

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
October 19, 2022**

The October 19, 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) matthew.vasquez@usda.gov
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Jessica Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)

Non-Voting Members

Brandon Diamond, CPW
Jessica Frey, NPS
Patrick Magee, WCU

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Petar Simic
Mike Pelletier, Gunnison County GIS Department

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 October 19, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:04 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Heather Reynolds was not able to record her presentation, so the agenda item will be tabled until November. Seward proposed using the time on the agenda for further discussing carcass removal. **Moved:** by Smith and seconded by Childers to approve the October 19, 2022 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF AUGUST 17, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: **Moved:** by Peterson and seconded by Smith to approve the August 17, 2022 meeting minutes. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Caloger saw a Nevada small-game brochure that still has a 2-day season with a 2-bird possession limit for Greater sage-grouse season with wing-collection barrels. Caloger wanted to learn more about the

information that was collected from wing age and sex ratios, specifically if there was any GPS data associated with harvests and if there was any DNA analysis of the wings given current technology. Kaminsky asked about compensatory mortality for harvest of sage-grouse, and Seward confirmed that much of the harvest is from younger birds which often experience higher mortality in winter than adults. Seward said it is hard to get harvest information about sage-grouse unless hunters are registered and can be contacted later. Many states do not require a permit or to specify they are hunting sage-grouse, so many of the harvest estimates from survey responses are from surveying all small-game hunters which has wider confidence intervals. Navy brought up a concern that removing birds from the population also removes certain genetics from the gene pool. Peterson said hunters used to flush birds, and follow ones that had flushed until successfully harvesting birds. Young said the data from approximately 1977 shows population demography because female/male and age can be distinguished easily, and showed that hunting is probably not strongly impacting populations at that point. Young said the Local Working Group instituted a population level threshold where hunting would not be allowed given the community concerns.

Vasquez reported that a new wildlife biologist has been hired for the Gunnison Ranger District (Sarah Lowe) through the Pathways program. The USFS has also hired other biologists throughout the GMUG. This year, 24 wet meadow restoration structures were completed at Black Sage Pass. Additionally, 166 acres of cheatgrass were treated in Red Creek (which may include treatments on Sapinero State Wildlife Area). Long is moving away from Gunnison to work for the USFS as the wildlife program manager in the Arapahoe-Roosevelt National Forest. The USFS is looking at having a detail in as soon as Long moves away so there is no gap in work. The Forest Plan Revision is being revised based on public comments, and they are nearly done finalizing the Forest Plan Direction and Biological Assessment for listed species.

Kaminsky updated that the Resource Management Plan Amendment for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, in coordination with other field offices, is on schedule. They are assessing Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), because several public comments recommended all of GUSG range as an ACEC, which may be a misuse of the ACEC designation. There were other proposals for other ACEC areas (Ohio Creek was proposed but lacks significant BLM lands). Kaminsky said the BLM is also working on a RMP Amendment for big game migration corridors. Kaminsky said the BLM also had a public meeting for a prescribed burn/ fuels treatment outside Powderhorn (aerial ignition fuels reductions including adjacent to and inside the Powderhorn Wilderness), but there was limited public interest in the meeting. Kaminsky thought Rejuvra could be used by BLM in 2023 but they were not yet approved to use it. Scott brought up that NPS and BLM are both Department of the Interior, and he wondered if the County could have a role in pushing that forward. Smith said that the County has been working with Senator Bennett's office to push that forward faster. Smith said they had a crew of about 25 at the Red Creek Treatment, and that the changes in which chemicals were allowed at different land management agencies complicated treatments.

Childers reported that the vegetation crew treated 15 acres of cheatgrass in Red Creek, which included all the NPS lands in Red Creek. This was also the last year of the North Rim project, and they completed a lot of cheatgrass control (including with three weeks of a WCC crew) and wet meadow restoration. A superintendent and Chief of Resources will be hired in the next 4-6 months to replace the superintendent detail. Last year the Integrated Pest Management Team (IPMT) worked on Dillon Pinnacles cheatgrass treatment with Rejuvra, so the IPMT crew should now expect to work on cheatgrass treatments whenever they come to these parks. Kugler asked about monitoring, and Kaminsky said that they have a lot of photo point monitoring, but he did not know the specifics of the rest of the sample plots and monitoring. Simic asked about the impacts of Rejuvra on native forbs and if BLM, NPS, and USFS have been monitoring impacts of native forbs. Childers responded that Dangoule Bockus may have more information about their monitoring. Seward recommended looking into the Boulder Open Space research that has been completed and indicates the cheatgrass control is strong, with limited negative impacts on forbs. Vasquez responded that he can also follow up on monitoring results.

Navy reported that HCCA completed about 11 projects this summer and fall, some for sage-grouse wet meadow restoration and some on stream restoration for beavers. All projects had good attendance and went well. They had some grant funders visit, and they brought the funding agencies to different completed projects to show them successes in hopes that they continue funding the stewardship coordinator position. Seward said the Beaver Dam Analogues (BDAs) are drawing a critical eye from some water commissioners

in the state, so Seward thought it was critical to address historic use and wetlands, rather than leading Division of Water Resources to believe they were creating new wetlands and ponds (with evaporative loss).

Blair updated on the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, with the first \$450,000 distributed. Open Range Consulting for mapping cheatgrass (300 ground truth sites and satellite imagery) came out a few weeks ago. Once the satellite imagery is run, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies will be doing the prioritization of maps with distance to lek, property boundaries, fuels hazards, etc. to prioritize cheatgrass treatment areas. UGRWCD has received the funding for wet meadow treatments. The 5-year review for the Species Status Assessment is due in 2024, so Blair will hold public meetings to get feedback on the Species Status Assessment, likely in February and March.

Seward reported for Colorado Parks and Wildlife that he would be sending out the spring 2022 Gunnison Basin lek count report to everyone. Population estimate is currently around 3,800.

GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE USE OF WET MEADOWS; EVALUATING HABITAT RESTORATION SUCCESS (PRESENTATION FROM HEATHER REYNOLDS)

Reynolds had technical difficulties and was unable to provide the recorded presentation. Agenda item will be tabled until the November meeting.

CARCASS MANAGEMENT AND REMOVAL DISCUSSION

Seward participated in an NRCS-led meeting yesterday with partners in Oregon, Idaho, and Montana (including Western Landowners Alliance, Montana State C, Ruby Valley Conservation District, Blackfoot Challenge). They showed how they developed partnerships and developed carcass removal programs and composters. Some groups started with wildlife carcasses driving the funding, and others worked with local non-profits to remove agricultural carcasses. Seward thought the Oregon Department of Transportation led the effort to compost carcasses that were road-killed. There are some complications, such as keeping wildlife carcasses that may have Chronic Wasting Disease separate from the remainder of the carcasses to avoid composting and later spreading prions throughout the environment. There are additional regulations on horse or cow agricultural carcass compost, which should not be used for composting food production sites. Diamond asked how it works, and Seward said they cover the compost piles and water it regularly until it decomposes. In Madison Valley, they said over 4 years it was less than 500 carcasses that they disposed of and the annual maintenance cost was \$45,000 - 50,000 per year. The Madison Valley said it brought the ranchers and the rest of the community together to address the issue of avoiding predators and scavengers. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation provided some money for establishment and maintenance. Kaminsky asked about incinerators, and Seward said there were no examples on the call about incinerators. Kaminsky thought it might make sense to investigate that to avoid spreading prions. The Gunnison Basin has not yet detected Chronic Wasting Disease, but it is present east of Montrose. There are some small incinerators in Gunnison and Montrose, but they could be expensive in terms of the cost of the gas to run. Smith asked who took the lead in developing these partnerships. One was a City (City of Prairie City Oregon), a local conservation district, and a non-profit. Patagonia Clothing Company donated a dump trailer to a group. A bicycle race did not like having carcasses and helped fund removal.

Seward thought it may make sense until after this spring to see how it goes before pursuing composting facilities locally. Peterson thought that if the program was timely (quick removal of carcasses, or ability to drop off a carcass at any time), local Stockgrowers would have interest in it.

CHEATGRASS TREATMENT AND SAGEBRUSH RESTORATION COORDINATOR POSITION UPDATE

Smith introduced Simic. Simic said he is trying to gather local opinions and knowledge, and asked people to reach out to him to talk (HappyHabitatsGunnison@gmail.com, 248-861-6082). Simic graduated from WCU in May 2022 with a thesis looking at fire history in Gunnison, and experience with some wildland firefighting experience. Smith reported that the County is working on a feedback guidance structure for the contractor position, and she was wondering if the Technical Subcommittee might be a good place for housing the coordination of the role. Smith also proposed a smaller group to have as a weekly onboarding meeting group. Vasquez was amenable to having the Technical Subcommittee as an oversight board. Smith also proposed making Simic the chair of a different Subcommittee. Childers thought it would make sense to have a separate subcommittee so that Bockus could be on the separate subcommittee targeting

just the coordination. Kaminsky also thought it would make sense to have Brian Stevens on a separate subcommittee. Peterson thought it would make sense to have a list of possible participants for a subcommittee to be able to finalize that next meeting.

UPDATING THE HABITAT PRIORITIZATION TOOL

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.

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 October 19, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:43 AM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District