

GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
September 15, 2021

The September 15, 2021 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. The meeting was also available on Zoom.

Committee Members Present:

Voting Members:

Nathan Seward, Chairperson, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Liz Smith, Vice-Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Daniel Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Ann Timberman, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Peter Caloger, Community At-Large

Non-Voting Members

None

Others in the Audience:

Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Leah Waldner, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Mike Pelletier, Gunnison County GIS Department
Jessica Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Sam Liebl, Gunnison Country Times
Ryan Kay, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Sally Thode, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Dayle Funka, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist
Shannon Frias, Gunnison County Community Development

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the September 15, 2021 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:03 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF AUGUST 18, 2021 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Childers to approve the August 18, 2021 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously. Navy abstained.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Navy reported that HCCA had a successful weekend working on restoration on Flat Top and Monson Gulch with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers (WRV). There were approximately 40-50 volunteers over 3 days. There was a tour day on Friday to see results from previous years' restoration work. Navy reported seeing sage-grouse sign and feathers. Navy was happy to have Jessica Young in the I&E Subcommittee, including as Chair, but thought the Chair needed to be Strategic Committee Member based on the bylaws. Young and Navy will discuss who will lead the I&E subcommittee.

Kaminsky and Brodhead reported that Brian Stevens hired a contractor who sprayed 485 acres for cheatgrass in Red Creek using Plateau; the same contractor last year did ~200 acres in North Willow Creek that was very successful. A WCCC crew treated cheatgrass on about 100 acres on the west side of Saperino Mesa. The BLM is coordinating with Tim Kugler/Gunnison Trails to spray with WCCC crew in the Signal Peak area. The BLM is also working on a 50-acre cheatgrass treatment in Cottonwood Gulch. The BLM is also working on road decommissioning. Andrew Briebart (BLM) is working on maintaining existing wet meadow restoration structures. National Public Lands Day is planned for Oct 9, where the Gunnison Wildlife Association will do a seeding and sagebrush planting where cheatgrass spraying occurred last year. Briebart is delineating campsites on South Willow Creek. A final EIS is signed for sheep grazing in the Gunnison Field Office. The BLM will be working on a weed treatment EA this winter, including adding at least Milestone to the approved herbicides list, and being able to spray in areas near Skiff Milkvetch such as at Hartman Rocks. Rejuvra is not approved at higher levels of BLM so the Gunnison Field Office can't add Rejuvra to their approved herbicide list but can potentially do some experimental plots up to 15 acres.

Dan Olson reported anticipated changes in NRCS representation. Allison Hearne will be the new regular representative and Dan will be the alternate representative. Liz With still would like to receive member packets. Agricultural land easements in Gunnison County (about 600 acres) and San Miguel County (over 900 acres) are moving towards closing soon. EQIP has experienced more competition for irrigation related practices (given lots of competition in the lower valley) and none were funded in the last year in Gunnison. Dan is going to present changes to ranking questions to keep Gunnison projects competitive.

Ann Timberman thanked everyone involved in Gunnison wet meadow restoration projects. Whit Blair was able to attend the restoration work this fall and learn about those projects. She reminded everyone to keep Blair involved in future field projects.

Vasquez reported Darren Long started as new Gunnison Ranger District wildlife biologist on August 30. USFS is working to decide who the regular and alternate member will be for the Strategic Committee. Long has been able to go out to Black Sage Pass restoration sites and was able to go out with WRV and HCCA on tours. This year, they are adding second layer of rock on many structures. The Forest Plan revision is one month in to the 90-day comment period. There are several public meetings for feedback. The USFS is looking to expand wet meadow restoration work to the Grand Valley Ranger District with Heidi Plank (biologist) on the north end of the Uncompahgre Plateau, close to the Pinyon Mesa population. Pinyon Mesa collared and uncollared GUSG have been documented in the area discussed for restoration work. Vasquez is also working with the Norwood/Paonia biologist (Valerie Horncastle) to examine some potential restoration sites in subpopulation areas to increase occupied habitat/habitat potential. Vasquez is learning about the U.S. Forest Service Conservation Finance Program that can provide funds for cheatgrass and wet meadow restoration by using private investments to promote shared stewardship.

Smith reported that she reached out to State Representative Julie McCluskie, Senator Michael Bennett, and John Swartout of Colorado Counties Incorporated (CCI) about large scale cheatgrass treatments. CCI is working on some related topics and could integrate cheatgrass treatment. For example, San Miguel County is working on a noxious weed treatment plan for A & B list species, and associated legislation.

Childers reported internal interest in cheatgrass treatment, including Justin Spitz's involvement, although Spitz will be starting a MS degree in fall at WCU. The Rocky Mountain Region Integrated Pest Management team came and treated the Dillon Pinnacles area for cheatgrass. Jessica Frey is coordinating with CPW to treat at Red Creek and possibly a second location within the next couple of weeks. NPS is starting the North Rim restoration project with a WCCC crew starting in August to target cheatgrass and knapweed and

returning in the end of September for 2 weeks to work on rock structures and taking down a fence that is no longer needed. Work will continue next fall as well. Habitat monitoring was delayed this year and will be completed summer 2022. Blue Mesa does have a toxic algae bloom in Lola Basin but please exercise caution in low water areas and where algae is visible. Childers received approval for CPW to do bighorn research within NPS boundaries. Childers will work on restoration in Cooper's Ranch area where the cows have been fenced out.

Leah Waldner reported Grizzly Gulch and Onion Valley allotments' grazing permit renewal are out for public comment until September 30. BLM manages the allotments even if NPS inholdings (MOU in draft).

Kugler reported Gunnison Trails was awarded funds from Great Americans Outdoors act to maintain Sun Park Trail in the West Elk Wilderness, which was completed about two weeks ago.

Amber Wilson (Saguache County) sent an update to Rummel via email. Saguache County is in the process of getting their GIS Parcel Viewer to have layers regarding GUSG, and the Assessor's Office has flagged each parcel that is within the GUSG areas to let the Land Use Administrators know when anyone wants to build in those areas. They are working on the Land Development Code to be able to collect fees for the services of site visits, so development in GUSG areas would require a pre-application approval before issuing a permit. Saguache County was invited to do a site visit in a sage-grouse area.

NEXT STEPS FOR SUGGESTED BUILDING SITES

Seward reminded the Strategic Committee that Gunnison County is receiving requests for sage-grouse reviews at infrastructure development sites after companies have invested significant resources into site selection. Seward and Rummel would like to identify areas where development is more likely to be approved, such as areas with existing infrastructure. Pelletier noted that it would be challenging to identify these sites since we don't know where these infrastructure developments will be needed. Pelletier can find locations that are accessible via existing roads, have low sage-grouse habitat values, have higher elevations, and maybe able to incorporate existing cell phone tower coverage. However, if the information exists, how do we promote that information, and existing Tier 1/Tier 2 layers? Timberman said the USFWS review process is developing new systems to direct people to the right resources, and they could link to Gunnison County's process. BLM does not currently have Lands and Realty position, but when that position is filled, a County GIS layer could help them direct new development to these layers. Pelletier is hesitant to put cell tower information on map viewer. Companies hire contractors to determine site selection (and these contractors should be aware of T&E species reviews, but don't always reach out to CPW and USFWS early enough). One solution could be to make a guide for contractors to review, explaining the Gunnison County process and key contacts, USFWS review process, etc. A flowchart could be used to help them understand the process based on land ownership, potential timelines, etc. Infrastructure can include cell/communication towers, power lines, radars, weather stations, burying fiber optic lines. CCA for BLM does specify that infrastructure needs to be away from leks and adjacent to existing structures, or the project will require consultation with USFWS. The USFWS works with companies to determine impacts to sage-grouse habitat when there is a federal nexus. Reviews will continue emphasizing preventative measures for cheatgrass and other noxious weed spread. Smith is going to touch base with Cathie Pagano about coming up with flowcharts and other handouts for development companies/contractors.

CHEATGRASS AND HABITAT ISSUES DISCUSSION

Magee would like to see more Basin-wide coordination such as with Gunnison Basin Sagebrush Ecosystem Alliance (GBSEA). GBSEA members work on cheatgrass issues on a part-time basis and agencies do not have the capacity to address weed management as much as they need to. GBSEA has received small-scale grants but need larger scale projects and funding. Coordination, funding, and personnel would help to be more effective at a larger scale. Young asked what the barriers are to effective and widespread treatment within different agencies?

Kay says BLM barriers to treating cheatgrass are funding, NEPA for approved herbicides, working across boundaries, and timing with contractors. The BLM had Richard Lee (a BLM noxious weed treatment specialist) come to Gunnison and Lee advised early detection and rapid response to prevent the spread of cheatgrass, rather than focusing on some of the larger infestations. Kay would like to have an agency lead to be able to address these issues. BLM is not approved for Esplanade/ Rejuvra.

Funka wants to apply Rejuvra in areas with perennial grasses and cheatgrass infestation, where perennials will take over more successfully. Plateau is for fall and spring use, and Rejuvra needs to be used July and August to allow it to saturate the soil with monsoons. Vasquez wants to prioritize Almont Triangle/ Taylor Canyon. Funka has partnered with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) to continue treating Almont Triangle (3 years). Vasquez is looking at the Conservation Finance Program and how that could benefit this area especially with basin wide treatments, and funding for capacity to have someone who coordinates these interagency efforts. Vasquez is hoping to receive a lot of comments on the Forest Plan revision regarding cheatgrass so the USFS appropriately prioritizes the issue. Using the wet meadow coordinator as a model, a person could coordinate treatments but also potentially help with NEPA. The coordinator would have to understand the Biological Opinion/ GUSG restrictions. USFS is working on local/ regional level approval for Rejuvra. USFS can do aerial applications if they do the right NEPA processes.

Funka and Stevens have been talking with Gunnison County to come up with a noxious weed treatment interagency crew. USFS has a cooperating agreement for the County to treat weeds along USFS road right of ways. BLM has more equipment for spraying than USFS. Gunnison County has a specific crew for noxious weed treatment.

NPS has capacity (4-person crew May to October) but roadblocks for them are internal buy-in. Education to NPS leadership is important to show that cheatgrass is an issue and requires internal support to leverage resources and complete paperwork (NEPA, etc). The NPS Integrated Pest Management crew is a great resource. NPS can never allow aerial application but is approved to use Esplanade (at least in areas without grazing).

Mapping is another limitation across agencies. Diamond would like to use WCU to inventory cheatgrass while NEPA is getting worked out (drone technology, helicopter surveys, etc. while BRTE purple). Brodhead reported the BLM Fuels program is considering helicopter surveys and trying to figure out time of year to inventory. BLM tried this last summer but the company that BLM contracted decided they couldn't fulfill the requirements because they were not capable of picking up small patches of cheatgrass and classifying photos, given extensive variation in coloration at the same time of year. Vasquez partnered with USFS Remote Sensing Application Center to try to map but the imagery was not high enough resolution and would struggle to identify small patches. SGI and USGS has done broader scale mapping but it does not have high resolution tool/ability to focus on a management scale. Tarantino thought NDVI through the Rangeland Analysis Platform might be useful, but it is also a 30 x 30 m pixel which is probably not high enough resolution. Imagery collected via drones takes significant computing power to put together the imagery. NDVI would have to be calibrated by date and elevation, etc. Vasquez said the USFS Remote Sensing Application Center may be able to provide that imagery computing power.

Peterson expressed interest in getting CDOT involvement in a discussion with Rummel yesterday. Cinnamon is CDOT regional biologist might be able to help, potentially by working with state noxious weed list prioritization (at least locally for cheatgrass).

Private lands have extremely limited contractors that they can secure, so although funding is available there are very few opportunities to apply herbicide. Good neighbor agreements with public land management agencies may help private landowners to complete projects bordering public lands without having to hire contractors out of the Gunnison Basin.

Seward recommended resurrecting the Habitat Subcommittee. They can discuss solutions. The Strategic Committee can provide letters of support for grant applications, recommendations to up-list cheatgrass to List A or B to the State, etc. Diamond recommended having a meeting for agency decision makers (and County, City, etc) to express concerns with cheatgrass to get more buy-in at higher levels and discuss barriers. Vasquez thought a Programmatic EIS for basin wide application of all herbicides and methods would allow more work to be done in the long run, but is a big-time investment up front. Vasquez could lead the existing Technical Subcommittee to identify hurdles, identify possible solutions, present to agency leadership and reach out to agencies not present (such as CDOT, Bird Conservancy of Rockies, USFWS PFW). The Technical Subcommittee would invite GBSEA to participate.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN DISCUSSION AND UPDATES

Motion by Navy to table until next month. Childers seconded. Unanimous approval.

Need to update language and document successes towards action items.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

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

9-15-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-20-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-17-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-15-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The September 15, 2021 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 1:08 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District