

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
April 19, 2023**

The April 19, 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, Secretary, Gunnison County Stockgrowers
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)
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Suzie Parker, United States Forest Service (USFS)
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Non-Voting Members

Jessica Frey, NPS
Brandon Diamond, CPW
Jessica Young, WCU
Steffanie Chain

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Petar Simic
Stuart West, NPS (Superintendent)
Brinnen Carter, NPS (Chief of Resources)
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Service
Emma Waters

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District
Shannon Frias, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the April 19, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:05 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Magee and seconded by Peterson to approve the April 19, 2023 agenda.

APPROVAL OF FEBRUARY 15, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Smith to approve the February 15, 2023 meeting minutes. Motion carried unanimously. Peterson abstained.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Seward introduced Emma Waters, who reached out about a group project for Gunnison sage-grouse conservation at the University of Wyoming. The senior project involved finding stakeholder input for management actions, and she has a survey to distribute to the Strategic Committee for feedback. They are working to determine a management alternative for a BLM Resource Management Plan.

Seward gave an update on early lek counts. In the last week of March the early counts were very challenging given access, but had 38 males/8 hens at Razor Creek lek (March 26). This was one of three leks that had birds displaying. The high male count was 44 males/10 females for the last week of March, compared to the late spring of 2019 with poor access where the high count was 14 males/7 females. When access is better, counts are typically 70-90 to 12-20 females for the last week of March. Magee reported what was likely a winter flock of 249 birds at Waunita, and the Ute Mountain Ute tribe (with Magee, Young, Seward, Tarantino) saw 200 a few days later on a different lek. Diamond thanked everyone for the extra effort in getting to lek counts this spring.

Simic shared that Cheryl Cwelich from Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD) is applying for an America the Beautiful grant from NFWF for \$4-5 million for primarily Gunnison sage-grouse habitat and landscape scale restoration from wetlands to uplands. The funds would support a conservation crew and interns from Ute Mountain Ute and the USFS, as well as large scale cheatgrass treatments, as well as conservation easements and fee title land purchases. The preproposal is due today, and the full proposal would be due later in summer, with funds possible to spend in 2024.

Childers reported that the NPS is doing a complete fence survey in both parks, and will be planning on removing fences that are unnecessary and replacing some current fencing with wildlife friendly fencing. They are having trouble accessing leks.

Brodhead updated that Andrew Breibart in the BLM moved on to the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest and is working to rehire some of the positions. Brodhead said the wildlife biologist position closes on Friday and it looks like they have good applicants. They have a contractor for archaeology. They plan on road decommissioning, exclosure replacements, and fence removal/improvement for summer. The RMPA is currently on schedule and is currently drafting the EIS (expected to come out this summer) and working on ACEC reports (assessing all proposed ACECs by public comments or staff).

Navy reported that the Stewardship Award was given to Andrew Briebart several weeks ago before he left. Eli Smith (HCCA Stewardship Director) is compiling a list of projects for this year.

Parker said she and Vasquez are discussing who can fill the Strategic Committee seats (likely either Parker or Funka). They are backfilling Parker's position as an ecologist.

Peterson said the Wolf Reintroduction Management Plan should come out in May, and Stockgrowers have provided input about the potential impacts of wolves on sage-grouse, as the previous draft had little information about potential impacts.

Smith reported that the Cheatgrass Subcommittee is working on a strategic plan and branding effort for communications. They have also discussed the greenhouse on WCU's campus (with CSFS, RMBL, BLM, County, etc.) and they are considering ways to get the greenhouse operational for restoration efforts. CSFS had looked at building a new greenhouse on their new property but the building alone would cost \$70,000. The current greenhouse has some functional equipment but is seeking bids to figure out what to fix and for asbestos removal. They are discussing ways to staff the greenhouse (the CSFS staffed it in the past but do not have the current capacity for that). Smith said cold-storage for seed collections would be another potential use for the greenhouse given an existing refrigerator. Parker suggested the USFS has some funding for restoration now. Childers was working with the Intermountain Region for restoration, and for growing out some local stock especially for riparian restoration, so she thought the NPS would have interest.

Magee said there is a Community Cheatgrass Pull Day scheduled for June 10, which will be targeted towards education and cheatgrass treatment for the City of Gunnison. Friday is also the Cheatgrass Subcommittee meeting from 11:00 am – 1:00 pm and cheatbeer at Kelly Hall in 4:00 pm.

Smith also reported that the County has been talking with CDOT about their annual agreement for roadkill carcasses. CDOT said their guidance is to pull roadkill off the road and allow it to decompose naturally, so their guidance might be in contradiction to some of the other objectives in the Basin.

Hearne reported no updates from NRCS.

Blair reported he has been working on grant proposals for satellite populations. He will be initiating the Gunnison sage-grouse 5-year review this summer.

RAVEN ABUNDANCE AND FOOD SUBSIDIES

Seward reminded the Strategic Committee that sage-grouse chicks and nests are depredated by ravens, and raven populations have increased given some of the food subsidies that are available on the landscape from both food, roadkill carcasses, and agricultural carcasses. Removing subsidies could reduce the year-round population of ravens.

Magee talked through his research looking at raven abundance in Gunnison. Magee explained that anthropogenic impacts increase raven abundance, for example ravens are strongly associated with transmission lines. Magee said many ravens here are definitely resident (500-600 birds at the landfill and/or in the Christmas Bird Count), but there are possibly migratory ones as well. Magee did a study about 10 years ago where he went three times a day, twice a month, to 12 sites (McCabes to Cabin Creek areas). 3 sites were sagebrush sites lacking human disturbance (but with roads, powerlines, etc), other sites that were heavily human dominated (airport, City Market parking lot, blocks around town, highway, golf course, wastewater treatment plant, and landfill). Magee said ravens were ubiquitous everywhere throughout the year and throughout the day. About 10,384 ravens were observed with 857 point counts (with 412 point counts having ravens observed). 81% of ravens were documented at the landfill. Ravens were present in the morning and evening most commonly, and not as present in the midday, except in winter when they were present all day long at the landfill. Ravens take 4-5 years before they are breeding adults (juveniles group together in "crowds"), and live to be 19-20 years. December through March had high raven abundance on the highway route, especially feeding on roadkill. Magee's report had 3 classes of management options: lethal control, aversive conditioning, and subsidy removal (something on which humans have the most control). Lethal control is very difficult because ravens are very smart, and typically they use poisoned fake eggs that cause liver shutdown. Aversive conditioning involves placement of fake eggs, but ravens tend to figure out which are fake fairly quickly. Some subsidy control options include using netting over the landfill to keep the ravens from accessing the pile, or spraying the pile with a substance that makes the landfill pile inedible. Prevent and remove roadkill, reduce hunter gut piles, have businesses cover their dumpsters (or wildlife-proof dumpsters), or removing food trash from going into the landfill (like a community composting option). Other measures could include reducing the options for ravens to nest on transmission lines, reducing standing water (ravens will sometimes drink water), etc.

Peterson reported seeing 52 on a roadkill carcass, and has repeatedly seen about two dozen in his calving pastures. He's not sure what they are eating, and the cows will try to protect the calves. Peterson had some concerns about ravens spreading from the landfill if that subsidy is removed. Caloger thought raven density had increased since being included in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Ravens also have conflicts with sandhill cranes, piping plovers, least terns, and other species. Other communities have successfully implemented some of the above raven reduction/control methods. Seward thought lethal control would be a contentious issue in the community.

Smith said that there could be a mix of strategies, but it's hard to know what the most strategic way to spend funds would be (for example, getting bear-proof trashcans would be useful but it's hard to know how many dumpsters versus individual trash cans). The County used to have a raven take permit, but Smith was not sure the status of that. Seward and Caloger discussed that Aspen is going to do a community composting program, and Caloger thought that households probably toss out 30% of their food. Restaurants can more easily separate their food waste, but households may not be as successful to separate their waste. Caloger was in favor of using the take permit to take ravens and analyze them for signs of sage-grouse DNA.

Navy suggested a subcommittee for addressing raven issues and what strategies to implement first. Brodhead thought the issue is definitely larger than the landfill, such as sorting the trash to cover food resources, or implementing ordinances/citations for City residents and businesses that have trash exposed. Seward thought education might be an important step for City residents/businesses to have buy-in. Magee suggested an article in the paper, and social media posts on the Facebook Marketplace, or dumpster stickers for dumpsters (all in the line of community based social marketing).

Diamond suggested bringing the City in to these discussions, and some education for the City staff first and to receive feedback from them on what their efforts already are. Diamond recommended treading lightly and making sure the City feels respected. Peterson thought CDOT also needs to be involved in some of these meetings, and Diamond said they have some upcoming meetings with CDOT and can bring up some of these issues. They have limited staff, and Gunnison is a boundary between jurisdictions.

Hearne sent information about a grant from USDA for water/environmental programs for solid waste management.

CPW HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICT REDUCTION GRANT

Smith is volunteering to work with the City again to discuss what values make sense for the numbers of individual trash cans versus dumpsters. Diamond wanted the City engaged as soon as possible so they were not frustrated. Clayton BonDurant has worked with the City a lot on the logistics and what would work for them for an application. One of the factors to consider is what trashcans are compatible with the City trucks to keep it from becoming burdensome.

Peterson asked how many bear conflicts occur in Gunnison right now. Diamond said most bear issues are on the western portion of town by the river corridor.

Diamond thought a strong application backed by the City, County, and the Strategic Committee might be a more competitive application given the highest priorities were funded last year.

Magee recommended coming up with a funny video for especially short term rentals as an outreach, but definitely including an education component.

Seward would reach out to Smith and the City about pursuing the grant application.

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.

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 April 19, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:59 AM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District