

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
June 15, 2022**

The June 15, 2022 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)
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association
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)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Jessica Young, Research & Education At-Large
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)

Non-Voting Members

Pat Magee, Research & Education At-Large, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Darren Long, USFS
Steffanie Chain, Public At-Large

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies

Staff Members Present:

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

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the June 15, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:07 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF MAY 18, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Navy to approve the May 18, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously. Peterson abstained.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Seward reported that he and Marlene Crosby had talked and Crosby said the County Attorney has not responded yet on a formal agreement between CPW and the County for the disposal of agricultural carcasses at the landfill. They need a memorandum of understanding before they start disposing carcasses at the discounted rate. Smith reported that the BOCC is in support. Seward also reported that the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Program request for proposals has opened with roughly \$11 million for conservation easements, and they will be accepting applications until October 13. Seward is hosting a field trip August 4 and 5 for Colorado Chapter of The Wildlife Society to showcase wet meadow restoration work, but may be able to expand that to the Strategic Committee and/or community depending on attendance. They will

go to Chance Gulch, Sage Hen Gulch, and to see beaver dam analogues and post-assisted log structures on the first day. The second day will include some hands-on work.

Smith reported she heard from Kristin Cannon (CPW) about the Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Community Grant Program that CPW is taking a bit longer than expected to process applications and decide on recipients given the number of applications received and the available funding. CPW will decide and notify awardees by the end of June.

Young reported that the final videos from the Gunnison Sage-grouse Summit should be released this week, available from the WCU Center for Public Lands. Young asked Seward about progress for a live feed camera on a lek, and Seward said he reached out to a landowner who has wireless internet and/or cell phone service with an active lek, but the landowner has privacy concerns. Seward is looking into what it would take to put the camera on a State Wildlife Area (SWA), but they would need better cell phone coverage or wireless internet, and a longer cable for the camera to reach a power source. Seward thought CPW would likely be able to purchase a camera without I&E assistance.

Navy reported that their HCCA hikes will begin on July 6 to the Miller Ranch SWA. Dan Zadra will talk about the ranch and history.

Vasquez reported he had a meeting with Pheasants Forever (PF), who has an interest in working with USFS in Region 2 for multiple species conservation projects. PF staff were familiar with Zeedyk restoration techniques. The USFS Regional office is looking to develop an agreement with PF, who may be able to help USFS with capacity, projects, contracting needs, staffing a partner-biologist, or similar. Vasquez also reported that USFS and WCU are doing sage-grouse habitat monitoring on USFS allotments within Critical Habitat (occupied and unoccupied), which will provide information to the forest management planning process. Some allotments are monitored every year, and some are monitored less frequently. The monitoring includes some repeats of annual CCA monitoring points, but also historic points that have not been monitored for a while. Flat Top roads will reopen tonight after the spring/early summer closure. Long also reported that they are working on a new agreement with Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD) for the wet meadow restoration and monitoring. Long also reported that Stage 1 fire restrictions will begin soon. Black Sage Pass will be added to the September 2 workday with HCCA. Long said they tried to map Red Creek twice this spring for cheatgrass using satellite aerial imagery, but both attempts were cloudy.

Blair reported that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill did fund their proposal, and he is working with Smith on moving the funding into Gunnison County starting July 1. He is also working on comments for the Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) for BLM, with the public comment period likely to open in early July. Blair will be working on Forest Plan Revisions with the USFS as Vasquez reported the USFS is still working through plan directions to be sure there is alignment with the USFWS Recovery Plan and Recovery Implementation Strategy, habitat standards, etc. Vasquez wants to start the formal consultation with USFWS this fall and have a plan for public comment in 2023.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN FINAL REVISIONS

Seward said he had a couple of small grammatical edits. Navy suggested one small revision to 8F responsibilities section, and Smith suggested adding status of the action item to the titles, so it shows up in the table of contents and is more easily understandable to the public.

Moved: by Smith and seconded by Navy to approve the Gunnison County Sage-Grouse Conservation Action Plan as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

LEK COUNT UPDATE

Seward reported that volunteers visited 87 leks for a total of 259 individual counts, which is a bit higher than average because access was easy with early snowmelt. The High Male Count (HMC) was 781 males, which was a 24% increase since the 2021 HMC of 629 males. The High Female Count (HFC) for 2022 was 293 females, which was the highest number of females counted since 1996 when the lek count monitoring procedures were standardized. The next highest HFC was 254 females in 2017, whereas the HFC in 2021 was 186 females.

Using the HMC and Rangewide Conservation Plan procedures to estimate population sizes, there were 3,832 sage-grouse estimated in 2022, which increased 746 birds from the 2021 estimates. Using the HMC and Gunnison Basin Conservation Plan from 1997 to estimate the population resulted in a population estimate of 3,183 birds, with an increase of 606 birds over the 2021 estimate. The 3-year (2020-2022) average HMC was 620, which was up from the previous 3-year (2019-2021) average HMC of 480. The USFWS Recovery Plan requires a 3-year HMC of 752 in Gunnison Basin before considering population augmentations and trap and transplant programs. The goal for the 10-year population average for the Gunnison Basin population as outlined in the Rangewide Conservation Plan is 3,000 birds, and the 2012-2022 10-year average is 3,517 birds. Seward suggested the wettest July in 20 years (July 2021) and cicada hatch in summer 2021 may have contributed to increases in sage-grouse chick survival and therefore higher populations in 2022 lek counts.

Seward said CPW may investigate the use of drones for lek counts in the future. Long said in Middle Park they used infrared technology from a 400-foot altitude and that it worked well, though Navy was concerned that Gunnison sage-grouse (GUSG) tend to be more disturbance prone than greater sage-grouse (GRSG).

Young said this was her first year she saw significant numbers of females in May, which is potentially indicative of reneesting. Reneesting is typically rare for GUSG but more common for GRSG. Young suggested looking at lek count data to see if there were increases in females after April 25 compared to normal. If reneesting were happening more commonly, it could have implications for management (restrictions timings, etc.).

Seward shared the lek count report with Gunnison County Stockgrowers for their litigation, but Seward and senior CPW staff did not share lek count reports in the last few years because of privacy concerns with lek locations. Seward is looking into ways he may be able to share the lek count report without lek names.

Caloger asked about sage-grouse population numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, and there was a report from Rogers that suggested the population size was about 10,000. There is not good data about when the declines started.

Crawford's HMC was 4 in 2021 and increased to 13 in 2022, corresponding to a population estimate of about 65 birds. Seward thought trends were up in San Miguel, Cimarron Cerro Summit (1 bird observed on a lek this spring), and Glade Park.

WAUNITA WATCHABLE WILDLIFE SITE UPDATE

Magee reported that Waunita has been a Watchable Wildlife Site since 1999, and they formally began their program in 2003 for monitoring. The program is a collaboration between Sisk-a-dee, CPW, WCU, and the County in addition to the Strategic Committee. This year, Lindsay Abernathy (undergraduate) was the student coordinator and had 8 student volunteers. A couple of years ago, the Waunita Sub-committee (with J Wenum as the lead) took a proposal to the CPW Wildlife Commission to formalize the open and closed dates. The current dates they are open include April 1 to April 30 (no longer open in May) with a weeklong closure April 10 – April 16. There are 23 days to access the lek. CPW has a very small SWA and requires a CPW hunting or fishing license to access the site, so Sisk-a-dee tried to promote that. Some users had a difficult time finding the right webpage to purchase a SWA access pass for the day. Sisk-a-dee and WCU students spent a lot of time working with people to try to purchase the passes.

The site was monitored for 35 days. There were 269 total visitors (average 12 per day). There were 62 volunteer days and 329 volunteer hours. Visitors were present on 21 of 23 possible days, and came from 13 states and 4 countries including Germany, Hungary, UK, and the USA. There were 82 vehicles and 13% of vehicles violated protocols, which is higher than normal. Magee received surveys about money spent to see GUSG and this year they had 10-12 surveys (lower return rate than normal) suggesting \$61,000 spent in the Gunnison Basin.

They saw a HMC of 80, which was the highest in 18 years of data, on April 28. The HFC was 23 in April 17, and the highest unknown count of 73 was on April 25. The highest combined count of 108 birds was on May 5, with several days over 100 birds. There are several areas males display, and some of those views are difficult to see with topography, vegetation, distance, etc. Some of the highest counts were from

flush counts so more reliable than trying to count birds on the ground. No birds were seen on the main/historic lek. There was an average of 50.4 birds per day on North Meadow and 5.6 birds per day on East Ridge. It seemed like birds spent more time in the North Meadow (better for viewing) than the East Ridge. Birds would often move to the East Ridge later in morning and/or fly to the west to leave the site.

The County has partnered to put no parking signs north on the County Road, and they noted no violations.

The volunteers observed 57 flush events, mostly for no known reason. 43% of flush events were before sunrise, and 57% were after sunrise. In 2011-2013, the flushes were earlier from the main lek area. Magee thought it might be interesting to compare flush times across years. 2 events at the parking lot were correlated with flushes though it is hard to know causation, and 4 times flushes were correlated with cars driving County Road 857. Coyotes were associated with 10 flushes, birds of prey with 8 flushes, ravens with 1 flush, and potentially wind with 1 flush. Seward requested a more in-depth review of predator disturbances over time.

The site had a high of 470 visitors in 2011, so there were far fewer visitors this year but still a lot of interest in viewing. Sisk-a-dee does 2 free programs for people to see a presentation the night before and view sage-grouse in the morning, and Magee had waiting lists for both events. The trailer was reserved 17 of 23 possible days, and they already have reservations for next year.

Now that the Wildlife Commission approved the new timing for the SWA, Magee believed the open/close dates would be set for a while. The Strategic Committee recommended a subcommittee meeting to talk with Brandon Diamond about the site history, and for the subcommittee to see if there are any needed adjustments for the future. Caloger, Navy, and Peterson requested the subcommittee consider retribution for public and commercial viewers that do not follow the protocols. Seward said CPW is responsible for enforcing protocol violations, and generally they issue warnings first, but Navy believed many of these viewers never come back so it would be better to issue citations instead of a warning.

CHEATGRASS TREATMENT AND SAGEBRUSH RESTORATION COORDINATOR POSITION UPDATE

Smith reported that the hiring committee will meet this afternoon. They have 10 applications, with a mix of people locally and from outside the Gunnison Basin and including several highly qualified applicants. The hiring committee will be looking at how to fast track the process within a week to start interviews soon. The Texas A&M job board posting just expired, but it would cost to extend the listing and it seems unnecessary given the number of qualified applicants. The hiring committee needs to discuss formal scoring and rubrics to evaluate candidates, which Smith will draft and bring to the meeting.

The County needs to wrap up the IGA. The entities providing money need to have a formalized role outlined. The financial contributions will be outlined in the IGA, and the Technical Subcommittee will establish oversight. They cannot extend an offer until everyone has signed the IGA.

Vasquez mentioned the Title 2 funds through the USFS Resource Advisory Committee. He was not sure what the funding for Gunnison County would be, but in the past the USFS has given funds for wet meadow restoration, noxious weed control on County Roads, watershed restoration, road decommissioning, etc. The cheatgrass coordinator position may be a good fit for those funds because they are supposed to contribute to the local economy and job creation. They usually have 2 years to use the funds. Smith thought the funding for the position seemed comfortable for 3 years from the County's contributions, given the alternative funding that has already been found. Senator Bennet is still pursuing additional federal funding through the USDA. The Colorado Field Ornithologists raised \$46,000 in their Colorado Birding Challenge, and they were giving GBSEA 85% of those funds, so it was around \$39,000. Half was to fund the coordinator and half was to go to the Red Creek treatment project.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

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.

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 June 15, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:27 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District