

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
May 17, 2023**

The May 17, 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)
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Non-Voting Members

Jessica Frey, NPS
Steffanie Chain, Public At-Large

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Brinnen Carter, NPS (Chief of Resources)

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 May 17, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:10 AM.

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

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

APPROVAL OF APRIL 19, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Childers to approve the February 15, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Seward reported the CPW Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Grant application was submitted on May 4 requesting \$69,000 for 30 bear proof trash cans, 30 2-CuYd dumpsters, and a \$15,000 stipend for a WCU student to monitor program effectiveness and improve public education. The application was submitted as a first phase, which could be expanded in the future. The language also left the ability to potentially retrofit dumpsters rather than purchase new.

The CPW Commission approved the Wolf Reintroduction Plan in early May. Early winter in 2024 would be the earliest that wolves could be reintroduced in Gunnison. There was a bill introduced to the state legislature to delay reintroductions until a USFWS 10(j) rule was in place, in addition to allocating additional funds for the reintroduction and related game damage programs, but Governor Polis vetoed the bill. Smith

said \$2.1 million was allocated from the general fund for the reintroduction program and game damage (Bill 2.1).

Seward also reported that the Gunnison sage-grouse lek counts would wrap up May 20, which is an extension of 1 count period beyond normal to incorporate counts for leks that were inaccessible in the first one to two count periods. Some high male counts have occurred in the last week, after normal counts would have ended. One lek had 99 males and no females in the last week, so most females may be on their nests but males are still coming to leks.

Olson reported the NRCS had significant interest in project proposals to benefit sage-grouse, with more applications than funds in Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) fund pools. Some projects in Gunnison were funded through SGI, and most others were picked up in other fund pools. Proposals included watering facilities (off-stream watering sources, hardened stream access points) with prescribed grazing and wildlife habitat management plans, and some low-tech process-based restoration projects. Several easements may also be funded through SGI. Seward asked about perimeter funding, and Olson said NRCS cannot usually fund perimeter fencing unless they can show benefit to sensitive species. NRCS is exploring virtual fence technology and possible cost share opportunities, but does not want to adopt virtual fencing until the technology improves. However, NRCS can use the prescribed grazing practice to support those opportunities. Brodhead said the BLM is working towards implementing several virtual fencing projects, especially in northwest Colorado and around Eagle and Crawford. Seward reported finding a hen that had collided with a fence and had some concern about the number of undocumented collisions that may occur with fences, especially with fences that have limited visibility to wildlife.

Magee reported the next Cheatgrass Subcommittee meeting is Friday at 11:00 am. There will be a cheatgrass pull event on June 10 within the City limits, for which CPW provided funding. The greenhouse at WCU's campus is nonfunctional, and there have been interagency discussions about getting that operable again for growing out native seed ecotypes, but WCU found asbestos in the greenhouse and has put a hold on that. Simic has been looking into other opportunities to find funding for a greenhouse. There is a Signal Peak treatment planned for October with funding from the GCD (through grants from the Colorado Department of Agriculture and USFS Disaster Mitigation Funds). The treatment will target non-federal lands around the Signal Peak area, and Bradley Wigginton will be the contractor for the project.

Brodhead reported that Backcountry Hunters and Anglers is having a large event this weekend with a volunteer day to remove fencing in several locations, improve wet meadow treatments at Cabin Creek, and map cheatgrass. The BLM is wrapping up lek counts and has started technicians on their conservation crew to improve sage-grouse habitat. Brodhead said the Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) internal drafts are due to the contractors by the end of May so the contractors can incorporate those revisions and issue a draft to cooperators for review soon. In Gunnison the Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) recommendations will each be included as alternatives (external suggestions of all occupied range or all sage-grouse habitat plus a 4-mile buffer, and internal suggestions of Chance Gulch, Waunita, Ohio Creek, Sapinero Mesa, etc.).

Navy said HCCA is also supporting the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers programs this weekend. Yesterday was HCCA's first stewardship volunteer day, and they put up MCH packets (anti-aggregation pheromone packets) on Miller Ranch to protect Douglas fir from beetle infestations. HCCA has a front window display at the Crested Butte Museum for the summer, and it includes a sage-grouse mount and a QR code to sign up for volunteer events.

Wilson reported no updates from Saguache County.

USFWS GUSG 5-YEAR REVIEW OVERVIEW

Tabled to next meeting.

WAUNITA WATCHABLE WILDLIFE SITE UPDATES

Magee shared a presentation to review the 2023 season at the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site (WWWS). Magee reported most sage-grouse activity was in the North Meadow area, and there was less use on the East Ridge. WCU students (sometimes with limited experience) work the site, and it is a challenging lek to

count even for experienced counters given low visibility. The WWWS is a 24-year partnership between CPW (SWA and pass, viewing trailer and site prep, funding, regulations, enforcement), WCU (student coordinator and volunteers, data collection and summary, equipment), Sisk-a-dee (commercial use permit, protocols, coordination, webpage, education programs, annual reports), Gunnison County (parking prohibition, enforcement), the Strategic Committee (WWWS subcommittee), and The Nature Conservancy and the landowner (conservation easement). These programs allow the public an opportunity to view GUSG, and maintain protection for GUSG. Most people appreciate the experience. The desire to see Gunnison sage-grouse is not waning – there is still a significant and growing demand for viewing.

This year, there were 12 volunteers (plus a supervisor and coordinator), with a total commitment of 382.5 volunteer hours including coordination, volunteer training, hours at the site, etc. The season is April 1 – 30, closed April 9-15 midseason. The trailer was used reserved 21 days and used 19 of those days, out of 23 possible viewing days. There were 261 non-volunteer visitors (about 11 visitors per day). There were about 2.7 vehicles per day, and about 8% of visitors violated protocols. Commercial, non-profit, and private groups reserved the trailer.

Volunteers made conservative counts given low visibility, but there were 3 counts with >200 males, and 10 counts with >100 males from early to mid-April. The high count was 249 males on April 7. In the second half of April, the average high male count was 21 males per day.

Magee thought years ago there was more harassment by eagles and coyotes, more traffic on the county road and Highway 50, and visitor use, which all may have contributed to the sage-grouse moving towards the North Meadow area instead of the traditional lek. Magee thought additional factors such as climate and snowpack may have impacted the high counts this year. Seward thought the South Parlin winter habitat is likely to support larger winter flocks than many other areas in the GUSG range.

Magee will be stepping away from coordinating the WWWS for 2024. He said there are already reservations for commercial birding groups for 2024 (reservations open the beginning of the 2023 viewing season for the next year). There is a Watchable Wildlife Site ad-hoc subcommittee that includes Diamond, Seward, Peterson, Magee, Caloger, Blair, and Smith which was reauthorized in August 2021. Seward and Diamond will work to convene the subcommittee to determine next steps for the WWWS.

POTENTIAL RAVEN SUBSIDY SUBCOMMITTEE FORMATION AND MEMBERSHIP

Caloger summarized that Alberta and Saskatchewan have defined ravens differently under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and allow residents to take ravens on private lands for any purpose, and others can obtain a permit for raven take on lands in which they have an interest (i.e. lease). Gunnison County has (or had) approval from the USFWS for raven population control at the landfill as part of the landfill management, and Caloger thought some current legal battles surrounding the Chevron Doctrine may allow for greater flexibility for the County to manage ravens. The Supreme Court is reassessing the Doctrine, and if they overruled it, it would make agency decisions final rather than allowing entities to challenge agency decisions in court. Caloger again suggested having some raven take that would allow genetic sampling for determining what proportion of ravens may have depredated sage-grouse. CPW has identified crows and black-billed magpies as nuisance species, but common ravens are not considered nuisance species. This allows crows and magpies to be removed but not ravens.

A potential subcommittee could work to understand what options are available especially for reducing subsidies, including the feasibility and potential funding of possible actions, and the subcommittee could determine research questions investigating raven impacts to GUSG populations after a literature review. For example, they could make a recommendation to the CPW avian research unit for research studies (such as radio transmitters on sage-grouse hens, transmitters on ravens, or nest cameras at the discretion of the research unit). Smith thought the research component was important for GUSG and for other interest groups, but emphasized that GUSG would have to be central to all discussions in the subcommittee. Caloger suggested the subcommittee could complete their work in two brood-rearing seasons, and he would like to see them incorporate a sufficient sample size for genetic sampling of ravens in Tier 1 habitat during the brood-rearing season to test for DNA of depredated sage-grouse. Seward thought the subcommittee would need to work through details, literature reviews, and USFWS support if they chose that as a feasible alternative.

Navy and Seward supported subcommittee formation. Magee supported conducting research but reminded the committee that there was significant research already completed that demonstrates that ravens impact sage-grouse populations, so Magee recommended taking action concurrently on subsidy removal projects if a research project emerged as a relevant alternative. Childers also supported subsidy removal over lethal control options, given ravens are typically smart and learn to evade lethal control. Brodhead agreed. Smith thought it would be critical to assess what resources would be required and what would be available for subsidy removal, and if those resources would better be directed at other projects such as cheatgrass treatments. Seward thought a subcommittee could be reauthorized annually as tasks are completed. Caloger proposed the subcommittee determine the rate of predation, and Seward said that could be a research question that the subcommittee could propose as an alternative. Magee suggested a cost-benefit analysis or list of possible actions for subsidy removal as a product for the subcommittee to work towards.

Moved: by Smith and seconded by Olson to form a Raven Subcommittee which would research actionable items to reduce subsidies for ravens including investigating the feasibility and funding opportunities for those actions, a literature review of known raven impacts on sage-grouse populations, and suggestions for potential research questions.

Seward requested nominations for the subcommittee. Caloger and Seward self-nominated. Seward would request Blair and Jason Kibler (City of Gunnison) consider joining if they were willing. Seward nominated Magee and Tarantino, who would consider their time commitments and may represent their organizations. Navy declined membership to the subcommittee.

Moved: by Smith and seconded by Olson to amend the motion to include subcommittee appointments of Caloger, Seward, Blair, Magee, Kibler, and Tarantino if all accept membership. Olson seconded the amended motion. Motion carried unanimously.

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.

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 May 17, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:22 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District