

GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
May 18, 2022

The May 18, 2022 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted in the Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners Boardroom, located at 200 East Virginia Avenue, 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)
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)

Non-Voting Members

Virginia Adams, Saguache County

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Clayton BonDurant, CPW
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
David Gardner, City of Gunnison Public Works
Jerry Wiggington, Native Landscapes Management and Consulting
Patty Wiggington, Native Landscapes Management and Consulting

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the May 18, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 9:11 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF APRIL 20, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Kugler to approve the April 20, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN FINAL REVISIONS

Seward noted that there were still some formatting issues that will need to be cleaned up in the final version. He asked the Committee about including a map for the HCP for City of Gunnison as relevant to the Action Item, but the Committee decided to not include a map because it is available from the USFWS.

Seward noted that Action Item 8D should also list the accomplishment in 2022 of having the STOR crew. Additionally, the STOR crew is applying for grant money for the Gunnison Basin Regional Partnership Committee which would work together to create a decision tool looking at recreation on the landscape and how it impacts wildlife. This grant application is ongoing.

Magee asked where the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site is recorded, as an accomplishment. The Committee recorded it as an accomplishment in Action Item 8D.

Navy noted that it is challenging for potential members of the public to understand the current status versus the ongoing work when the Action Plan was initially written and revised. For example, grazing research (Action Item 1) is NOT currently funded at \$300k a year, or in Action Item 7 lists the programmatic EA target date as 3 years but it is unclear if that is 3 years from 2012 or 2025. She suggested reformatting the tables to have a column for 2009 and a separate column for 2022. Smith proposed an alternative to create more of a narrative to clarify dates, or to continue as in the remainder of the draft to outline dates in parentheses as necessary to provide clarity. The Committee settled on clarifying “ongoing” activities and timelines as listed in the current version. Additionally, there should be more clarity on which action items are new in 2022 versus the original ones in 2009.

BLM is working on revising their Resource Management Plan (for three field offices throughout the Gunnison sage-grouse range) to update grazing in relation to sage-grouse, and Brodhead wondered if that should be included as an accomplishment somewhere. Seward thought perhaps not because it was BLM specific rather than related to the Strategic Committee. Smith suggested to reference it so the resources are available to anyone that may look them up. Brodhead said she will look into where to note it under current status and ongoing actions, potentially as related to Action Item 8 or 1 before the next meeting. Vasquez said the USFS is also working to complete their Forest Plan revision and would like that to be captured given the special considerations as related to sage-grouse, including a new Biological Opinion for grazing.

Rummel will make changes to the narrative for clarity and resend it out to Committee for the June meeting to approve then. The Committee will be provided a link to the original revisions, as well as a clean copy, and potentially a “revised from the May clean copy” version.

HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICT REDUCTION COMMUNITY GRANT PROGRAM UPDATE

Smith reported that Rummel drafted a grant proposal for the Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Community Grant Program through CPW. Smith thanked City for their work and participation. The grant application was amended from individual trash cans to include bearproof dumpsters. Smith also thanked Jess Young and WCU MEM program for collaboration and resources.

Gardner said the City thought it would be a good grant. Gardner thought dumpsters were more important than individual residential cans. The City recently revised their Title 12 municipal codes in several ways that may have addressed some of the bear conflict in residential areas. For example, these revisions required 68-gallon and 96-gallon cans rather than smaller ones that tip over more easily. The codes require residents to store trash cans in a secure location overnight. The City enacted overfill charges to limit people from having spillage problems, and to create accountability from homeowners for their trash. The City also now allows approved bear-proof trash cans. However, the City will soon work on revising codes for dumpsters, which currently have less accountability. The City is working to have someone hold an account (HOA, an individual, etc) for overfill fees.

Gardner reported that the grant request was for 30 bearproof dumpsters, and 30 individual cans. Western students will help determine where the residential cans are most needed to reduce conflicts. Smith thought this was a good initial request and was appropriately scaled, with the potential to request more funds next year. Dumpsters are likely about \$1200 each, whereas residential cans average about \$280 each for manual opening mechanisms. However they are investigating the use of automatically dumping cans, which would be beneficial to reduce the possibility of human error with not unlocking the can at the appropriate time. Grant recipients will be announced in June.

Seward echoed his gratitude for the work completed with a short turnaround time and thanked BonDurant who worked with Jason Kibbler and Gardner to make the grant feasible and useful to the City and their equipment and needs.

Caloger asked BonDurant about the carrying capacity of bears in Gunnison compared to the current bear population. BonDurant explained that conflict is not always related to carrying capacity, but is often more

related to scarcity of food and conditions across the landscape. Seward said some bears are habituated to food resources in town (e.g., crabapples, trash) and when there is more food outside town, some bears will move out and feed elsewhere and others will remain in town.

Magee asked about advertising for the trash cans if the grant application is funded, and if there will be a clear link to sage-grouse and trash subsidies for ravens. Smith thought it would be appropriate to reach out to local media to make sure that story was part of the reporting.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Smith updated the Committee on the cheatgrass and treatment restoration coordinator position. They have received one application from Collin McCullough. It is now more than 30 days since the position was posted but it is still listed. Smith wanted to post it more widely. County HR reached out to everyone who attended the Summit, advertised in the newspaper and Shopper, and on their website, and is investigating advertising on some job posting sites. Smith was concerned the right applicants might not be seeing the outreach. HR has provided resources for hiring committees, which still need to be formed and start reviewing applications. Magee and Seward both volunteered to be on hiring committees if needed. Smith has heard back from a few people on how the IGAs are formatted and worded but Smith requested feedback from all agencies that are financially committed. Magee suggested advertising on the Texas A&M wildlife job board as the position is related to sage-grouse habitat conservation. Smith has reached out to State's Noxious Weed Advisory Commission on where to list it. Magee was wondering about the budget for advertising the position, and there is no budget for that. Magee was hoping to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to apply, but it usually costs more money to advertise in those locations. The Wildlife Society job board would be a good location but costs money to advertise. Seward may be able to cover costs. Magee asked about the budget and Smith responded that it was posted at \$85,000 to \$105,000 but the person would be responsible for their own taxes, and other fees associated with being a contractor. This amount was determined as comparable to someone working in the County Ecological Stewardship program. Current contributions include BLM (about \$25,000, UGRWCD for about \$5,000, Sisk-a-dee for about \$15,000 with another \$15,000 to the Red Creek project, and the County would fund the remainder from the Landfill Mitigation funds up to half for 2-3 years until the opposition was established. Jerry Wiggington asked about if the person would be able to work on other contracts at the same time, and Seward thought it would be a full-time job but the person might be able to work on smaller side projects. There would also be a negotiation on what a person could do for the salary range. The coordinator would work with contract sprayers in the Basin to align work.

Smith went to Boulder for the State's Noxious Weed Advisory Commission meeting. They had a site tour on the Front Range to demonstrate agricultural grazing practices and their use to control tall oat grass. There was a distinct line where areas that were grazed stopped the fire. There is an intersection between grazing, fire, and noxious weeds. Smith thought virtual fencing could be really important to using grazing as a tool for noxious weed control, although admittedly it would be more challenging with cheatgrass given the short timeframe at which it is palatable. Eric McPhail at CSU-Extension is realigning his budget to have funding for base stations for local ranchers to use in a virtual fencing system. Smith thought the ability to target grazing in particular areas and move cattle across the landscape could be very useful.

Smith also reported at the most recent BOCC regular meeting there were 2 applicants (Magee and Young) for the education and research position on the Strategic Committee, and Smith recommended to appoint them without interviews.

Brodhead reported for BLM that the gates were scheduled to be opened May 15 from sage-grouse road closures, but there were problems with shed antler collectors starting on May 1 trying to break open gates and/or blocking the gates with too many vehicles. There are 52 gates to open, and this year May 15 was a Sunday so gates were opened Monday morning. Some of the public was unhappy with that decision. The official language is that roads are closed "through May 15" but the public believes it is opened on the morning of May 15. The BLM is trying to improve road closure signage, clarity of the closures, and gates on the closed roads. Advertisements in the Shopper currently list what the closures are, but they are working towards maybe having an educational news article about why the closures are in place, and maybe incorporating the "why" into the signage at gates as well, at least at some of the most busy trails/ roads. This could potentially use a QR code on the sign where there is internet connectivity. Kugler recommended

clarity about if the closure pertained to human, mechanized, or motorized use. This year the BLM is focusing on their travel management Area 5 (south of the City of Gunnison, including Hartman's to Bull Creek/ Lake City highway area) to correct signage, decommission roads as appropriate, and more. The BLM is working together to make it more of an office-wide effort rather than just wildlife. The USFS has some signage for road closures that they will share with BLM for consistent messaging. The BLM is in the process of hiring a Lands and Realty position, and the next position to fill is the wildlife biologist position which will likely be advertised in a few months.

Kugler reported that he heard that compliance with road closures was good at least in Signal Peak when someone from Gunnison Trails went to open the gate there. There was no evidence of people biking past closures despite dry conditions. Kugler thought opening Hartman's was really important to have an outlet for people wanting to get outside this spring.

Vasquez reported that Darren Long is working on wet meadow restoration coordination. Vasquez is working on grazing management and Forest Plan Revisions, and specifically looking at opportunities for habitat connectivity for sage-grouse. The USFS has some critical habitat areas, which may include performing vegetation management in habitats adjacent to critical habitat. Other areas are truly forested and are unlikely to change to suitable critical habitat. Seward was interested in what kinds of silvicultural practices because he thought with aridification and climate change, sage-grouse may start using some higher elevation sites including potentially forest borders. Magee said CPW has records of radio-collared grouse at 12,000 ft elevation.

Navy thanked everyone for the Stewardship Award. Navy reported that last year Eli Smith was HCCA's Stewardship Fellow from the WCU MEM program. This year he was hired as a Stewardship Director staff member. HCCA got another WCU MEM Stewardship Fellow.

Blair reported that the USFWS is awaiting final signatures from the regional director next week on the application for the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law but they have been notified that they received \$800,000 for cheatgrass and wet meadow restoration (\$550,000 related to cheatgrass and about \$350,000 for wet meadows restoration). They received good feedback on the number of letters of support and the level of partnership in the Gunnison Basin. Blair had to cut some money from the original requests specifically for monitoring and outreach. He will be working on 2 other grants (specifically, the State of the Birds, and another about invasive species prevention) to cover those aspects.

Caloger talked to Pete Coates at the SG Summit. Predation has become recognized in the last 10 years or so as a bigger threat (top 2-3 threats) especially in terms of recruitment. Coates agreed to correspond with him, and Caloger wanted to know if the correspondence should be through Caloger or through Strategic Committee. Seward requested Caloger work with Coates individually at this time. Seward was curious about the response of corvid populations to the work cleaning up subsidies. Do the corvids move on to a different location? Or scavenge more efficiently? The Crawford Local Work Group (LWG) is looking into predator control targeting ravens given their low sage-grouse population sizes. Seward wants to see what happens in Crawford first in terms of take permits and other procedures. Brodhead said the Crawford LWG wants to do raven surveys. Seward recommended building on 2013 and 2015 surveys from Magee to replicate sites and methods to assess change. Brandon Diamond, Young, and Magee met with Cinnamon Levi-Flinn (Colorado Department of Transportation; CDOT) who is very interested in predator and raven subsidy issues. She is considering enrolling in a WCU program for a MEM/MS combo as an agency employee, with a raven subsidy project. Smith reported that the BOCC supported the reduction in rates for agricultural producers for carcass removal at least as a test. There were questions about volume, how it will impact the landfill in the long term, so Jonathan Houck thought it would be great to see CDOT or other entities pitch in financially to help offset that cost that the County would then be subsidizing.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Magee suggested a summer field trip. Seward said that we should discuss it at the next meeting, and Kugler suggested helping in a wet meadow workday later in the season (August or September).

FUTURE MEETINGS: Future meetings will occur in the Gunnison County Blackstock Government Center, 2nd floor meeting room and by Zoom online meetings, unless changed for a specific reason.

06-15-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
07-20-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
08-17-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
09-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-19-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-16-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The May 18, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:36 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District