GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
October 21, 2020

The October 21, 2020 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was a field trip that began at the Mountaineer Bowl at Western Colorado University, 106 Maintenance Drive, Gunnison, CO, 81230 and ended at Miller Ranch State Wildlife Area at County Road 7A, Gunnison, CO 81230.

Committee Members Present:

Voting Members:
Jonathan Houck, Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Nate Seward, 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, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)

Non-Voting Members
None

Others in the Audience:
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Hannah Schaefer Tibbett, Gunnison Conservation District
J Wenum, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (retired)

Staff Members Present:
Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Houck called the October 21, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 9:09 A.M.

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

APPROVAL OF AUGUST 19, 2020 MEETING MINUTES: Approval of August 19, 2020 minutes will occur at the subsequent Strategic Committee meeting.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Vasquez reported that there was significant progress on wet meadow restoration work in 2020 despite COVID-19 restrictions, and limiting volunteer and conservation corps groups. They worked in August and September at Teachout on Flat Top, including an August 29 HCCA volunteer day with about 15 people. This work included adding a second layer of rock, and rock armoring on last year's plug and spread treatment. Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation (STOR) Corps helped especially for a week in September. Given the dry soils this year, there were fewer negative impacts from livestock trampling. They did find wetland vegetation growth, rose bushes (an indicator of wet soils), and a salamander at sites despite drought conditions. This year they also prepared for treatments next year including staging rock at South Cottonwood, to add second layers of rock. They also discussed water management opportunities on Flat Top at existing seeps and springs. Bill Zeedyk was in Gunnison this week for plug and spreads and contour swale treatments at Black Sage Pass and the Double Heart Ranch. They also hosted a tarn restoration field trip with Bill on Flat Top.

Vasquez additionally reported that the U.S. Forest Service had received notice of intent to sue within the last week, from Western Watersheds and the Center for Biological Diversity over grazing management and the federal CCA pertaining to Gunnison sage-grouse. The BLM and NPS are included in the lawsuit as well. The conservation groups are looking to hold the federal government accountable for conservation measures and monitoring and reporting. The intent to sue states that the USFS must cease actions and consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the next 60 days to avoid litigation. Seward commented that the intent to sue does not recognize the climatic effects on sage-grouse populations, because there have not been any substantial increases in grazing or housing in the last 5 years when the most precipitous population declines have occurred. Vasquez expressed concern that grazing in drought may need more contingency plans outlined. Seward explained that ranchers sometimes must sell cattle if they do not have enough hay production in a drought, resulting in a reduction in grazing pressure naturally during droughts. Childers also commented that the high male count is more of an index and there is some uncertainty related to causation versus correlation when you use an index for population estimations and attempt to consider population trends.

Vasquez also reported that he would plan on reconvening the Technical Subcommittee to discuss Gunnison sage-grouse issues and concerns, and actions that could be taken.

Navy reported that HCCA had three volunteer events this spring, including the wet meadow restoration in late August with the USFS. They also had 22 volunteers working on restoration at the Signal Peak Chicken Scratch Trail for the BLM. They also had volunteers working on willow restoration and closing dispersed camping sites adjacent to Texas Creek at Taylor Park on USFS lands.

Childers reported that the NPS had a planning meeting at the North Rim with Seward and Tarantino last week. They are planning, purchasing materials, and scheduling Western Colorado Conservation Corps (WCCC) crews for next year. The restoration will include wet meadow restorations, as well as oak and serviceberry treatments. The NPS also finished taking out an old fence at Cooper's Ranch and fenced cattle out of the riparian area, and they will do some riparian area restoration in the next couple of years to increase cottonwood recruitment. The STOR Committee member representative from NPS (Sandy Snell-Dolbert, Chief of Interpretation) is retiring and the NPS will need to find a new representative. The NPS, CPW, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, and Gunnison Conservation District held a cheatgrass treatment day at East Elk Creek to follow up from last year's treatment. Childers also reported that her supervisor, Kim Hartwig, is looking to formalize agreements for interagency cooperation and organizations, including the Strategic Committee. Houck recommended using the IGA agreement from when the Strategic Committee was first formed.

Seward reported that rifle seasons have begun. First season has concluded, and second season begins this weekend (October 24). Warm and dry weather has resulted in mixed harvest success, with some hunters reporting that they can easily find animals and others struggling to locate deer and elk. Houck reminded Seward that CPW will need to send a letter with their recommendation for a new regular and alternate member for the Strategic Committee, given Wenum's retirement.

Caloger had nothing to report.

Kugler reported that Gunnison Trails had 3 days of restoration work with cheatgrass but otherwise their crews were limited in size due to COVID-19.

Schaefer introduced herself as the new Gunnison Conservation District's District Manager.

Olson reported that the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is updating their programs and priorities for 2021-2025. They are determining how to incentivize for greater and Gunnison sage-grouse programs, and how to prioritize threats and projects addressing those threats. Easements have been a significant focus for spending, and will continue to remain a priority. In Gunnison last year NRCS closed two easements, totaling about 900 acres, each with Gunnison sage-grouse habitat. They also had one stewardship project that was specifically focused on Gunnison sage-grouse this year. Next year, they have several applications for easements. NRCS has also been surveying at Flat Top to work on water management there.

Houck reported that the County's primary focuses have been a safe election and COVID-19 responses. The County Coalition will soon have significant turnover, as many neighboring counties limit commissioners to two terms, and many of those members will therefore not be running for re-election. If Houck is reelected, he is looking forward to helping coordinate the County Coalition and

GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECTS IMPLEMENTED BY THE GUNNISON BASIN SAGEBRUSH ECOSYSTEM ALLIANCE (GB-SEA)

Magee explained the life history of cheatgrass and how that gives a competitive advantage to the invasive weed, and a brief history of GB-SEA. He said that Jess Young, Kathy Brodhead, and Pat started GBSEA and it is based on several grassroots efforts including funding, treatment, monitoring and research, coordination, outreach, and mapping. Courtney King was a MS student hired last year as a coordinator, and Young's class developed a coordinated approach for GB-SEA. Rummel and Sam Liebl worked on funding with National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and USFWS Recovery Implementation Strategy grant applications. Liebl produced a documentary video about cheatgrass in Gunnison. King, Rummel, and Tarantino created a cheatgrass pulling and education competition for this summer. Rachel Miller (BLM) has implemented post-fire monitoring at Vulcan, where cheatgrass treatments have occurred. Robin Bingham monitors treatment areas in Sapinero Mesa. The NPS has set up experimental plots for Plateau and Esplanade at the Dillon Pinnacles. The BLM also had mapping and inventory efforts including satellite imagery and aerial fixed wing flights to test remote sensing options for cheatgrass detection.

The Strikeforce is an annual effort for a multi-agency, cross-boundary treatment day. In 2018 it was hosted at Centennial, and in 2019 it was at East Elk Creek. This fall the Strikeforce (including USFS, CPW, NPS, WCU, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, and Gunnison Conservation District) treated the largest patch of cheatgrass in Gunnison City Limits at the start of the Signal Peak trail head, east of the Mountaineer Bowl. Mayor Gelwicks stopped by to learn about cheatgrass treatment. This site was easily approved for treatment because WCU had signed a CCAA for Gunnison Sage-grouse, and it had included noxious weed treatment as a condition. Magee and Young were able to take that to the board for approval, and CPW had funds set aside for habitat enhancement projects on lands enrolled in the CI and CCAA program. Cheatgrass is moving further along the trails in the Signal Peak system, so repeated cheatgrass treatments and trail management (to close redundant trails) are essential to reducing the spread of cheatgrass throughout the Signal Peak area.

WET MEADOW RESTORATION FIELD VISIT

The Strategic Committee visited one of the oldest treatment sites on the BLM and USFS (east of the Redden Ranch and Eagle Ridge Ranch). The structures were installed around 2011/2012, and the site has several nearby Gunnison sage-grouse leks. The channel was initially deeply incised and had runoff for 2-3 weeks early in the year. This drainage now provides pockets of standing water into August, and in good years can have saturated soils into October. The initial structures included a variety of types of Zeedyk rock structures, and armoring select areas. In 2016 or 2017, the site also had a plug and spread installed to spread water and rewet a larger area. The plug and spread currently promotes wetland vegetation and productivity over about an acre area, and has drowned out sagebrush in that area.

This drainage has no downstream water rights, which made it an easier location to test some of these structures. A downstream landowner, initially skeptical of the structures, did only have about a half-gallon of water pressure in his well, and had a series of collection points and tanks to get enough water. Although he drilled a new well for his primary water source, he does believe the restoration has improved his access to reliable water and he has become a major proponent of this work.

The cost of plug and spread treatments is around $2000-2500 for larger structures. Mobilization of the equipment is the most expensive component of the project, and this particular structure took about 8 hours of labor. Maintenance to plug and spreads will include armoring them with rock to reduce cattle trampling on the soft soils.

MILLER RANCH STATE WILDLIFE AREA ACQUISITION PRESENTATION

Wenum discussed the history of the Miller Ranch SWA. The owner of Miller Ranch had failing health, and his family was unable to take over the ranch management. He approached CPW about a possible easement. He received a couple of offers from developers that wanted to create a ranchette/exurban development. At the same time the neighboring Castleton Ranch sold, raising the property values throughout the area. This made the cost of an easement prohibitive. However, the presence of an active lek and a big game migration corridor (from deer and elk moving from Crested Butte to Beaver Creek) made the property highly valuable for wildlife. Given the wildlife value, and the family's hesitation to sell the land to developers, CPW was able to acquire the property for $6.5 million. The property has some challenges with water delivery from the Cunningham ditch, to fulfill the water rights. The ditch does leak, which provides forage for wildlife with the higher production of grasses and forbs along the ditch. The easement came with an agreement with the Colorado Stockgrowers and Colorado Cattlemen's Association to keep the property in agricultural status rather than vacant land for wildlife. The NRCS and CSU-Extension service provided technical assistance for grazing management, irrigation, and haying, to maintain about 100 head of cattle throughout 10 pastures in mid-May through mid-October. CPW seeks out lessees that will prioritize proper management for wildlife forage.

STEWARDSHIP AWARD PRESENTATION

The Stewardship Award was presented to J Wenum, recently retired from Colorado Parks and Wildlife for a 36 year career in wildlife management, including work with the Gunnison sage-grouse for the last 16 years while working as the Area Wildlife Manager in Gunnison. During his time in Gunnison, J was involved with about 11,000 acres of conservation easements and 3,000 acres of State Wildlife Area acquisitions including Miller Ranch, Blinberry, and Dutch Gulch. J has served on the Executive Subcommittee for the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee since its inception.

2021 SAGE-GROUSE SUMMIT AND FESTIVAL UPDATE

Magee informed the Strategic Committee that although they were initially planning to do a Summit and Festival in 2021, the increasing likelihood of a virtual meeting made it less appealing to host in 2021. Therefore, the Summit and Festival will be in spring 2022. In 2021, though, Magee will work with the USFWS to have a pre-summit meeting that adds value to the annual USFWS Recovery Implementation Strategy (RIS) workshop on February 24, 2020 (tentatively). The pre-summit meeting would include a one-hour sage-grouse population status and recovery actions update, a one hour breakout session to determine feasible projects associated with the RIS to complete within the next year, and a one hour keynote address.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

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

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
1-20-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room
1-24-20	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The October 21, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 1:30 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District

DRAFT