

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
August 17, 2022**

The August 17, 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
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Jessica Frey, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)

Non-Voting Members

Virginia Adams, Saguache County
Kathy Brodhead, BLM
Steffanie Chain, Public At-Large

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Jamison Jewkes, NRCS
Heather Reynolds, WCU Graduate
Brian Stevens, BLM

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 August 17, 2022 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: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Peterson to approve the August 17, 2022 agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF JUNE 15, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Peterson and seconded by Smith to approve the June 15, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Smith reported that the Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Grant was not funded. Colorado Parks and Wildlife received requests for 3 times the amount of money that was available for those grants. Important conversations have begun with the City of Gunnison, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, and the Strategic Committee to address trash disposal and security in the City limits and surrounding areas.

Vasquez reported that the upcoming wet meadow restoration with High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA) and Wildland Restoration Volunteers (WRV) on September 2 for Miller Ranch and Black Sage Pass. Friday September 2 will be the tour day to see existing restoration.

Kaminsky had no updates other than agenda items to discuss later.

Wilson reported that Seward was able to go out to a Poncha Pass property that proposed development, and they were able to find a suitable site. Seward said there was another applicant that contacted them about a septic system in Saguache County, and worked with them to find a suitable site.

Frey had no updates for the NPS.

Seward said he would be able to share lek count reports for Gunnison and Crawford populations. Although some CPW senior staff had concerns about lek names especially with geographic reference or private landowner names, Seward reached out to landowners to see if they had concerns about the way leks were named. Senior staff is now in favor of sharing those reports. The USFWS came to Gunnison on August 2 for a public scoping meeting for wolf reintroduction and the 10J Rule. A 10J ruling would give more management flexibility to CPW by deeming the reintroduced wolves as an experimental population (not important to the overall wolf population recovery) and allows for hazing techniques and lethal control techniques for wolves that depredate livestock. August 22 is the deadline for public scoping for the USFWS, with Environmental Impact Statement will come out late winter/early spring 2023 for public comment. CPW's reintroduction plan will be out for public review this winter. Proposition 114 states reintroduction needs to happen by December 2023. The alternative to the 10J rule would be that wolves would have full protection under the Endangered Species Act, and CPW would have fewer control tools.

Olson reported that there has been some interest in rangeland improvement projects in the Gunnison Basin. He thought there was opportunity to grow the programs in Gunnison especially for projects benefitting sage-grouse. The Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District is coordinating with NRCS on maintaining private lands wet meadow restoration project in Wolf Creek. Jonathan Coop's class and Pat Magee's class will provide labor for the maintenance in that project on September 12.

UPDATE ON BLM PUBLIC SCOPING FOR THE GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT

Public scoping began July 5 and runs through August 22. Kaminsky shared the ePlanning website, which shows how people can be involved with scoping, and allows people to share substantive input. The website shows examples of what substantive input is, which helps BLM identify factual information, public priorities and valid concerns from specific comments that the BLM can analyze. The Resource Management Plan (RMP) amendment ePlanning website shows draft Environmental Impact Statements, USFWS GUSG recovery plans, timelines for the review process, updates, virtual meetings for the public scoping process, and contact information for people working on this project. The public open house meeting had low attendance.

After August 22, the BLM and contractors will work on a draft EIS that will be released in the spring. In addition, in early September, the BLM team will release a scoping report, which will show what comments were submitted and where the BLM combined related comments. In winter 2023-2024, the team will release the proposed RMP Amendment and there will be another public comment period then. They are collecting information across the entire GUSG range, so the geographic scope is bigger than the CCA. BLM is required to respond to all substantive comments. The substantive comments can lead to new alternatives or can be used to amend alternatives, or can be used to justify which issues were considered or not considered. The BLM is not required to pick the alternative with the least impact in an EIS, but the EIS process is a way to disclose which alternatives were considered, the likely outcomes from each alternative, and why a certain alternative was selected. Drought and climate change adaptations (e.g., wet meadow restoration) can be considered, though a GUSG RMPA will not address climate change itself. A draft MOU should have been sent to cooperating agencies. September 1 they will have a meeting for cooperating agencies to show what roles they can have.

Seward requested that BLM also consider impacts of roads and trails on downcutting and incision. Brodhead reported that there are a lot of roads and user-created routes that are being decommissioned over time. The BLM is getting heavy equipment to be able to rip roads, though that was halted while there was no archaeologist. The BLM is building water bars, seeding, dead planting, and creating barriers for road closures. They added two gates on Highway 114 to the Gold Basin Subdivision area, which will be included in seasonal closures in spring. The BLM is trying to sign everything and keep people from driving roads that are not travel management routes. They are trying to decommission about 20 miles of roads every year, especially focusing on ones that lead into a network of road.

BLM was considering an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) designation for the RMP Amendment. Within an ACEC, there can be special regulations for surface disturbance, timing of operations, etc. In an ACEC, BLM users would be required to submit a Plan of Operations, which would be considered under NEPA, for all uses on BLM land. Crawford and Dry Creek both have ACECs for GUSG (and there is a Skiff Milkvetch ACEC in Hartman Rocks area). RMP amendments can consider ACECs. There is a high bar for designating an ACEC, so it must be a particularly important area for GUSG with specific management objectives. For example, occupied GUSG habitat would be a very large ACEC and harder to show the critical relevance to GUSG populations. Showing the field office boundaries as an entire ACEC would be unnecessary because the alternatives for an ACEC can be considered without designating an ACEC. Peterson asked if there were different standards for grazing in allotments impacted by an ACEC, and Kaminsky thought it would be unlikely, but he would look into it.

RED CREEK COOPERATIVE CHEATGRASS TREATMENT 2022

Brian Stevens (BLM Fire Management Specialist) reported on the planned Red Creek cooperative cheatgrass treatment. Last year there were 450 acres of cheatgrass treated within a designated area of 957 acres on the west side of Red Creek, and after walking through last year's treatments, it looks successful. North of last year's treatments and on east side of Red Creek, the BLM plans to contract treating 480 acres on BLM, in addition to an estimated 160 acres on USFS and CPW (113 acres on CPW lands). If they don't find 480 acres of cheatgrass on BLM, the contractor (recently awarded to Cutting Edge Forestry from Oregon) will complete those acres on Sapinero Mesa. They have scheduled a field trip with the USFS, BLM, CPW, and the contractor September 1, and USFS and CPW treatments will begin after completing BLM. Seward, Long, BonDurant, and Stevens thought Red Creek is a good place to start, and hopefully work back drainage by drainage towards the east. A lot of the treatment will be backpack spraying with 10 people. They have a chemical tank with 1800-foot hose, and another 1500-foot hose. That way they can keep people on the hillsides and not walking back and forth to the vehicle. The treatment last year took about 9 days, and cost about \$370 per acre (this year the cost will be about \$330 per acre). Restoration and suppression costs are much more expensive (if it could even be successfully completed) than this treatment. They are in the process of writing an Environmental Assessment for aerial application, but aerial applications could be less effective with oak. Monitoring has involved walking back through and eyeball estimates for success, but no protocol. BLM suggested NRCS could come up with some ideas for a monitoring protocol. BLM does not have much capacity for monitoring. Olson asked about a threshold to re-treat areas. Post-treatment seeding is planned for 1 year (given it is a pre-emergent chemical application), though it does not look like reseeding will be necessary given native grasses appeared resilient. Seward suggested maybe selective reseeding on steep grades and shallow soils. Stevens said they will be receiving some plant materials from CSFS nursery, which can be used for planting. USFWS Bipartisan Infrastructure Law money will go towards mapping, and monitoring treatments. CPW and possibly USFS will likely use Rejuvra in their treatment areas. CPW is still working on finances (statewide Habitat Partnership Program did approve some funds). NPS said they would plan on treating next week with a WCCC crew at Red Creek. Olson said to keep NRCS in mind once efforts start reaching private lands or permittees on allotments.

CHEATGRASS TREATMENT AND SAGEBRUSH RESTORATION COORDINATOR POSITION UPDATE

Smith reported that they had great applications. They completed interviews and were working on awarding a contract. The top candidate worked with Julie Kraft in Sublette County, Wyoming but could not move out to Gunnison. They are working on a contract for the next candidate and working on completing the Inter-Governmental Agreement. The candidate is still interested in the work. The hiring committee considered local professionals and their abilities to integrate into and support the upcoming efforts related to the

contract position. The contract nature of the position is not ideal and has created some challenges. Colorado Department of Agriculture and CSU-Extension have some interest in developing this into a state position (especially CSU-Extension). CSU-Extension wants to see what Gunnison County develops and what works best, and may have some funding for the position as well. There is potential to develop this into a position across the state for more strategic regional approaches. Seward thought the conversation with CSU-Extension office was very promising, though he was somewhat concerned to expand the emphasis area too far beyond the Gunnison sage-grouse range. Smith clarified that the position would remain a reflection of the local interests, and could see replication across the state for other local interests. Seward thought there may be potential for additional funding through the Mule Deer Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, or Statewide CPW HPP committee. Smith thanked the hiring committee for the time and effort that they put into that work.

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.

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| 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 August 17, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:43 AM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District