

GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
UNOFFICIAL PUBLIC RECORD MEETING MINUTES
July 19, 2023

The July 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, Gunnison County Stockgrowers
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Creed Clayton (USFWS)
Tim Kugler (Gunnison Trails)

Non-Voting Members

Jessica Frey, NPS

Others in the Audience:

Cheryl Cwelich, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD)
Petar Simic, Gunnison County Cheatgrass Coordinator
Jason Kibler, City of Gunnison
Dayle Funka, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

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 July 19, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:04 AM.

DETERMINATION OF QUORUM: Seward confirmed that a quorum was not present at the beginning of the meeting with 7 of 8 members needed for a quorum.

AGENDA APPROVAL: Approval delayed until a quorum is present.

APPROVAL OF MAY 17, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: Approval delayed until a quorum was present.

AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL GRANT APPLICATION

Simic and Cwelich put together a pre-proposal for \$4.9 million through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) America the Beautiful Grant, and they were invited to submit a full proposal. There were three components of the grant, including cheatgrass treatment, wet meadow restoration, and property acquisition (\$1.5 million for protecting 350 acres of critical Gunnison sage-grouse habitat close to leks with a high potential for development). The vacancies in federal partner staff (including the hydrologists at both the USFS and BLM, and the archaeologist at BLM) makes it challenging to implement the work, and especially the NEPA. Childers said sometimes there are ways to work around missing positions by having regional staff sign off on plans, but NPS may operate differently from USFS and BLM.

Cwelich said Jon Kaminsky believed the BLM hydrologist position would likely be filled by fall. Funka explained the Gunnison Ranger District works underneath the Grand Mesa – Uncompahgre – Gunnison

National Forest (GMUG). The Gunnison Ranger District does not have the appropriate staff (archaeologist, botanist for threatened and endangered plants, hydrologist) for wet meadow restoration, and currently the USFS and GMUG prioritize fuels and timber sales especially along roadways. Wet meadow restoration and cheatgrass treatments would be hard to implement at the scale of the grant in the timeline outlined by the grant, without the staff needed to work through the NEPA and planning required. Funka also wanted to plan treatments more strategically to determine which projects would be the best cross-boundary opportunities, but the analysis to determine priorities would be time consuming and would require those additional staff. Funka said they do currently have a hydrologist but they are going to hire a second. The wildlife staff used to be leaders in the wet meadow treatments, but with the turnover that has occurred in that department, they are more focused on vegetation management.

Funka said noxious weeds were a priority problem for the GMUG, and they do have a crew that treats noxious weeds. The crew normally assesses conditions and prioritizes treatments, and they have seen more noxious weeds introduced through lower elevation areas (i.e. Kebler Pass). Funka believed that treating the lower elevations should be the priority to limit the ingress of noxious weeds to the higher elevations along roads, trails, and potentially private lands. The County helps with spraying noxious weeds on roadways, but they can only go up to 200 feet away from the road. The USFS needs to have a prioritized strategy for treating noxious weeds and cheatgrass. Funka said wet meadows could be prioritized as a potential fire break, but the wet meadow treatments are generally planned away from roads for sage-grouse habitat improvements, whereas fire breaks tend to be close to roads.

Seward asked about lobbying for hiring these positions. The USFS Watershed Program Manager is working on hiring specialists, and human resources is slow. Funka is not opposed to hiring in creative ways, such as hiring a hydrologist that was a shared staff member between UGRWCD and the USFS. That would fill the USFS lead role for wet meadow treatments. Smith asked about the USFS and BLM sharing a hydrologist or archaeologist, but Funka said it is often too complicated to share a position between Department of Interior and United States Department of Agriculture, but one could take a lead if both agencies had those positions filled and projects crossed boundaries. Funka said money from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is being awarded to the GMUG because of their work with Montrose Forest Products and timber sales, so they need to prioritize related projects.

Simic asked about how much of the workload needs to be addressed through USFS District staff, versus addressing the workload through other forms of capacity such as contracts. Funka said the USFS needs to be able to assess thorough project proposals and rank them against other potential projects. Partners can do some of the planning process including purpose, needs, and outcomes.

Peterson asked about how to prepare for aerial treatments for cheatgrass, recognizing that the required EIS would take years. Funka said the Range Program Manager at the Supervisor's office is working with the Gunnison Ranger District to be able to aerial spray the Almont Triangle and then expand that. Funka said the BLM process is different. Simic thought the BLM was working towards an aerial treatment plan for a smaller area, and then expanding once they assess the effectiveness and collateral damage. Statewide listing cheatgrass as a List C noxious weed makes it difficult to prioritize funding, so Smith has been a proponent for uplisting List C weeds locally. However, List C does not require eradication, but agencies do the best they can with the resources they have for all species, so making cheatgrass a County List B weed might not make a difference in prioritization (not to the USFS).

CITY TRASH ORDINANCES

The Committee submitted the CPW Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Grant requesting \$69,000 to retrofit about 30 bear-proof trashcans and 30 2-cubic yard dumpsters, and funding for a WCU student to follow up on how effective the measures are at reducing conflict. Kibler talked about the changes the City has implemented in the last year or two. The City has allowed residents to purchase their own bearproof trashcans, even though it does present some liability concerns for the City. Therefore, the residents need to sign a liability waiver in case the trucks were to break the can, and stating that the resident is responsible for unlocking the can on trash day and they are responsible for purchasing the can. Older bearproof trashcans require the user to unlock the can on trash day, and many users would forget, making it less

appealing for the City to invest in bearproof trashcans. However, the City did receive prototypes for trashcans that do not require being unlocked by the user, and they worked well with the City's trucks. The City has also retrofitted about 10-12 dumpsters to work with their trash trucks, with kits from the Canon City prison. They have worked with the producers of the retrofitting kit to improve the kit for the trash trucks the City uses. The City also now requires a Master Account holder for dumpsters, which requires one main contact person for each dumpster to be responsible for overfill fees and following trash ordinances, which has been especially effective in multi-family residences. This new regulation also applies to commercial operations but was most often violated by multi-family residences. Implementing overfill fees has reduced the frequency of overfilled trash cans, which keeps lids closed and therefore limits ravens from getting into trash cans.

Funka asked about composting, and Kibler said the City is working on a plan. They need a clean product with no food wrappers, etc. that could be added to the Wastewater Treatment Plant's Gunnison Gold program. The City is working through the logistics for that kind of program.

Caloger said Waste Management hauls their waste to Grand Junction, and asked about if there was a way to reduce waste sent to our landfill. Kibler explained that the landfill is a County operation whereas Kibler works for the City. Kibler thought the size of the Waste Management operation likely makes it more affordable for them to take all trash to Grand Junction, and that having Waste Management haul waste to Grand Junction likely extends the life of our County landfill.

RAVEN SUBSIDY SUBCOMMITTEE LEADERSHIP, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

No Chair was designated for the Raven Subcommittee at the last meeting. Kugler confirmed that he was willing to serve on the Subcommittee. Magee had said in May he would participate. Clayton said he thought Blair would be a good fit for the subcommittee, and Seward thought a USFWS member would be critical. Clayton would reach out to Blair and tentatively said he would be likely to participate.

Caloger thought his private email has made it difficult to communicate with outside entities, and he recommended the Subcommittee have a page on the Gunnison County website to make contact easier. Seward recommended Caloger copy Seward on emails to outside entities and making it clear that Caloger was making these contacts on behalf of the Committee.

Caloger again brought up the difference in Canada versus the U.S.A. for raven management under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, in which Canada allows for the take of ravens on private lands for livestock protection and on public lands with a permit. Caloger recommended asking Pete Coates about Canadian researchers working with Greater sage-grouse on private versus public lands with the hypothesis that leks on private lands may have higher recruitment if those private landowners were involved in raven take.

Funka asked about population data on ravens, and Seward said the reliable Christmas Bird Count data shows a strong increase over the last few decades. Seward explained Magee's work from about 10 years ago which looked how landscape characteristics influenced raven populations. The highest raven density was at the landfill.

Seward explained one option could be lethal control, but lethal control was likely to be challenging with how smart ravens can be. Seward thought tackling education for reducing subsidies was critically important. Smith also thought enforcement from the City was important because some of the lower wage workers that may be dealing with commercial trash might have high turnover. Smith thought fines for leaving dumpsters open might be effective, and Seward agreed that working with the City would be integral. Funka brought up the idea of covering the landfill, and Seward said that was Magee's priority recommendation from his report. Smith said the landfill does cover trash with dirt at least daily, but there is still a lot of residual material. Peterson thought it would also be important to have Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) representation on the Subcommittee or regular interaction with CDOT, to also tie in the carcass removal efforts. Seward said the Intergovernmental Agreement between the County and CPW was approved yesterday at the County Commissioners meeting, which allows the County landfill to offer a discounted rate for Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances participants. Smith thought the

County did not renew CDOT's carcass removal contract because CDOT said they were following CPW's guidance to remove carcasses from visibility, rather than bringing them to the landfill. Peterson thought the lack of CDOT carcass removal would be a significant concern for landowners impacted by wolf reintroduction, if the landowners are responsible for removing carcasses and CDOT is not removing wildlife carcasses.

Seward self-nominated for Chair. Without a quorum, the Committee will finalize membership and Chair assignments at the next meeting.

2023 LEK COUNT SUMMARY

Seward has almost completed the 2023 lek count summary report, with 83 leks visited. The 2023 high male count (HMC) was 805, which was an increase of 24 males as compared to the HMC of 781 in 2022. There were 3 leks with total count of over 200 birds, but those are likely large winter flocks that then dispersed to other leks. The High Female Count (HFC) was 355, an increase of 62 hens from the HFC of 293 counted in 2022. This was the highest HFC since 1998. Using the HMC of 805 and the 1997 Gunnison Basin Local Conservation Plan, the population estimate is 3,220 birds (an increase of 97 birds from 2022). Using the population estimation techniques in the Rangewide Conservation Plan, the minimum population estimate is 3,949 birds (an increase of 117 birds from 2022). The 3-year average HMC from 2021 to 2023 is up to 738, a 16% improvement from last year, but still falls below the 752 3-year average HMC minimum required for trap and transplant actions. Childers asked about how the limited access from significantly late snowpack reduced the number of counts and potentially contributed to missing parts of the population in counts. Seward said there are also sage-grouse on Pine Creek Mesa that were not included in final counts until CPW secures permission for including those counts. The population estimate derived from the 10-year HMC average (for 2014 – 2023) and the Rangewide Conservation Plan is 3,495 birds.

Seward explained the difference in the population estimate calculations between the two plans. The HMC for the Local Conservation Plan represents 75% of the total male population, and for every male there are 2 females. The Rangewide Conservation Plan assumes we only observe 53% of males, and there are 1.6 females per male in the population. The Rangewide Conservation Plan was based on a mark-resight study, so it is generally considered better because it is more strongly science-based and newer information.

Seward thought that with the range conditions present this summer, it was likely that recruitment could be good this year, and unless there was an icy winter, we may have higher counts next year. Seward thought nesting and hatch dates would be about 2 weeks behind average this year. Clayton asked about how much the late snowpack reduced lek count effort, and Seward said he would have to look at how many counts were completed this year versus previous years.

WAUNITA WATCHABLE WILDLIFE SITE MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Seward summarized that he and Diamond and Magee came up with a plan to phase Sisk-A-Dee out of the management of Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site. All reservations and management of the Waunita site needs to go through CPW. They are working with CPW IT to see if they can allow reservations through their CPW website, and at least allow the local CPW front desk staff to answer questions about site management. Seward thought a full-time temporary employee would be needed but that person would likely not be available for reservations throughout the year. They have also discussed volunteer staff for CPW, or MEM students through WCU that may be funded by CPW.

Magee provided a written update that there have been changes for 2024 including updating the Sisk-a-dee website, scheduling two public viewing tours, and sending out a notice for MEM applicants.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Tabled until August meeting.

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.

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 July 19, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:20 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District