

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

The November 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:

Liz Smith, Vice-Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
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)
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Matthew Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)

Non-Voting Members

Kathy Brodhead, BLM

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Liam Duggan, USFS
Bella Biondini, Gunnison Times
Cheryl Cwelich, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD)
Sophia Reggiani, WCU
Phoebe Roberts, WCU
Gina Phillips, BLM
Leah Waldner, BLM
Pete Simic, Happy Habitats
Paul Rivera, WCU Center for Public Lands

Staff Members Present:

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

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Vice-Chairperson Smith called the November 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:01 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Added WCU student research proposal overviews. **Moved:** by Blair and seconded by Navy to approve the November 15, 2023 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF SEPTEMBER 20, 2023 MEETING MINUTES: **Moved:** by Blair and seconded by Navy to approve the September 20, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Nathan Darnell introduced himself as the new Western Colorado Supervisor. Blair expects the cheatgrass mapping products from Open Range Consulting this week. The USFWS will begin follow up work with Tarantino to work on a cheatgrass treatment prioritization tool. Blair also is planning another RIS workshop in February or March to work on CED updates.

Magee asked for nominations for the I&E Sub-committee's Stewardship Award by December 5. Magee also said he attended the The Wildlife Society (TWS) conference in Louisville, Kentucky and he thought there may be upcoming opportunities to share accomplishments of the Strategic Committee and Gunnison Basin in future TWS meetings as a demonstration of a landscape-scale habitat restoration collaborative. Magee also explained that a former student in Washington was working on reducing predation by terns and cormorants on salmon with a laser system. Magee contacted the company to learn more about if the laser system would be a good potential system to use at the landfill to reduce raven populations. Diamond said a raven in Gunnison recently tested positive for high prevalence avian influenza (HPAI), although it had been recorded in mountain lions in Gunnison.

Brodhead updated that the BLM did publicly release the draft EIS for the Gunnison Sage-grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment (GUSG RMPA). The BLM planned a large cheatgrass treatment this summer and it was put out for contract and they received one low bid that they had to accept, but the contractor was unable to complete the work. The BLM did do smaller scale treatment projects and follow-up. They did road decommissioning, removing enclosures, other fencing improvements (with Backcountry Hunters and Anglers), and wet meadow treatments.

Simic updated that the USFWS funds went to private lands cheatgrass treatment, working with 30 landowners to treat over 100 acres (mostly from Simic, with help from Wigginton and the conservation crew). He hopes to expand next year. The conservation crew also did treatments on BLM. There was mention at the IMAGINE workshop that the application of sugar can successfully improve the soil biome for the native plant community to compete with cheatgrass, but it would be impractical to use that much sugar across the landscape.

WCU GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Roberts presented on her proposal for her M.S. at WCU. She is working with the BLM and is a Fellow with HCCA. She is looking at long-term changes in plant fossils (phytoliths). This will involve soil cores and carbon dating to determine what kinds of vegetation were present a thousand years ago. She will also look at soil charcoal analysis to examine past fire regimes in sage-grouse habitat. She will test carbon isotopes to determine historic water use efficiency (frequency and intensity of past droughts). Management implications can include botanical species that may be subject to climate change and which species might therefore be useful for seed mixes, historic fire regimes, and how droughts impact the landscape and how wet meadow treatments impact the landscape.

Reggiani also presented on her proposal for an MS at WCU. She is looking at the difference in insect community and diversity in wet meadow treatments and controls. Wet meadow restoration has been shown to increase vegetation cover, and she is hypothesizing that there will likely be an increase in insect abundance and diversity. She expects 5 paired treatment/control sites. She will use pitfall traps and malaise traps and compare insect communities. She expects to find more carnivorous insects in untreated wet meadows, and expects to find more herbivorous insects in treated locations given the increased abundance of herbaceous plant material. Cwelich said they intend this to be a long-term, more robust study than some of the preliminary insect comparisons for the wet meadow treatments. Reggiani also plans on looking at historical community composition.

BLM GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT UPDATE

The public meeting will be December 5, 2023 at 5:00-7:00 pm at the Gunnison Public Library, and a virtual session on December 12 2:00 – 3:30 pm. Waldner went over the GUSG RMPA Draft EIS. The draft EIS is available on the ePlanning website. Volume 1 is the EIS, and Volume 2 has the appendices and maps. The EIS includes all BLM surface and subsurface federal mineral estate (about 2.8 million acres) in Colorado and Utah. There are occupied habitat management areas (OHMA) with suitable continuous habitat; unoccupied habitat management areas (UHMA) with areas outside occupied habitat that were likely formerly occupied and may contain some appropriate habitat; linkage-connectivity areas (LCMA) that have potential for connectivity and movement between populations; and adjacent non-habitat which includes areas within a 1-mile or 4-mile buffer (depending on which alternative) that are not contributing to the annual life-cycle of GUSG. The 1- and 4- mile buffers were chosen related to the distances to nests. The majority of birds nest within 4 miles of occupied habitat so it would be more conservative, whereas the 1 mile buffer would protect some use. 57:42left

There are 5 alternatives. Alternative A is current/no action alternative, which includes the 11 existing Resource Management Plans and consultation process with the USFWS. Alternative B excludes threats in the decision area including livestock grazing and would include the designation of all proposed Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). Alternative C includes minimizing threats to varying degrees rather than eliminating uses primarily in occupied habitats, and no ACECs would be designated. Alternative D is the preferred alternative and would provide a more balanced approach of resource uses. This would exclude, avoid, and minimize threats within occupied habitat, and avoid and minimize threats in unoccupied habitats. They would improve linkage-connectivity habitats. They would include a subset of ACECs. Alternative E is specific to the Gunnison Basin and reflects the Candidate Conservation Agreement, and would only apply to occupied and unoccupied habitat in the Gunnison Basin.

The RMPA preferred alternative would include a disturbance (removal of vegetation/ loss of habitat) cap of 2% in OHMA and a separate 3% disturbance cap in UHMA. There would not be a density cap on energy infrastructure (currently or with the preferred alternative, but is included in Alternative B), which was not considered to be a primary threat in Gunnison. There were disturbance timing limitations from March 1- July 15. Buffers for authorized uses would be 1 mile to 3.1 miles. Livestock grazing would be continued and evaluated with permit renewals to evaluate the duration of use and threshold habitat objectives (grass cover, forb diversity, sagebrush cover). Salable minerals (except existing gravel pits), non-energy leasable minerals, wind energy, and solar energy would be 100% excluded from OHMA areas with the preferred alternative. The BLM will close many areas to leasing in OHMA, and would also have no surface occupancy (NSO) overlapping many of these areas.

There were 15 ACEC nominations. There were several in the Gunnison Basin that moved forward in consideration, including an existing GUSG ACEC for the Crawford population, Dry Creek Basin (San Miguel Population), Sapinero Mesa, Sugar Creek, and Chance Gulch. Alternative D (preferred) would have 4 new designated ACECs and 3 existing ACECs with updated management (South Beaver Creek, Antelope Creek, and the Crawford ACEC).

The public comment period is November 9 through February 6. The next step will be to release the final EIS in summer 2024, followed by a 30-day protest period and a Record of Decision/Approved RMPA in fall 2024. Kaminsky explained that the final EIS may not include the draft alternatives exactly as outlined today; the final EIS may include a combination of parts of proposed alternatives. Phillips explained that substantive public comments would provide relevant information and rationale, and vague questions or preferences will not be incorporated.

WET MEADOW RESTORATION UPDATE

Cwelich reminded the committee that 80% of wildlife use wet meadows but only 2% of the Basin is currently wetland. The Nature Conservancy and other partners in the valley started the wet meadow projects 10 years ago. This year they focused on doing site prioritization in the last year, and they had the multi-jurisdictional conservation crew through BLM, CPW, and UGRWCD that accomplished wet meadow treatments (96 site assessments for future prioritization, over 200 wetland assessments, and 30 spring

assessments). They also did cheatgrass treatments, seeding, road decommissioning, and juniper removal. Wet meadows partners will meet on December 6 to review site assessments and consider prioritization for the next 5-10 years. They also completed 127 structures (36 on CPW, 30 on tribal lands, 61 on private lands). They also did maintenance on 160 existing structures. The BLM is supposed to have a new hydrologist by the end of 2024, and the USFS is considering hiring a new hydrologist and is moving to hire a new wildlife biologist. They had 5 volunteer days with HCCA, CPW, WCU, and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. They did 14 workshops to teach how to do wet meadows restoration and the benefits.

Cwelich went over grants and said each structure cost approximately \$500-600. There were remaining funds in several grants.

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.

12-20-23	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
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The December meeting will be cancelled. January 17, 2024 will be the next meeting.

ADJOURN: The November 15, 2023 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:57 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District