

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE**  
**UNOFFICIAL PUBLIC RECORD MEETING MINUTES**  
**September 20, 2023**

The September 20, 2023 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  
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large  
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)  
Tim Kugler (Gunnison Trails)  
Patrick Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)  
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)  
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)

**Non-Voting Members**

Jessica Young, WCU

**Others in the Audience:**

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies  
Bridget Estep, WCU Center for Public Lands  
Paul Rivera

**Staff Members Present:**

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District  
Rebecca Ricord, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

**CALL TO ORDER:** Chairperson Seward called the September 20, 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:** Wet Meadow Update was moved to 10:10 am. **Moved:** by Navy and seconded by Childers to approve the July 19, 2023 agenda, August 23, 2023, and September 20, 2023 agendas. Motion carried unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF MAY 17, 2023; JULY 19, 2023; AND AUGUST 23, 2023 MEETING MINUTES:** Amended to be an unofficial public record instead of meeting minutes given the lack of a quorum at the July 19, 2023 and August 23, 2023 meetings. **Moved:** by Smith and seconded by Navy to approve the May 17, 2023, July 19, 2023, and August 23, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

**COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS**

Navy reported that HCCA hosted hikes all summer, including an educational Gunnison sage-grouse hike with Blair as a presenter. The sage-grouse mount is still present in the museum in Crested Butte. There is an upcoming service day for wet meadow restoration on October 21 at Centennial State Wildlife Area.

Seward reported that Kevin Blecha's position was backfilled in Gunnison by Alyssa Meier as the new terrestrial biologist. She is coming from Wyoming starting in mid-October. The new CPW office is under

construction and anticipated to be completed in fall 2024. They are discussing remodeling the current main office into seasonal housing.

Smith updated that John Swartout (executive director of Colorado Counties, Inc.) just retired. The County is working on contract negotiations with Simic by October 1, 2023. The BOCC does not need to approve it during their regular agenda, and approval from the County manager is sufficient. The partners are encouraged to continue applying for additional funds to support the position, so the County can preserve sage-grouse mitigation funds to continue the position further into the future. Seward thought there could be potential for using funds from the Habitat Partnership Program, or through the CPW private lands coordinator. Seward also suggested the Mule Deer Foundation, which often funds capacity for private lands projects. Smith also met with Lauren Boebert to talk about housing and infrastructure, water, agriculture, and sage-grouse restoration projects. Smith also reminded the Committee that there is an IMAGINE workshop on October 24 at the Gunnison County Library starting at 8:00 am.

Seward shared a brief (email) update from the BLM, including their next steps for the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA). The NEPA review team will review the draft in October, followed by public comment meetings, followed by a draft EIS released November 10 for a 90-day comment period. They will then draft a Biological Assessment with the USFWS.

Magee updated the WCU stadium is being rebuilt and the stadium will be locked, so there is an opportunity to restructure the entrance to the Signal Peak trails. The Canal Trail will have a more recognizable trailhead, including a larger kiosk. They are developing signage about the human history and sagebrush ecosystem for an approximately one-mile loop interpretive trail. WCU is collaborating with the BLM and CPW to rip a shortcut road and block access, including WCU students will do dead planting and seeding on October 5. Seward reminded Magee that CPW could have funding to assist with signage or any of the other restoration projects through the CCAA Species Conservation Trust Funds. Estep has a GOCO (Great Outdoors Colorado) fellow until May that could also help. Magee also said Friday, October 6, Brodhead and Stevens will do some presentations for the Gunnison Wildlife Association at PieZans in the basement, followed the next day by some road decommissioning. There is also a Public Lands Day this Saturday for road decommissioning, including planting sagebrush and forbs (and volunteers get free t-shirts).

Kugler reported that Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association, Gunnison Trails, and BLM hosted the Colorado State Trails Commission last Thursday and Friday. Thursday was a field day showcasing projects from State Trails funding including Hartman Rocks motorized trail network, Signal Peak, and Crested Butte (Gunsight Pass Bridge, and Oh-Be-Joyful). They also had a Friday work session, where the commission was impressed by the partnerships in the Gunnison Basin.

Blair reported he has a new supervisor (Nathan Darnell) within the last month. The USFWS did lose State Supervisor Nicole Ault, and they are currently advertising the position. Blair also reported that Blair and Simic ground-truthed some of the map from Open Range Consulting. They went to some remote areas and found cheatgrass was detected in very small patches. The only remaining product was the annual grass map, but Open Range Consulting has finished the perennial, bare ground, and forest maps. All maps will be housed on the Conservation Efforts Database (CED). The resolution is 0.5 feet and seemed to pick up the difference between a 3-foot cheatgrass patch and adjacent Indian Ricegrass. The project was funded through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), and the San Miguel Working Group is considering a similar project with funding that was just acquired. Poncha Pass also received funding for wet meadow restoration using Ducks Unlimited as a fiscal agent. Blair also discussed potential applications for future projects.

Childers shared Frey was finishing her third round of sage-grouse habitat monitoring for the Crawford population in the North Rim. They were not able to keep a consistent sampling time frame given staffing issues. They are also planning on having a grazing planning meeting soon. The NPS is losing a long-term law enforcement officer (Melissa Post) who is retiring from NPS and starting as a Deputy Coroner for the County. There will be a Crawford Working Group field tour October 4. This year is also the first of three years of fence removal and wildlife friendly fence improvements.

### **USFWS 5-YEAR REVIEW**

Hearne did the initial Species Status Assessment (SSA), Recovery Plan, and Recovery Implementation Strategy (RIS) which will need to be reviewed by 2025. Blair wants to have it completed by September 2024. He does not want to work on it until the BLM RMPA and USFS Forest Plan Revision are completed. He will base it on feedback from the annual RIS workshops. Most of the feedback he received was about CPW lek status trends, and that the Poncha Pass population is more persistent than some of the other subpopulations. Since translocations in 2014, the population has been consistently 6-10 for the High Male Count (HMC), whereas Crawford has a HMC of 6 and recovery goal of 3 HMC. Poncha Pass is considered a non-essential population, and Blair wants to remove that language but the USFWS is not planning on designating any critical habitat. Seward does review occasional building permit applications for Saguache County in the range of the Poncha Pass subpopulation, and includes recommendations to consult with the USFWS. Suitable habitat size is the same in Poncha Pass and Crawford. Peterson asked about private landowner relations, and Blair said they have a strong working group and that private landowners are more supportive than many of the other working groups. The working group has major concerns about private lands development. Blair wants to make sure the restoration efforts in that area continue to be funded and recognized as important. Blair is planning on using the CED to document restoration efforts that have occurred in the last 5 years. Blair has requested data from some partners.

The Programmatic CCAA is expiring in 2024, and the USFWS is discussing safe harbor agreements (which is essentially the same document, post-listing) but they want to determine what monitoring requirements will be required. This will be a topic of discussion at the RIS workshop next spring.

### **RAVEN SUBSIDY SUBCOMMITTEE LEADERSHIP AND MEMBER APPROVAL**

Seward self-nominated for the Chair of the Raven Subcommittee at the July meeting. Membership could include Pat Magee, Peter Caloger, Tim Kugler, Jason Kibler, Hannah Kersting (CSU-Extension Gunnison County Director), and Whit Blair. Marcella Tarantino said she would reconsider membership in 2-3 months but currently will not be on the subcommittee. Blair will talk to Brodhead about getting the new BLM Biologist to join the subcommittee and to be introduced to the Strategic Committee. Seward invited a CDOT representative (Cinnamon Levi-Flynn).

Seward explained the subcommittee would be responsible for examining literature for projects that have reduced raven densities and predation, and exploring potential projects for subsidy reductions. Caloger said the status of ravens has been changed on the MBTA to a protected predator in the 1980s, which is about the time around sage-grouse populations declined. Caloger again brought up the example with Canadian raven control differences on private and public lands, and exploring how that impacts sage-grouse populations. Caloger emailed Peter Coates about this issue.

There was a motion to approve the formation of the Raven Subsidy Subcommittee in the May 17, 2023 regular meeting including appointments of Caloger, Seward, Blair, Magee, Kibler, and Tarantino if all members accepted. **Moved:** by Smith and seconded by Peterson to approve Seward as the Raven Subcommittee Chair. Motion carried unanimously. Seward appointed additional subcommittee members of Kugler and Kersting. Pending acceptance, Seward will appoint Levi-Flynn, a local CDOT representative, and the new BLM biologist in the future.

### **HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICT REDUCTION GRANT UPDATE**

Smith updated that there was a meeting to work through details and revisions on the Scope of Work, especially with WCU for the student portions that were approved, including a \$15,000 stipend for an MEM student. Some of that funding may be set aside for producing educational materials. The City will likely purchase new dumpsters rather than modifying existing dumpsters, although that option is still being explored. The City is also working on getting an updated quote for residential trashcans. Rummel added that the original proposal was for 30 dumpsters and 30 residential cans, and after this year's bear season it will be changed to about 12 dumpsters and 120 residential cans. Madelon Van de Kerk will be the advisor for the WCU student, who would primarily be needed in summer. Neighborhoods that were discussed for bearproof trashcans included 51 homes in the Sunspots area (west of the High School), and about 140

homes in the Palisades neighborhood. John Livingston (PIO in Durango/SW region of CPW) will work with the student to make sure the messaging is consistent. There was a discussion about having a QR code on bearproof trashcans and dumpsters, which could potentially be used to identify bear conflicts when and where they occur.

**WET MEADOW RESTORATION UPDATE**

The wet meadow restoration update was tabled until October or November 2023. Marcella Tarantino made a video showing Low-Tech Process Based Restoration structures from a recent NRCS project (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOL1pIOji14>). This was a collaborative project at Powderhorn and Cebolla Creek mostly intended to improve fish habitat. There was a beaver that had already adopted structures within a 2-week timespan. Peterson asked about planning and how to incorporate irrigation infrastructure to avoid impacts from beavers, and Rummel explained that no Beaver Dam Analogues were implemented on Cebolla Creek, where all irrigation infrastructure is. The beavers would be less likely to take over Post-Assisted Log Structures on Cebolla Creek, but all irrigation infrastructure was given a buffer and planners were already in contact with Paul Planer about the possibility of installing beaver deceiver structures if needed. Powderhorn Creek did have a few Beaver Dam Analogues. Navy asked about the legal challenges of installing these structures, and Seward said Trail Creek restoration was paused in the USFS to examine the potential impacts more. Peterson brought up the issue of water rights and making sure senior water rights would be honored and enough water would still be within the system for irrigation. Seward said some of the legal challenges have been focused on examining the historical impacts of beavers within the system, and that all of these structures are permeable, so water should be able to pass through at least in a normal water year.

**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.**

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

The October meeting will be cancelled.

**ADJOURN:** The September 20, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:06 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District