

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
February 15, 2023**

The February 15, 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)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Burt Guerrieri, Gunnison County Stockgrowers
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large

Non-Voting Members

Brandon Diamond, CPW
Jessica Frey, NPS

Others in the Audience:

Dayle Funka, USFS
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Rachel Miller, BLM
Brian Stevens, BLM
Liam Duggan, USFS
Aidan Downey, USFS
Sarah Lowe, USFS
Creed Clayton, USFWS
Jim Cochran
Barb Frase
Petar Simic

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the February 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:06 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Magee to approve the February 15, 2023 agenda. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF JANUARY 18, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Magee to approve the January 18, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Magee reported for the I&E subcommittee that they received a nomination for the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Stewardship Award. Seward nominated Andrew Briebart (BLM), for his wet meadow restoration work and leadership, and his mentorship with WCU students. Briebart is moving to work for the USFS in Fort Collins. There will be a reception March 9 in Crested Butte South at Tully's at 5:30 pm, and Sue Navy and Russ Japuntich will present the award to him at that time.

Seward reported for CPW that the draft wolf plan public meeting on January 25 had high attendance with standing room only. The wildlife commission heard many comments which may be incorporated into the final plan, including comments about the funding of the programs associated with wolf reintroduction and compensation, and comments about the compensation program structure. Comments are accepted until February 22.

Brodhead updated for the BLM on staffing updates. Briebart's departure will be significant and hard to fill, and they are losing their archaeologist already, which will be the highest priority position to refill and they may accept a lateral transfer once the hiring process is determined. The second BLM biologist position is not yet filled, and they are looking to start interviewing applicants again, possibly pulling from the northwest district's hiring list. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) is in the process of developing alternatives and they have received internal and cooperating agency comments. They are including a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) alternative, to allow for the analysis of management activities included in the current CCA (including recreation, grazing, small infrastructure). The draft RMPA alternatives will be provided to the State Director of BLM on February 22. The Gunnison BLM office is contracting out an Environmental Assessment (EA) for several herbicides, including 5-acre plots of Rejuvra. The national office for BLM is coming out with an Environmental Impact Statement in August for Rejuvra, and the local BLM will tier to that with a determination of NEPA adequacy, so their EA will include broad language so they can potentially use Rejuvra next year, and possibly even this fall.

Smith reported that the sage-grouse fund collected from the landfill was not intended for any specific project, and a committee had been formed when the fund first began to make sure those funds were spent on the most impactful sage-grouse projects. The committee has been inactive for several years, and there is no mandate to maintain membership on that committee. The funding was used for legal disputes, and now for the cheatgrass treatment coordinator now. Smith said the County currently operates in a deficit with the allocation of funds. The GBSGSC currently gives some direction to where the funding is spent.

Smith also reported that the landfill accepts roadkill carcasses from CDOT for a discounted rate (CDOT is charged approximately 50% of the County's cost to operate that portion of the landfill), and Seward requested an expansion of that program to Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) participants in the last year. The landfill is an enterprise funded program, so the Public Works Director needs to see proposals for carcass disposal that are financially feasible for any expanded carcass programs. CPW has circulated a draft MOU for the carcass disposal to the Public Works Director. Childers brought up the idea of having the NPS assist with carcass removal from US Highway 50 given their strong presence on that stretch of highway, but NPS assistance would be complicated in terms of payment to the landfill. Seward said the charge is by weight of the carcasses. Magee reported that they accepted a new student into the MEM program (Cinnamon Levi-Flynn) who will be working on roadkill carcass issues.

Brodhead asked about any updates on the grant funds for bear proof trash receptacles, and Smith said the application was not funded and she has not heard of any 2023 application opportunities.

Childers reported on NPS personnel updates. At the end of April, they will have a Chief of Resources who is an archaeologist, and they will have a new Superintendent next month. Frey is doing a detail for the hydrologist who is soon on maternity leave. The NPS will write a grazing management plan as part of the ongoing litigation. The NPS is working with the BLM to get a temporary MOU in place for grazing management in the interim. The new Chief of Resources may have some new funding opportunities for highway crossings for wildlife.

Blair reported that the USFWS RIS workshop is this afternoon.

Magee reported the Cheatgrass Subcommittee meeting will be Friday.

BLM MONITORING PRESENTATION

The primary method of monitoring for the BLM is Assessment Inventory Monitoring (AIM), which is used for all landscape health decisions such as grazing permit renewals and other similar processes. AIM is nationally standardized, but can also be customized locally, for example to more extensively sample Gunnison sage-grouse habitat. The data is numerical, with strict quality assurance/quality control protocols at the local, state, and national levels. There are random points, with 6 new points added in Gunnison per year, with the possibility to revisit every 5 years (a subsample of those points) to detect trends. Currently Gunnison has 294 samples in sage-grouse range, of which 223 are unique sites and 71 are revisits to plots. AIM data is publicly accessible and available. The program is consistently funded at the national level, and emphasizes the use of repeatable methods and calibration among crews and trainers.

At the AIM sites, they collect data for line point intercept, plant height, canopy gap, species richness, plot characterization including a soil pit and basic soils information, photo points, soil stability, and other plot observations. In addition, they add a few inventory methods specific to sage-grouse habitat monitoring, including stubble heights from CCA methods, and they take herbaceous vegetation height for both grasses and forbs at each location instead of just whichever one of those is tallest. The measurements are taken on 3 25-m transects 5-m from the plot center, with line point intercept taken every 50 cm and plant heights every 2.5 m.

The AIM data feeds into a Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF), which is used to identify opportunities for restoration. Each AIM plot is ranked as suitable, marginal, or unsuitable for each kind of seasonal GUSG habitats, based on habitat guidelines from the Rangewide Conservation Plan Appendix H and Tony Apa's suggestions.

In addition, the BLM does CCA specific allotment monitoring. This involves 100 ft transects, with a height recorded every 2 ft. The vegetation heights are recorded for one point per pasture or one point every 2,000 acres if the pasture is larger than 2,000 acres. They also include one transect in riparian areas if a riparian area exists in the pasture.

Miller was asked about drought, and she responded that forb cover is often dependent on drought conditions, but there are no specific adjustments to on the ground measurements for drought conditions.

The state BLM does an analysis of the AIM plots and weights the samples. The first Instruction Memorandum (IM) for sage-grouse habitat assessments was in 2018, which directs BLM on how to complete the HAFs. Gunnison has been doing site scale HAFs for the last few years. The grazing permit renewals are contingent on the HAF analysis.

USFS MONITORING PRESENTATION

Duggan reported on the USFS monitoring methods in the last couple of years while he was an Master of Environmental Management student at WCU and now continuing as he was hired as a wildlife biologist with the USFS. Committee members were Magee, Vasquez, and Madelon Van de Kerk. The goal was to meet or exceed monitoring required in the CCA, and investigate ecologically meaningful metrics of habitat quality.

They used line point intercept, one transect per pasture in Designated Critical Habitat. Each pasture was monitored once every three years (with three samples in monitored year before grazing, after grazing, and at the end of the growing season). Percent cover and plant height (within 30 cm of line) for all lifeforms: shrubs (sagebrush versus non-sagebrush shrubs), grasses, and forbs. Data was recorded by lifeform, but not to species because of the challenges of correctly identifying grasses throughout the entire field season. They also recorded plant species list and photo points.

In 2021 they monitored 28 pastures in 9 allotments, and in 2022 they monitored 38 pastures in 10 allotments. All Flat Top pastures were monitored annually rather than once every 3 years, and 3 allotments/14 pastures were precluded from monitoring because they lack sage-grouse habitat.

Transects were established in 2021 by the range conservationist, wildlife biologist, permittee, and Duggan. They used the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Habitat Primary Constituent Elements Checklist, which are habitat guidelines. For example, the checklist says 25% of the land should be dominated by sagebrush cover for a 1.5 km radius, and if the pasture did not have those large sagebrush areas, it was excluded from monitoring. The transect location was selected to be representative of sage-grouse and livestock use within the pasture.

Plant height measured was droop height ignoring inflorescences, instead of bulk height. Droop heights likely overestimate functional hiding cover for sage-grouse. Percent cover also may overestimate useful hiding cover for GUSG because line point intercept measures aerial cover but some percent of this vegetation is not of a useful height for hiding cover because those individual plants are too small to effectively hide a sage-grouse. Therefore, they used a Robel pole to measure hiding cover or "horizontal visual obstruction". They assessed 6 Robel pole locations, 5 m offset from the line point intercept transect to avoid trampling vegetation, and they took 4 measurements from cardinal directions at each of those locations. Readings were taken from the height of a coyote's eyes.

The USFS 2021 transects were not randomly located, so in 2022 they wanted to introduce a more randomized design. They populated the pasture with randomly generated potential transect locations using GIS, and then they randomly ranked potential transect locations. They excluded potential transect locations that were unsuitable (i.e. forest, etc.), and anything too close and likely influenced by features such as roads, fences, trees, salt, riparian areas. Then they would travel to potential transect locations in order of random ranking (or when time was limited, they went to whatever was closest and easiest to access) to determine transects.

They also did a standard line point intercept in 2022, plus they did just the height of any vegetation (rather than tallest) hit by the pin flag. If the pin flag did not hit anything, they did the measurement of the grass that had the canopy closest to the pin flag hit. Height sampling methods are statistically significantly different for all lifeforms, with LPI measuring taller grasses (the difference was 5.3 cm for grasses, 3.0 cm for forbs, and 2.6 cm for shrubs).

DISCUSSION OF BLM AND USFS MONITORING METHODS

Caloger asked about measuring decadent stands of sagebrush and if any measurements were taken when a pasture is rested. Duggan said pastures that were rested were not included in USFS monitoring that year and it was a limitation of the study that there were no control pastures without grazing. Duggan also said it would be good to have the longer-term data set after a few more years, to be able to compare changes in management, grazing, etc. Simic asked about which height measurement was appropriate to use since they were significantly different. Duggan said the line point intercept droop height is a standard throughout the country and many vegetation measurement objectives, especially with the tallest plants along the transect. However, an average height should theoretically include more random measurements rather than just the tallest plants within the 30 cm area. Simic also asked about if the livestock use is homogenous throughout the pasture, and it was not homogenous. There is little data other than conversations with permittees to determine livestock use, and they are working to develop models to predict livestock use of a pasture based on physiographic features of the landscape (topographic wetness index). Brodhead asked if the USFS was doing utilization measurements and Duggan said no, aside from doing transects before and after grazing. They try to get the transects completed just before grazing and just after, but there are limitations based on workload, permittee communications, etc. The range staff separately does primarily ocular estimates for utilization in allotments, but they also have utilization cages in key areas, they do some feed/forage balance with clipping plots.

Magee asked Miller about the size of her staff, and she has 1 crew lead and 2 crew members. Magee asked about the cost of the monitoring, and she said the state's annual budget was about \$1.2 million to run 14 or 15 crews. Magee also asked about vegetation height measurements when a plant has been grazed and Miller said they do a 100 m transect tape, and do the tallest plant's droop height within 30 cm of the transect, and they note whether or not it was grazed.

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.

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 February 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:15 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District