



**Gunnison County, CO**  
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**To:** Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee Members

**From:** Shannon Frias, Administrative Assistant III

**Date:** January 5, 2023

**Included in your packet for the Wildlife Conservation Strategic Committee Meeting:**

January 18, 2023 Agenda

Draft of November 16, 2022 Minutes

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE**  
**REGULAR MEETING AGENDA**

**DATE: Wednesday, January 18, 2023**

**PLACE: Planning Commission Meeting Room, Blackstock Government Center OR via Zoom meeting, Meeting ID: 830 1997 8312 (see Teleconference Information below)**

1. 12:00pm
  - Call Regular Meeting to Order; Determination of Quorum; Verify Public Notice of Meeting
  - Agenda Approval
  - Approval of November 16, 2022 Meeting Minutes
2. 12:10
  - Wet Meadow Restoration Research Presentation
3. 12:30
  - Blackfoot Challenge Carcass Mitigation Presentation and Discussion
4. 1:30
  - USFWS Notice of Recovery Implementation Strategy Workshop
5. 1:35
  - Committee Member Comments/Reports
6. 1:50
  - Public Comments
7. 1:55
  - Future Meeting
8. 2:00
  - Adjourn

NOTE: This agenda is subject to change, including the addition of items up to 24 hours in advance or the deletion of items at any time. All times are approximate. Regular Meetings, Public Hearings, and Special Meetings are recorded and **ACTION MAY BE TAKEN ON ANY ITEM**. Work Sessions are not recorded and formal action cannot be taken. Two or more Gunnison County Commissioners may attend this meeting. For further information, contact the County Administration at 641-0248. If special accommodations are necessary per ADA, contact 641-0248 or TTY 641-3061 prior to the meeting.

**Teleconference Information:**

**Zoom meeting, Meeting ID: 830 1997 8312**

**Passcode: 199910**

<https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fus06web.zoom.us%2Fj%2F83019978312%3Fpwd%3DMEJkTzRVYWRmZ25uTUNYQ0IPTzUrUT09&data=05%7C01%7C%7C8586b96230194380e45d08dae391683d%7Ced5b36e701ee4ebc867ee03cfa0d4697%7C0%7C0%7C638072510901668449%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWljoimc4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzliLCJBTiI6Ikk1aWwiLCJXVCIMn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=8ISAFb8XCH4KxlgT%2B8tD8HAYkkWznuHOkRWF0c8%2FB5A%3D&reserved=0>

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**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE  
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES  
November 16, 2022**

The November 16, 2022 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted in the Gunnison County Blackstock Government Center, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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)  
Jessica Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)  
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)  
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)  
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large

**Non-Voting Members**

Brandon Diamond, CPW  
Patrick Magee, WCU  
Dan Olson, NRCS

**Others in the Audience:**

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies  
Petar Simic  
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services

**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 November 16, 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 November 16, 2022 agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF OCTOBER 19, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved:** by Smith and seconded by Caloger to approve the October 19, 2022 meeting minutes. Motion carried unanimously.

**CHEATGRASS TREATMENT POTENTIAL SUBCOMMITTEE FORMATION**

Several organizations filled out the poll to nominate their representatives to an ad-hoc cheatgrass treatment subcommittee: CPW nominated Nate Seward and Dan Zadra, Gunnison County Stockgrowers nominated John Scott, WCU nominated Pat Magee, Jessica Young, and Robin Bingham, and Gunnison Trails nominated Tim Kugler. This ad-hoc subcommittee would meet approximately monthly to provide direction and resources to the cheatgrass treatment coordinator. Smith recommended Simic be the chair to the ad-

hoc subcommittee. Simic accepted the nomination and requested that each agency have a representative on the subcommittee. The intent would be to add more representatives over time. Navy specifically asked about private lands representatives, and Peterson said Scott would be able to represent private landowners. Young withdrew herself from the list for WCU and said that Bingham was likely going to be on sabbatical next year. Blair self-nominated as a USFWS representative, and Vasquez said he would follow up with USFS to determine who would be most appropriate with the USFS. NRCS and partners would bring their nomination to the next meeting. Childers nominated Danguole Bockus to streamline coordination with the ecology program at NPS.

Smith also reported that John Whitney with Senator Bennett's team notified her that the USFWS had secured another \$400,000 for cheatgrass treatments in the Gunnison Basin. Blair said this was for on-the-groundwork (contracting herbicide crews, vehicle lease, chemical purchases).

Smith proposed a first meeting between Thanksgiving and winter break, or after the new year starts.

**Moved:** by Smith to create an ad-hoc subcommittee to address cheatgrass treatment and management including Simic, John Scott (Gunnison County Stockgrowers), Pat Magee (WCU), Robin Bingham (WCU), Tim Kugler (Gunnison Trails), Nate Seward (CPW), Dan Zadra (CPW), Whit Blair (USFWS), and Bockus (NPS). Seconded by Peterson. Motion carried unanimously.

### **CARCASS MANAGEMENT NEXT STEPS**

Martin Smith and Seward are working on an MOU (memorandum of understanding) for carcass removal from CCAA agricultural lands, with CPW paying for their disposal at the Gunnison County landfill. Seward reiterated that private landowners may be supportive of carcass removal with the upcoming reintroduction of wolves. Seward thought that starting slow with carcass management in Gunnison as outlined in the draft MOU makes sense until we can determine if it is feasible or necessary to take additional steps. Seward wanted the committee to think about more beneficial ways to remove the carcasses, though composting does require carefully tracking wild vs domestic carcasses, and contaminated carcasses (euthanized, etc.).

Diamond heard that other counties (Routt County, potentially Glenwood Springs area, etc.) were talking about carcass removal for wolf management and are exploring funding opportunities. Smith said she would talk to Routt County commissioners in December and would follow up. The County is about to receive the first data from the pilot project of agricultural carcass disposal at the landfill and will use that data to determine if it is sustainable. Smith thought investigating alternative opportunities early was prudent.

Caloger thought the Blackfoot Valley in Montana (the example referenced at the October Strategic Committee meeting) was a lower elevation and wondered if the anaerobic process of composting might be impacted by oxygen density. They had wood chips donated by local forestry companies. Seward thought the City of Gunnison tree dump might donate wood chips, and Caloger suggested lumber yards in Montrose. The concern about prions from Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) may limit the use and marketability of a byproduct after processing.

Hearne was able to go to Montana in early October to tour the Blackfoot Challenge composting site and talk with the Madison Valley leaders. NRCS in Montana is working on drafting interim practice standards, with the Western Lands Alliance and others, for non-lethal predator management practices (fladry, electric fencing, game cameras, range riders, etc.). NRCS has an existing practice (animal mortality facility) which could support something like this but would require an appropriate applicant that meets eligibility requirements (FSA eligibility, tax ID number, Farm and Tract number even if leased land). Olson asked if the eligibility requirements were flexible enough to make it possible for a community facility rather than individuals to apply. Hearne has been working with Jackson County on this and thought it would be challenging for the County itself to apply, but there could be a partner like the Gunnison County Stockgrowers that might meet eligibility requirements and could potentially lease County land. There might be other opportunities like a Conservation Innovation Grant. At the Blackfoot Challenge, people used the compost from agricultural carcasses for field fertilizer.

Peterson reiterated much more successful the program is likely to be if the carcass is picked up from the landowners, because there is little incentive for landowners to bring in their carcasses to the landfill on their

own time. Seward hoped to have a seasonal technician (or additional responsibility of the lek count coordinator) that would be able to coordinate with the landowner to pick up the carcasses, and hopefully the landowners would be able to help load the carcass onto a dump trailer with a tractor. Alternatively, CPW might add a winch to their dump trailer so it would just require one person to load the carcass.

Smith thought for next steps, it would be useful to pursue clarifying how the carcass removal benefits sage-grouse and is relevant to the Strategic Committee (i.e., including carcass removal in the Action Plan). Smith also requested a presentation from someone from the Blackfoot Challenge or similar.

Navy wondered how much land would be required for this kind of project. Seward thought other facilities were 3-5 acres, and the operational costs were \$45,000-\$55,000 annually. Navy asked if the site should be at the landfill, and Seward thought that should be something to consider if the pilot program indicates that further development of a carcass management program should occur.

#### **UPDATING THE HABITAT PRIORITIZATION TOOL (HPT)**

Seward explained that the HPT is used for land use comments, and the Committee intended to update the tool every few years, though the last revision was in 2018. Seward requested a motion to reconvene the Technical Subcommittee to further discuss potential updates to the HPT.

Potential layers to update include a lek polygon layer (some revisions to polygon shape and size), official status of leks (historic lek became active, active leks moving to inactive), more recent soils layer, and different aerial imagery that may be useful to determine conifer encroachment.

Seward said in October we discussed increasing the lek buffer from 0.6 miles to 1.0 miles because CPW is currently recommending no surface occupancy within 1.0 miles of the lek. Seward thought it would be useful to work with Mike Pelletier to see how much acreage would be impacted by increasing the buffer. There is often topography or forest that can be used to hide the single-family residence within the buffer. Peterson wanted to have strong scientific evidence if the buffer should be expanded with acknowledgement of the impacts it might have, and Smith agreed it would be good to quantify those impacts. Seward thought it would be easy to explore those potential changes by working with Mike Pelletier. Seward reiterated that this buffer was adopted by CPW based on the best available science for greater sage-grouse, and Peterson thought it would be useful to see the specific related scientific literature.

Scott said that the HPT is a tool and reminded everyone that it is a start to determining where the highest quality habitat is. Scott said when the HPT was originally created, the Technical Subcommittee went against some current literature.

Seward recommended reaching out to Jim Cochran to see if he would be interested in working with the Technical Subcommittee to revise the tool.

Vasquez, chair of the Technical Subcommittee, said he would be more available next year to begin the revision process. Seward and Scott thought it might be useful to have 1-2 meetings to get started looking at potential new layers or updates with a smaller group (Scott, Vasquez, Rummel, and Seward), and start working with Pelletier to investigate some of those proposed changes. Then the Technical Subcommittee can reconvene in spring to look at some of those potential changes. Scott thought it would be useful to go over the tool development, history, how it works, and uses to educate the Strategic Committee and Technical Subcommittee.

#### **COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS**

Diamond reported that the hunting seasons have seen animals distributed at lower elevations than normal, and therefore hunter success has been high. Diamond would like to work with the STOR committee and Kaminsky on travel management, which could impact sage-grouse. They need more barricades and signage to reduce off-road travel. Navy asked about the elk culling in Saguache County, which Diamond said was associated with the National Wildlife Refuges in the San Luis Valley to manage elk numbers and distribution. Diamond did update that there will be a wildlife commission meeting on wolf reintroduction in Gunnison on January 24. The December commission workshop will focus on the wolf reintroduction plan and general release/reintroduction locations, though there may not be opportunity to comment until the

January meeting. Peterson asked how Gunnison sage-grouse habitat overlap with wolves might impact reintroduction plans. Diamond thought the lack of scientific evidence of wolf predation on sage-grouse may limit the impact of sage-grouse on reintroduction plans. The 10J ruling (to make the reintroduced population an experimental population) is being fast-tracked by the USFWS and it sounds favorable that a 10J ruling will be granted, but no news about the timeline.

Vasquez reported that the USFS is trying to be proactive on wolf reintroduction in their Forest Plan Revision, especially revolving around interagency communication. Darren Long will become wildlife program manager for Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest and Pawnee National Grassland in Fort Collins. Though Long is still working in Gunnison, they were able to announce his position along with nine other offices, and hope to be able to fill that position relatively quickly. The Range position that has been vacant since Funka became District Ranger is currently listed on USA Jobs, closing soon, and will hopefully be filled in spring. Vasquez said the sage-grouse pre- and post-grazing habitat monitoring partnership with WCU (Magee and Liam) has been very productive, and they are planning the third year in 2023. There are some differences between BLM and USFS monitoring, and Liam may be able to talk about which metrics make sense and are most useful. Scott thought the BLM was caught up on AIM monitoring and transitioned to monitoring every third year, with Scott performing interim monitoring as necessary. Magee said Liam has one monitoring plot per pasture, but that the permittee, BLM, and Liam all decide where a non-biased transect could be placed for pre- and post-grazing monitoring. Scott said the Rangewide Steering Committee recommended simple monitoring, and both BLM and USFS have gone above and beyond the monitoring requirements. Smith asked about virtual fencing and how it could be used to monitor cattle use in the pastures. Liam will start November 21 supporting the USFS range program.

Peterson reported that local water users are concerned about the Colorado River Compact discussions and the potential impacts on sage-grouse habitat if there are shortages or curtailments.

Seward said the Wet Meadow Restoration and Resiliency Building project is meeting at 12:00 – 4:00 today at the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District office to discuss opportunities and challenges with wet meadow restoration. For example, some of the treatments are happening in historical floodplains, and some water commissioners are concerned about evaporative water loss.

Magee went to The Wildlife Society conference in Spokane last week and attended an inspiring session on cooperative ecosystem-level restoration (the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which started last year). The session highlighted the concept of stopping the injury and then starting the recovery process in an ecosystem. The Gunnison community may have opportunities to engage (“actors” are engaged in on-the-ground restoration work), which could provide further resources and collaborations.

Hearne updated that NRCS anticipates the Inflation Reduction Act will provide significant funding for NRCS programs, with prioritization on urban agriculture and forestry, wildfire mitigation, climate smart agriculture, and potentially wildlife projects. NRCS is in the application period now with a deadline for December 2 for EQIP and CSP.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

None.

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

01-18-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
02-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
03-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
04-19-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
05-17-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
06-21-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
07-19-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
08-16-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
09-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room

10-18-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
11-15-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
12-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room

**ADJOURN:** The November 16, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:56 AM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District

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