

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES  
January 17, 2024**

The January 17, 2024 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)  
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large  
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large (Gunnison Trails)  
Jessica Young, Research and Education At-Large (Western Colorado University, WCU)  
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)  
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)  
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)  
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)  
Jon Kaminsky, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

**Non-Voting Members**

Patrick Magee, Research and Education At-Large (WCU)  
Steffanie Chain, Public At-Large  
Kathy Brodhead, BLM

**Others in the Audience:**

John Scott, Scott RMS  
Petar Simic, Happy Habitats Gunnison  
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies  
Jessica Frey, NPS  
Brian Stevens, BLM  
Cheryl Cwelich, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District  
Ryan Romero, BLM  
Sam Stanley, USFS  
Melissa Jernakoff, BLM

**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:** Chairperson Seward called the January 17, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:08 AM.

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

**AGENDA APPROVAL:** Moved: by Navy and seconded by Smith to approve the January 17, 2024 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF NOVEMBER 15, 2023 MEETING MINUTES:** Moved: by Navy and seconded by Smith to approve the November 15, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

## COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Navy attended the Crested Butte Film Festival and saw a film from Daniel Curry that did range-riding for cattle, and had an organization called Guarding the Respective Interests of Predators & Humans (griphs.com, 509-680-9112). This organization works with wolf conflict mitigation.

Seward said CPW did release 10 wolves in northern Grand County at the end of December, and the wolves are all alive and staying out of trouble. CPW kept the release site confidential to protect the wolves. Seward said 6 females and 4 males were reintroduced so there should be high reproductive capability, but they are individuals from separate packs rather than translocating a whole pack so it is unclear if they will stay together or disperse. Gunnison is still a Phase 2 relocation site, but currently there is no source of additional wolves identified for 2024 translocations.

Blair finished the Biological Opinion (BO) for the USFS Forest Plan Revision and is working on the BO for the BLM Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA).

Blair, Simic, Stevens, Brodhead, and the Gunnison BLM have the Open Range Consulting cheatgrass layers. Brodhead said she was impressed with the product, which Open Range Consulting says has 78% accuracy. She was alarmed by the extent of the infestations they were previously unaware of, and motivated to work cross-boundary with several private landowners that have cheatgrass infestations. The data from Open Range Consulting has half-meter pixels that are assigned a percentage of cheatgrass cover, and Brodhead created a point layer of presence/absence per pixel, and then calculated a density map as a way to visualize where the “worst” cheatgrass infestations were. Some areas of importance included Woods Gulch, North Parlin, Waunita Park, South Beaver Creek, Pinecrest, Sapinero Mesa, Sewell Gulch, and Cochetopa Canyon. Brodhead thought the areas that have been treated in the last few years show less cheatgrass than expected. Stevens thought the map could help inform monitoring programs, and wanted to attempt to germinate seed in the soils as part of monitoring, to determine if cheatgrass seed banks were present in previously treated areas. The BLM has a Field Maps layer of cheatgrass, and their in-person inventory matched well with the Open Range Consulting layer. Simic reported that last year they treated a little over 100 acres for free on private lands, and they will reach out to private landowners in high infestation areas especially if they could coordinate cross-boundary treatments. Other layers include percent perennial grass cover, bare ground, conifer, sagebrush, etc. The field work that Open Range Consulting had to do for this work in the basin was the most expensive part of the mapping, and in the future, it would not be as expensive to remap the area so Blair, Simic, and Stevens would like to remap the basin every three years or so to monitor the effectiveness of treatments and see new areas of concern. Seward was surprised not to see more cheatgrass along the highways, and Simic thought it could be because of the sites Open Range Consulting used to train the machine learning, because the ground-truthing was done farther away from the highway at higher elevation sites.

Brodhead updated that the public comment period for the BLM RMPA is open until February 6. The contractors working on the document will review and incorporate the comments into the proposed preferred alternative. The BLM has until March 6 to synthesize and incorporate comments. Headquarters leadership will review, followed by State, field office, and cooperators on April 4. Navy asked about alternatives, and Brodhead explained that the Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) Alternative (E) was included because the CCA is more like a guideline that the Gunnison Basin has been following, so it shows what the field office has been doing and allows the BLM to use parts of the CCA management in the preferred alternative. Brodhead said alternatives are designed to show the range of possibilities for management with conservative and less conservative options, sometimes based on the early scoping comments.

Brodhead also updated that the BLM nationally has been working on the Rejuvra Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and the local field office has been working on an Environmental Assessment (EA) to tier off of the EIS as soon as it is released, likely in March or April. The local EA would allow the local field office to use Rejuvra and Milestone. The Tres Rios and Uncompahgre Field Offices are not as close to being able to approve an EA for satellite populations. Currently the South Beaver Creek Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) does not allow for the use of Rejuvra or any herbicides. Young thought input and comments from the Strategic Committee on the RMPA could potentially be important to allowing the use of herbicide in the South Beaver Creek ACEC to address cheatgrass for sage-grouse habitat

improvements and also to prevent cheatgrass from damaging the ecosystem of the Gunnison Skiff Milkvetch. The Gunnison Field Office Resource Management Plan (RMP) will be completed after the Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMPA, and internal guidance is that the RMP will address the use of herbicide at the South Beaver Creek ACEC. Simic and Seward will work together to draft a comment letter for the RMPA and circulate the letter via email in time to submit during public comment. Blair noted that Table 2.20 (page 2-89) shows that removing language about the restriction of herbicide in the South Beaver Creek ACEC is a preferred alternative. **Moved:** by Smith and seconded by Kugler that the Committee authorizes Seward and Simic to draft a comment letter on behalf of the Strategic Committee to support the use of herbicide in the South Beaver Creek ACEC (supporting Alternative D of Table 2.20), with the opportunity to raise concerns via email. No email response will be considered a vote in support of the submission of the letter during public comment. Motion passes unanimously.

Rummel reminded everyone to submit their applications for At-Large committee membership and/or have their agency submit a letter reaffirming their regular and alternate appointments for approval by the Board of County Commissioners as soon as possible.

Vasquez said the USFS currently has the staff wildlife biologist position open, and they are working to refill it via an open continuous recruitment announcement on USA Jobs. They are unable to hire from that until they get approval from the Regional Office to be able to pull a certificate list of applicants. In the meantime, Sarah Lowe is working in the Ranger District office, with assistance from Vasquez. Vasquez will remain on the committee as the alternate to Funka (regular) during the transition period as they hire a new biologist. Vasquez is working with Magee and another professor at WCU and an incoming graduate student to address sage-grouse habitat monitoring.

#### **LEK ACCESS PHOTOGRAPHY APPLICATION(S)**

Seth Owens is a photographer that has applied to visit a lek. Owens is with Pheasants Forever out of North Dakota and has shared professional photos and articles (included in the meeting packet). Normally the I&E committee would examine applications after they are due February 1, but Owens wanted to arrange travel earlier if possible. Seward said in the past they only accept 2 photographers (2 mornings each on private lands to prevent photographers from easily returning on public lands). There are two other potential applications that could be submitted by February 1. The photographers are required to share some photos with the I&E committee. Magee was supportive of proposals, such as Owens', that contribute to conservation. This application says photos would be used for potentially a coffee table book, and digital and magazine articles. Navy asked about reviewing text in any book pre-publication to ensure that the text is factually accurate. Caloger thought the lek location should not be disclosed and thought most photography equipment has geo-locations. Smith suggested drafting a contract for lek photography, including not geo-referencing the photos, getting landowner permission for referencing the ranch name, etc. but a contract would likely have to be addressed later. **Moved:** by Navy and seconded by Magee to tentatively approve Owens' application contingent on having only one other photography application by February 1, with the opportunity for Owens to have the Strategic Committee proof-read his writing for accuracy, and to move the photography deadline to January 1 so these applications can be discussed in the January meeting. Motion passed unanimously.

#### **USFS FOREST PLAN REVISION UPDATE**

The Forest Plan Revision went through the objection period August through October. The team is reviewing all objections and is working on responding to them, and there will be an objection resolution meeting the week of February 20. The USFS anticipates having a final Record of Decision this spring, contingent on the objection resolution process and timeline. They received the Biological Opinion on the Forest Plan Revision from the USFWS in December, available online on the GMUG Forest Plan website.

## STEWARDSHIP AWARD PRESENTATION

Magee presented the annual Gunnison Sage-Grouse Stewardship Award. The award has been given out annually since 2001 by the Strategic Committee to recognize individuals with exemplary work on sage-grouse and habitat conservation. Brian Stevens of the BLM will receive it this year for his work in cheatgrass treatments in sage-grouse habitat, helping get a cheatgrass coordinator hired, working on wet meadows projects, organizing seed collections, working with the CSFS nursery to grow seed, fuels projects, and more. Stevens thanked everyone for working with him on creative ways to solve problems. Kaminsky also wanted to recognize Stevens for his ability to find funding and get projects accomplished.

## PUBLIC COMMENTS

Tarantino said that Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (BCR) was hiring an employee in Montrose similar to Tarantino's former position with BCR, so contact her for distribution of the announcement which should also be available on the BCR website.

Seward mentioned the first meeting of the Raven Subcommittee will be January 29 10:00 am – 11:00 am at CPW's conference room and online. They will go over subcommittee objectives, current conservation actions to reduce subsidies, and making connections with newer partners.

Brodhead will be going on detail in the California state office likely by next meeting, but the new BLM biologist will fill in as well.

**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.**

02-21-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
03-20-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
04-17-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
05-15-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
06-19-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
07-17-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
08-21-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
09-18-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
10-16-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
11-20-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room
12-18-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor meeting room

**ADJOURN:** The January 17, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:52 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District