

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
January 18, 2023**

The January 18, 2023 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
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)
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)

Non-Voting Members

Brandon Diamond, CPW

Dan Olson, NRCS
Jessica Frey, NPS

Others in the Audience:

Cinnamon Levi-Flinn, CDOT NW
Virginia Adams, Saguache County
Petar Simic
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Eric Graham, Blackfoot Challenge
Randy Gazda, Blackfoot Challenge

Staff Members Present:

Shannon Frias, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the January 18, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 12:02 PM

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Peterson and seconded by Kugler to approve the January 18, 2023 agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF November 16, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Kugler to approve the November 16, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

WET MEADOW RESTORATION RESEARCH PRESENTATION:

Seward presented on behalf of Heather Reynolds, a graduate student at WCU who studied wet meadow use by Gunnison sage-grouse. Reynolds' committee included Seward, Jessica Young, Madelon van de

Kerk, Micah Russell, Renee Rondeau, and Sarah Marshall. They were assessing Gunnison sage-grouse use in summer and fall in wet meadows (seeps, springs, perennial wetlands). Wet meadows have a high biodiversity including forbs and grasses, as well as insects which are a good food source for sage-grouse chicks. Much of the western U.S. has been under drought conditions for several years, and improving wet meadows through rock restoration structures would likely increase vegetation productivity and drought resiliency. The project assessed wetland vegetation changes for control and treatment reaches, which showed that forbs increased, and bare ground decreased in treatment areas after construction of the structures. They used camera traps at control and treatment areas, mostly on private lands to avoid camera theft or vandalism. They had almost 6,500 pictures of sage-grouse across 5 years (2016 – 2020). They did not observe a significant increase in sage-grouse use in treated sites but did observe an increase in sage-grouse use in untreated sites. Throughout the study, the drought severity index showed the drought increased in severity throughout time, so therefore sage-grouse used mesic meadows more often as drought increased. Three of the control sites were like reference sites for wet meadows and were in great condition, and they were the sites with the highest sage-grouse detections per trap day, so those control sites would be a reasonable goal for restoration improvements.

Peterson asked about site fidelity and if that could impact the lower records of sage-grouse detected in the treated areas. Seward thought it could also be a lag effect because it takes several years before the vegetation responds to the restoration treatment, so they may have more sage-grouse use later as they approach the condition as observed in the three high quality control sites. Seward also thought that meadows with grazing had higher detectability given lower stubble heights. Seward thought it would be ideal to have a before-after control-impact study design to be able to compare pre- and post-treatment in one site, since it is extremely challenging to find control sites that are similar reaches to treatment sites. One MEM student also did a small study using pitfall traps for insects and net sampling in sagebrush, but there was not a high enough sample size to be able to draw conclusions about insect abundance in control and treatment sites. Reynolds and her committee are working on a publication.

BLACKFOOT CHALLENGE CARCASS MITIGATION PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION:

Eric Graham and Randy Gazda presented on carcass mitigation. Gazda stated that they will give background, share what they have been doing and then open it up from questions and discussion. Gazda worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service for 26 years, mostly in Montana, but retired a few years ago. Gazda is now the chair for The Blackfoot Challenge (TBC). Eric Graham is currently the wildlife program coordinator for The Blackfoot Challenge.

Gazda said TBC is 30 years old and started when conflicts began in the 1990's with grizzly bears. In 2001 an elk hunter went to retrieve an animal and was killed by a grizzly bear at the carcass. Acceptance of grizzly bears was low before that incident and went downhill after. TBC started a wildlife committee at that time to reduce grizzly bear conflicts. Over time TBC created a group called "The Ranchers Seven" to get participation of landowners. Human-bear conflicts were typically happening close to ranch headquarters, where bears came to bone yards. One of TBC's early projects was to deal with bone yards, and there were two components of that project including cleaning up existing bone yards and dealing with fresh carcasses, which evolved into composting carcasses. They acquired a truck, and TBC hired a driver. They initially hauled carcasses to the Missoula landfill. The highway department began composting deer, elk, and roadkill. A partnership began with the highway department to include livestock.

Seward gave an introduction of the Gunnison Basin Sage Grouse Strategic Committee's (GBSGSC) interest in carcass removal. The committee started discussing carcass removal to reduce "food subsidies" for corvids in the landscape, so the Basin would support fewer corvids and therefore potentially have lower sage-grouse nest depredation. The GBSGSC is also trying to be proactive and prevent habituating wolves to carcass pits or bone pits with the upcoming wolf reintroduction later this year.

Gazda informed the committee that their composting facility has an electric fence to keep bears and wolves out, but it is not fenced to keep birds out. They are working on that.

Gazda explained the compost area and process to the committee. The setup is contained by Jersey concrete barriers that are the width of a front-end loader. Starter compost is put down first. Then a layer of carcasses, followed by a layer of wood chips. In a dry climate, water is needed to keep things wet and “cooking”. The number of carcasses varies per year. The highway department picks up 400 – 600 wildlife carcasses per year. TBC adds about the same number of livestock carcasses. They do not measure success by the number of carcasses taken to the compost each year but by how much of the landscape and ranches are participating in carcass pickup.

Graham added that location is one thing they still think about, and it should be carefully considered in the beginning, especially in terms of sage-grouse. They also experimented with distribution. Instead of taking the carcasses to the landfill, they investigated distributing them across different landscapes, but that was not a good fit. When starting a composting facility, an important aspect is partners and partnerships.

Seward commented that the GBSGSC was interested in learning more about the details of how the compost site started with TBC and their partners. Seward explained that in Gunnison County we currently have a discounted fee at the landfill for the disposal of carcasses. Gunnison County does not currently have chronic wasting disease (CWD), but it is geographically close enough that it could be a concern for wildlife carcass composting. Gunnison County is wanting to be proactive. Seward asked how TBC disposes of carcasses with chronic wasting disease, how they got started, where some seed money came from, and about their evening meetings and participation.

Peterson stated he watched the video TBC sent prior to the meeting, and it was very impressive. He asked if they have seen any changes in numbers or behaviors of the corvids. Gazda answered that they have not tracked that. Graham stated that even without having actual data, he can say they notice there is more corvid activity than when they started their compost facility. They are discussing fencing/exclusion for the corvids. Graham said other things to think about include water access, someone to manage the piles, fencing/exclusions, and initial startup compost. They borrowed some start up compost from a nearby facility. They started with a 5-wire electric fence around facility and over time they replaced that with sheep fence. The fence is tall because they don’t have CWD and wanted to avoid it. They keep their wildlife and domestic composts separate. The wildlife compost must stay onsite because of the CWD concerns. Another thing to think about is run off from all the water and protecting any nearby water bodies.

Navy asked about how long composting takes from start to finish, and how many acres you need. Gazda answered they have about 5 acres, and composting is happening on approximately 1 acre. When it is hot out a large cow can be down to large bones in 45 days. In winter it will be much slower. Navy asked if the compost was ready to spread out with the large bones. Gazda stated that they have taken out bones or spread the compost with a roller which can break down the bones.

Graham stated that anyone is welcome to visit for a tour.

Seward asked if the compost that is being produced is being sold. Are they allowing people to come collect some to use? Graham stated the DOT used to use the wildlife compost but they do not anymore. The domestic compost is being spread by a local rancher inside an electric fence. There are some rules on composting domestic animals and how it can be used. It is in the permit with the state of Montana. They cannot fund the program by selling the compost.

Gazda stated that they have been able to decrease grizzly bear conflict over 90% between composting and putting electric fences around calving.

Peter Caloger asked how many miles of highway they cover for carcass pick up and how many head of livestock? Gazda stated that he does not have exact number. He guessed 200-250 miles of highway. The best number he has for livestock is 15,000 cows, and there are some horses, sheep, goats, pigs, and chickens. Graham stated that the executive director Seth Wilson estimated that they probably cover 4 million acres with the carcass program.

Caloger asked what the turnover of the wood chips is? Gazda stated that they continue to use the wood chips and they become part of the startup. Gazda guessed that they may use 100 cubic yards a year. They

were getting some wood chips for free. In the last 5 years the owner of the local mill has been donating chips that they can use.

Seward asked what the annual cost is to run the facility. Gazda stated that they are not running the facility and the wood chips are free, but for the drivers it is approximately \$20,000/year not including the truck, fuel, and DOT.

Graham asked for a contact of the group and he would get the answers to the questions. Seward will put together a list of questions for TBC and have Aleshia Rummel contact them.

Smith wanted to clarify the intersection of this topic with the GBSGSC and specifically the highest impact projects that can be accomplished by the GBSGSC. Seward responded that it should be made clear. Corvids are predators of sage-grouse chicks, and the upcoming wolf reintroduction may also affect sage-grouse. Therefore, carcass removal becomes important. Peterson commented that the tie between corvids and sage-grouse nest depredation, but they don't know if it is going to make a difference with corvid populations. Wolf management cannot be related to the GBSGSC. Scott commented that it makes the most sense to have the location of compost at the landfill. Smith stated that there may be potential for collaboration but she would need to have a conversation with the Public Works director to understand capacity and limitations. Seward stated that the CPW contracted with Pat Magee from Western to conduct raven counts. Magee looked at smaller landscapes. The landfill had the most ravens due to food subsidies. Seward commented that he could write up information to justify the need for a compost site in relation to sage-grouse. Seward reached out to the director of Public Works recently to discuss the fee rate for carcasses. That memorandum of understanding should be finalized soon. Peterson asked if the wildlife is being buried at the landfill, and Seward responded that it is sporadic. Peterson asked if it would be easiest to just bury them at the landfill rather than creating a new program if the volume isn't large. Seward stated that he was surprised TBC said they were having a difficult time getting rid of the by-product and were burying some of the compost at the landfill.

Seward stated that the committee can revisit this topic at the February meeting.

USFWS NOTICE OF RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY WORKSHOP

Blair reported to the GBSGSC about the Recovery Implementation Strategy workshop, which would be held February 15th after the GBSGSC meeting, starting at 1:00 PM at the Gunnison Public Library. Blair will host a facilitated discussion with the goal to get some feedback for recovery goals and grant writing. It will be based on the sage-grouse action plan. An agenda will be sent out by the end of the week.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Smith reported that the first cheatgrass and habitat restoration meeting would be on Friday, January 20, 2023, at the courthouse at 10:00 am to discuss the cheatgrass management plan. There are a few additional appointments to that committee that need to be finalized.

Seward shared about the Landfill Mitigation Fund. Seward was approach by someone asking if they could submit a request for some of that funding for a fence removal project with the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. We have never had a formal subcommittee who could manage those funds. Should the committee finalize in the bylaws that there is Landfill Mitigation fund subcommittee? Navy stated that there was a Landfill Mitigation Committee years ago and it should still officially exist as a County committee (not a GBSGSC subcommittee). Smith said there have not been any appointments to that and it could be disbanded. Smith reminded the committee that \$250,000 has been set aside for cheatgrass coordinator position. Smith doesn't know how much more funding would be available. Smith stated that the fence issue was brought to her and she has been looking into it. Navy stated there was a formalized agreement as to the formulation of the landfill mitigation fund. Seward would like to revisit the mitigation fund. Smith will look into it.

Navy mentioned that this year marks the 28th year of sage-grouse involvement, collectively. Navy shared a book called “Eager” on the topic of habitat restoration, which she would highly recommend.

Frey reported for the National Park Service that there is a new superintendent arriving in February. They still have an opening for a Division Chief of Resources but that will not be filled until the superintendent arrives.

Hearne shared a link in the chat that the NRCS agricultural easement program application period is open until February 17th. There is a Gunnison sage-grouse specific ranking pool.

Simic reported that they are planning a treatment in Cochetopa Canyon in the fall and a cheatgrass workshop March 1st for private landowners.

Smith added that after talking to BLM they have preliminary authorization for Rejuvra but there is a process that needs to be completed.

Blair stated that nationally they are doing the EIS, Environmental Impact Statement, anywhere the BLM will use Rejuvra. The Gunnison Field office must do an Environmental Analysis (EA). Locally, it may delay things while trying to determine what capacity there is to do the EA.

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.

02-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
03-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
04-19-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
05-17-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
06-21-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
07-19-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
08-16-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
09-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-18-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The January 18, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 2:15 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District &
Shannon Frias, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department