

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
MARCH 20, 2024**

The March 20, 2024 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)
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large (Gunnison Trails)
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Petar Simic, Research and Education At-Large
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Liz With, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Amber Wilson, Saguache County

Non-Voting Members

Jessica Frey, National Park Service (NPS)
Brandon Diamond, CPW
Virginia Adams, Saguache County

Others in the Audience:

Ari Yamaguci, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD)
Cheryl Cwelich, UGRWCD
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Paul Rivera, WCU Center for Public Lands
Codi Prior, CPW
Ben Prior, CPW
Clayton BonDurant, CPW
Brinnen Carter, NPS
John Hare, HCCA
Sabrina Lucero, WCU

Staff Members Present:

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

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the March 20, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:07 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Smith to approve the March 20, 2024 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF FEBRUARY 21, 2024 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Blair to approve the February 21, 2024 meeting minutes without amendment. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Smith reported that the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) has approved most of the appointments and applications for the membership. There are no current regular or alternate members for Saguache County or for Development At-Large approved by the BOCC.

Brodhead reported that Rachel Miller will be leaving Gunnison. Range specialists Tara de Valois is retiring and Andrew Bryant is leaving this spring, and the BLM will be unlikely to hire a new range specialist by summer. Brodhead will be starting a detail April 7 but will be working remotely. Russ Japuntich will also be leaving in May for a remote job but Andy Stokes is the new wildlife biologist for the BLM and will be available at the Gunnison Field Office. The BLM has put out 11 acoustic recorders, 9 on historic leks and 2 in areas that seem likely to be a lek to try to find if there is attendance on historic leks. One site that was not a known lek seems to have active displaying males, but Seward said it would require in person visits for a couple of years to determine lek status. The sound analysis will be done by Institute for Bird Populations, which will automate the analysis rather than having someone listening to hours of recordings.

Cwelich will be leaving UGRWCD to work remotely for the River Network. UGRWCD will be coordinating the transition for wet meadows leadership in the next few weeks.

Navy said HCCA has hired a new advocacy director (John Hare formerly with the USFS).

Seward introduced Ben Prior as this year's Lek Count Coordinator, who started yesterday and will be contacting people to start lek counts on April 1. They would like counters to use Survey 123, rather than hard copy data sheets. Survey 123 should reduce potential error from transferring data, and will be visible real time for CPW to monitor when counts have been completed. CPW will provide information on how to download and use Survey 123 soon. CPW does need more volunteers at the Wuanita Watchable Wildlife Site. Previously WCU students did daily counts there and led the commercial tours to the lek but there are not enough students this year. CPW is taking the payment and coordinating the site. Navy brought up the long-term management of the site, and there is potential for another organization to take over. The site coordination is a significant workload.

Blair reported the 5-year review has started, including the Species Status Assessment, to be completed August 2024. Blair needs new data such as recovery actions updated in the Conservation Efforts Database, lek count data, etc. The Recovery Implementation Strategy workshop for the Gunnison Basin is April 18 at the Gunnison Public Library. This year will include updates to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding and projects, and an ecosystem tool from USGS to create a long-term vision for restoration efforts across land ownerships. The USFWS is also working with BCR on cheatgrass treatment planning including the prioritization map using the layers from Open Range Consulting. The BLM Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment submitted a Biological Assessment, and Blair is working on the Biological Opinion related to that. The USFS Forest Plan Revision Biological Opinion was finished at the end of December, but the Record of Decision has not yet been signed yet. The USGS does have access to the Habitat Prioritization Tool which can be used potentially in the cheatgrass treatment prioritization. Seward said that the Committee had discussed updating the HPT last summer, and it would be good to update that this year. Simic asked about updating the HPT to include Open Range Consulting vegetation metrics and Seward thought there may be potential. Simic proposed using the Open Range Consulting vegetation cover layers in comparison to the Rangewide Conservation Plan to identify areas that meet biological objectives and those that do not. Yamaguchi talked about using the HPT Tier 1 map to prioritize areas for wet meadows assessments.

With reported that NRCS has record level funding through BIL and Inflation Reduction Act. She recommended getting the word out to people that could qualify for Farm Bill programs (CSP and EQIP). She also talked about the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), which no longer requires a funding match and funding can be used for private and public conservation projects. RCPP should have a request for proposals very soon. NRCS gets line-item funding for CSP and EQIP for sage-grouse conservation projects, but some of these funds get sent back to national headquarters annually and reapportioned out to other priorities. Especially CSP needs more sage-grouse funds to be used. NRCS staffing was a major challenge in the past, but they are working to increase staffing levels statewide. NRCS has a State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) which informs funding decisions and policy decisions

that impact funding priorities across the state. Five subcommittees, including a wildlife subcommittee, bring recommendations to the full STAC's consideration, and someone from the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee could participate as a regular representative on STAC. Caloger asked about what might keep agricultural producers from accepting NRCS funds, and With said EQIP is a reimbursable program primarily used for structural practices (such as wildlife habitat management, low-tech process based restoration, etc.). They are incentive rates which are established at approximately 50% of the estimated costs (or up to 75% of costs for sage-grouse). For CSP, annual payments are made for meeting a threshold of management and then going into higher management levels. Seward brought up the potential difference in public relations coverage for Gunnison versus Greater sage-grouse, and With said that funding is broadly marketed for both species, but is earmarked for individual species. Diamond said RCPP could potentially be used to buy a truck and trailer for carcass management and pay for a technician to perform the work, and Smith explained that CDOT has been difficult to engage with carcass management for roadkill. With said there is an RCPP initiated in Montana but with activities planned across several western states including Colorado. This project will potentially include carcass management as early as fiscal year 2025, and Matt Collins in Salida will be managing the Colorado portion of the project. Smith said Hannah Cranor Kersting from CSU-Extension is interested in helping with agricultural carcass disposal and Smith said CDOT may get on board if agricultural producers are engaged.

Monday March 25 at 10:00 am will be the next Raven Subcommittee meeting at the CPW office.

DESIGNING A WINTER ROADKILL SURVEY PROTOCOL TO STANDARDIZE AND INCREASE EFFICIENCY OF CURRENTLY USED METHODS

Navy recommended the book *Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet* by Ben Goldfarb about roadkill in wildlife. Seward suggested a community event with the author coming to the library, and Carter said he thought there could be funding from NPS for an event like that.

Rivera presented on his MEM project. He wanted to identify wildlife collision hotspots on Highway 50 and Highway 135, where corridors could be beneficial. He wanted to test a survey protocol that could be adopted by CDOT and CPW, and collect baseline roadkill data to compare roadkill rates. Rivera has experimented with different driving speeds during the survey, and he records covariates such as start and stop time, date and time, weather, location, driving speed, time of observations, species, sex, age of animal, mortality cause, if animal touched pavement, side of road animal was located on, animal visibility from the road, image of a carcass, etc. Surveys are done once per week and take about 5-6 hours to cover 152 miles. Rivera noted that ravens were frequently on the carcasses, so Rivera started recording numbers of scavenging birds present at each carcass.

This year, there have been 67 roadkill deer and 31 elk from January 1 to March 18, and ravens have been present on about one third of those carcasses and magpies have been present at about 13% of the roadkill carcasses. Ravens have been present on 42% of elk roadkill and only 28% on deer carcasses. Rivera mapped where ravens have been present on roadkill carcasses. For carcasses where raven numbers were observed and counted, there was an average of 11 ravens per carcasses for elk and 4.5 ravens for deer.

Rivera found 40 roadkills on the north side of the highways, 4 on the east, 53 on the south, and 1 on the west side of highways.

Brodhead asked if Rivera records numbers of ravens after the first instance he finds a roadkill, and Rivera said all funding is out of his own pocket so he is marking carcasses with tree paint and not repeating observations at any carcass a second time. Brodhead asked about incorporating a viewshed analysis because blind corners probably play a role in where roadkills occur. Smith suggested finding a way to incorporate snowpack because big game foraging patterns change based on snowpack.

Navy asked if the data could contribute to the location and funding for overpasses and underpasses. Navy suggested that could be an RCPP topic, and With agreed especially if some of the crossing hotspots were on private land, especially with the intersection of ravens and sage-grouse. With did say that easements may impact the locations of some potential crossings.

BonDurant thought it would be useful to have cameras on carcasses to understand the frequency of raven visits on carcasses. BonDurant talked about the West Slope Prioritization Study (WSPS), where CPW and CDOT collaborated to examine variables impacting roadkill across Colorado from 2006-2015 and used the data to prioritize sections of roads where roadkill could be minimized by installing wildlife crossings. The top 5% of high priority road sections on the west slope do not include any segments in the Gunnison Basin, but there are some segments in the next highest 5% (segments near Sargents, Blue Mesa, Mitzels Green Acres) in the Gunnison Basin. However, it may take years before CDOT addresses the top 5% priority areas, let alone anything in the Gunnison Basin.

BonDurant showed a heat map from GPS collar data of elk migration that indicated several hot spots for highway crossings. BonDurant noted that the WSPS 2007-2008 data from Colorado State Patrol and CDOT showed very few roadkill mortalities. Navy suggested the feeding program might have baited deer away from the road, and BonDurant believed feeding could have reduced mortality but the mortalities are still underrepresented. The same occurred in the 2016-2017 winter. The WSPS study used data attached to a mile marker, but sometimes CDOT does not record the mile marker (frequently underreporting the mile markers in 2018-2019). 40% of the deer data for Gunnison in the WSPS was not usable because there was no mile marker attached to the mortality, including 49% of known deer roadkill in the study from 2016-2023. Other counties in the study more frequently had mile marker data attached and therefore more mortality data, which may have elevated the priority of other areas.

BonDurant pointed to several other projects that have done feasibility studies to assess roadkill mortality, including Rocky Mountain Wild in the East Vail Pass area, and Rocky Flats. East Vail Pass brought in significant funding and partnerships, and eventually CDOT ended up prioritizing that section over some of the top 5% projects from the WSPS. BonDurant thought it was important to continue roadkill monitoring and potentially implement camera traps to determine exact crossing locations, continue collecting GPS collar data, and form partnerships and community support can drive interest further than data.

Smith asked if wolf reintroduction could impact funding, and BonDurant had pointed out that scavengers are frequently also hit by vehicles when feeding on roadkill. BonDurant did not know if or when wolves might be factored into the WSPS, and Smith thought that could be a useful tool for community support. Navy thought another bad winter could also drive community support.

BonDurant showed a camera study that Blecha had implemented at Coldharbour. They had observed a potential crossing location in the heat map from GPS collar data at the intersection of Highway 114 and Highway 50, and CPW put out cameras to assess exactly where animals are crossing. The cameras show more precise crossing locations.

Carter thought the NPS may be able to do a second feasibility study in Curecanti. Curecanti received notice from their national Wildlife Transportation Coordinator that they could apply for grants in the \$50-75k range to do feasibility studies like Rocky Flats area. This is important to mitigate wildlife vehicle collisions between Middle Bridge and the east side of the Blue Canyon, to reduce carcass subsidies for corvids, and to address the NP Sage Initiative to preserve and quantify the benefits of maintaining sagebrush habitat. They need to have a draft project proposal to the Region by March 29, and he wanted support from CPW, CDOT, and the community. He was interested in heat map data, internal hot spot data, and they could potentially incorporate camera trap data. Carter requested preliminary support from the Strategic Committee and other agencies. Carter thought the money would be used for a study through CPW and/or WCU such as extending Rivera's study and possibly expanding it to include potential mitigation. Smith proposed the Strategic Committee could draft a letter of support and circulate it for Committee review, and submit it to NPS before their deadline. **Moved:** by Smith and seconded by With to have Rummel draft a letter of support for Carter for his project proposal. The motion passed unanimously. Childers reported that the March 29 regional level does not need the letter of support, so the motion was retracted and the letter will be circulated prior to the April meeting with time for feedback from the Committee.

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.

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

ADJOURN: The March 20, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:16 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District