 1600 birds is deceiving. They are not using the most recent lek count data from 2020. The only way Seward can figure that they are coming up with the 1600 birds is that they are using the outdated population estimation formula from the Gunnison Basin Conservation Plan from 1997. It is more acceptable to use the Rangewide Conservation Plan population estimation formula from research in the 2000s and finalized in 2005. The population did increase from the Spring of 2019. The population trend has decreased from the hard winter of 2016-2017. Then it was followed by the drought of 2018 and hard winter of 2018-2019. The weather patterns have impacted the grouse population but we are not down to 1600 birds using the generally accepted Rangewide Conservation Plan formula. If you are looking at the high male count from 2017-2019 the high male count was 583, 24% decrease from 2016-2018. The three-year span from 2018 to 2020 high male count dropped to 480, 17% decrease. If you look at the three year high male count from 2018 to 2020, if you run the high male count of 480 through the Rangewide Conservation Plan formula, you are going to have a population estimate of around 2,353 birds. Wants to clarify that they are not down to 1600 birds rangewide.

Young reported that what was in the seven local working group plans was a National estimate that was utilized for sage-grouse population estimates across the entire range before they were two distinct species. There are problems with any estimates. In the 2005 Rangewide plan, there was a small study that was based on one or two leks that radio tracked males to look at which ones were on the leks and which ones weren't and used a different population estimate method to adjust for the males that are off the lek in a given morning and the percentage of females of that population. It didn't match the data very well in terms of females in the population. From that day forward the population estimates increased by 20 to 25 percent on average, depending on the year, high male count and so forth. Young agrees that it is standard to use the Rangewide plan but that it may not reflect what's going in the population that has 80 to 90 percent of the birds. Really liked how over the years the Division of Wildlife included in their lek counts, up to about three years ago, both averages from the Rangewide and Gunnison Basin Conservation Plan averages. Not sure where the press release came up with the numbers.

Houck stated that it is worth trying to figure out a creative way to respond to the press release and would like to draft a letter from the Committee on how they utilize data to drive action, how their model works, and the commitment and collaboration that has been consistent. It is important to push back with a reminder on how the Gunnison Basin works together to better effect the outcomes for Gunnison Sage-grouse and find common ground with everyone. Wenum stated that he would support it and believes the information in the Gunnison Country Times sent out a mixed message.

2021 SUMMIT

Magee reported that they have been holding Summits for the past 15 years, first one in 2005 in Norwood and Telluride and every 3-5 years after that. The next Summit will be held in the Spring of 2021. The idea is to bring the local, state and out-of-state representatives in to share policies, efforts in the field, that have been going on. It might be a good opportunity to learn more about the recovery plan and where they are with the process. Also think about strategies and networking. This will be the 20th year that the Gunnison Sage-grouse has been a designated species and he wants to integrate it into the Summit. They want to have it in April at Western. Went over the tentative agenda, possible topics and possible funding sources. They are hoping to bring a Gunnison Sage-grouse Summit fellow to come in and help with the coordination, most likely a MEM student, to help with fundraising, grant writing, summit event planning.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF THE RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY FOR THE USFWS GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE RECOVERY PLAN

Hearne gave an overview of the Recovery Plan process. The Committee went through the Recovery Implementation Strategy, making suggested edits.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

FUTURE MEETINGS: Future meetings will occur by Zoom online meetings, unless changed for a specific reason.

08-19-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
09-16-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
10-21-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
11-18-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
12-16-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The July 15, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 1:45 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Rebecca Ricord, Administrative Assistant

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