

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES  
June 12, 2024**

The June 12, 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)  
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large (Gunnison Trails)  
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)  
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large  
Petar Simic, Research and Education At-Large  
Matthew Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

**Non-Voting Members**

Jessica Frey, National Park Service (NPS)

**Others in the Audience:**

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies  
Aleshia Rummel, National Park Service (NPS)

**Staff Members Present:**

Ben Prior, 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 June 12, 2024, meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:10 AM.

**DETERMINATION OF QUORUM:** Seward confirmed that a quorum was not present. Only seven voting members present.

**AGENDA APPROVAL:** Moved: Agenda approved. Motion carried unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF APRIL 17, 2024, MEETING MINUTES:** Edits to meeting minutes:

Page three, 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph, road will not be opened till Friday, May 17<sup>th</sup>.

Page three, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph, 2<sup>nd</sup> sentence, change wording to “would be a loss of Gunnison sage grouse conservation support”.

Page three, 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph, last sentence, “They had several outraged citizens plowing County Road 25 and trying to get through seasonally locked gates”.

Have to wait to approve meeting minutes until next meeting in July.

**COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS**

Seward was in a call with Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) personnel on Friday, May 31<sup>st</sup> regarding mitigation for County Road (CR) 26 reopening. During the call they discussed potential impacts and disturbances to Gunnison sage-grouse (GUSG) during the 2024 breeding season. These impacts included increased noise levels due to traffic and work on CR 26. Disturbance to leking. Seward thanks the NPS for comments on leks along CR 26. A formal consultation between CDOT and USFWS regarding CR 26 is occurring and some form of mitigation will likely occur. Some form of mitigation will occur along CR 26. Mitigation ideas discussed included: spraying cheat grass along CR 26, wet meadow restoration work in the areas around CR 26, juniper removal in the area. Acquiring private land and/or establishing conservation easements on private land parcels adjacent to CR

26 sage-grouse leks was not discussed. These could be options depending on mitigation budget. Mitigation budget was not discussed. Next step is to measure noise levels at leks along CR 26 while traffic is going by to determine how much noise levels increase compared to ambient noise levels. This will give a good metric to determine disturbance amount to leks along CR 26, since there is scientific literature that shows increased noise influences sage-grouse.

Seward discussed the 2024 CR 26 lek counts. Two lek count periods occurred before the bridge closure and two lek count periods occurred after the bridge closure. After the bridge closure, two leks saw an increase in high male counts (HMC), two leks decreased in HMC, and one lek had no HMC change. Seward believes the HMCs observed are not a good metric to demonstrate the CR 26 traffic disturbance impact on GUSG, but still needs to consider them as an indicator. During lek counts along CR 26 it was observed that birds would hunker down in response to traffic and would flush due to dust from traffic. Next step is for Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and USFWS to monitor noise levels. No set dates on when this will occur.

Simic asked about monitoring nesting and successful brood rearing in the general CR 26 area. Nate said there is not a direct way to do so. The only way is with GPS transmitters on GUSG hens. May not be socially acceptable to the community. Must spotlight at night to capture birds and attach transmitters. This causes a fair amount of disturbance to GUSG. Seward did not want to go that route due to public reception. Next spring's lek count numbers will give some idea to 2024 brood rearing success.

Simic asked if chicks would use same lek that their parents used. Seward said chicks will commonly come back within 100 meters to nest in same areas where they were hatched. There is seasonal generational learning among GUSG.

Simic asked how many years it would take to see the impact on the population from one year of foreign nesting success. Seward said one bad nesting year would show its effect on the population quickly. The uranium mine clean up traffic did impact grouse population in area where the mining project was occurring. The traffic lasted multiple years and the Chance Gulch leks decreased in bird use and never fully recovered. This occurred over 25 years ago, and no rebound has occurred for the Chance Gulch leks. Landfill and residential development near the Chance Gulch leks also have an impact.

Vasquez asked if an extended closure on CR 26 for next year is part of the mitigation discussion. Seward said this is an idea for mitigation. Frey asked about keeping BLM side roads closed along CR 26 until 2024 hunting season. Seward said BLM would like concrete jersey barriers placed in front of BLM side roads. Frey said it may be a bad year to conduct wet meadow projects in the CR 26 area due to large disturbance amount already occurring from traffic. Seward agreed and said those projects should be postponed this year.

Vasquez observed that people aren't thinking about the impact of CR 26 traffic has towards wildlife. People are saying the road is nice, etc. Vasquez said that messages to the public regarding the impact on wildlife by CR 26 traffic need to be continued to increase awareness that wildlife is being affected and why it is important.

Navy said she asked Gunnison County at another meeting what would happen to CR 26 once the bridge is repaired. The county told her they would roughen CR 26 up a bit to make it harder to drive on. Seward said the condition of CR 26 has noticeably decreased the last couple of times he has used it. Seward explained that during the CR 26 mitigation call CDOT was planning on addressing CR 26 road erosion.

Simic asked if CDOT would implement grass restoration along CR 26 to offset current impacts. Seward said that is being discussed through the formal consultation process regarding CR 26 mitigation. Seward said that CDOT increasing their carcass removal efforts along CR 26 was mentioned during the May 31st call. He said he would like more emphasis put on direct GUSG habitat restoration projects instead.

Vasquez said the GMUG's revised forest plan is scheduled to be signed Friday, June 14<sup>th</sup> and goes into effect three weeks after, around July 14<sup>th</sup>. It has taken seven years to get to this point. The wildlife management areas designated by the plan applies to 28% of GMUG, roughly 334,000 acres. These wildlife

management areas often overlap with GUSG critical habitat. Wildlife management areas within GMUG help maintain habitat connectivity, maintain migration corridors, and cap route densities and new trail development. The plan has a standard that commits the forest service to following the recovery limitation strategy for GUSG.

Vasquez said he submitted a request for \$75,000 from the Mule Deer Foundation for wet meadow restoration work. The funds would help support existing wet meadow sites within the Gunnison and Grand Valley ranger districts. The Mule Deer Foundation has a keystone agreement with the forest service and funds from this agreement can be applied for by individual forests. The \$75,000 would contribute to continued contracting with BioLogic, purchasing rock for wet meadow projects, crew support, and setting up events related to wet meadows.

Frey said the National Park Service (NPS) has keystone initiative for sagebrush preservation. Gunnison Basin is considered a priority landscape, Frey and NPS looking for collaborative projects. This keystone initiative wants partner projects. Projects need to be proposed in the next couple of weeks. The deadline is June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Frey also said there is already 1.1 million dollars coming to parks in the west for sagebrush ecosystems. The NPS has a grazing management plan in the works for Black Canyon and Curecanti. Frey introduced Rummel as the new environmental protection specialist for the NPS.

### **CHEATGRASS COORDINATOR HIRING**

Simic said Cheatgrass Coordinator will be replaced. Updated contract/job description. Don't know when it will be posted to the public. Seward said Liz wants to run the position past the board of county commissioners meeting on June 24th.

Simic said Cheatgrass Pull Day was a success. Around 50 people attended and 575lbs cheatgrass pulled across Gunnison. Simic said he will spray pulled areas. Noticed cheatgrass was not present in sprayed areas from last year.

Simic mentioned a contract with Oregon based company Silhouette to treat private land in the Gunnison Basin this fall. The contract includes land to treat on Pinecrest Ranch, Bob Robbin's ranch, and Double Heart Ranch. Bob Robbin's ranch has a large amount of cheatgrass to treat. Contract with company in Oregon to treat land in the fall. Did not see much cheatgrass on Double Heart. Some questions on the open range map accuracy. Good year for cheatgrass, seen a lot of it lately. Red Creek project on bid for BLM spraying.

### **UPDATE SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

Executive Subcommittee: Nate Seward as chair, Liz Smith as vice chair, Liz Width as secretary

Technical Subcommittee: Vasquez recommends someone else to take the position of chair. Maybe Aleisha Rummel? Needs approval from supervisor. Suzie Parker: gone, Liz Width will stay, Kathy Brodhead will stay, Tara is gone, Nate Seward will stay, Thersa Childers will stay, Pat McGee will stay, John Scott will stay, Aleisha Rummel will stay, Witt Blair is gone. Matt Vasquez is willing to stay as chair if needed. Vasquez would like to stay on the subcommittee. Vasquez said Sarah Lowe and/or Ilam Duggin could join the subcommittee. Vasquez will talk with them first and they will need approval from Dale.

I and E Subcommittee: Jessica Young said she wants to step back, doesn't want to be chair. Kugler might be able to chair the subcommittee, would like to meet with subcommittee members. This subcommittee hasn't met in years. Navy said maybe make more outreach related things happen through this subcommittee. The NPS has full education staff, some staff might be interested. Seward said the subcommittee can work on motorized road closures and GUSG educational poster. Next festival/summit. Navy said GUSG Summit was two years ago. Rummel nominated Liz Smith and Ben Prior as members. Ben Prior accepted. Reach out to Jessica Young for new chair possibilities. This subcommittee doesn't meet too often. Busy when a sage grouse summit/festival is scheduled. Navy will stay on committee.

No quorum can't finalize subcommittee members today. Next meeting will finalize committees.

## LEK COUNT UPDATE

Prior gave update on the 2024 lek count season. The 2024 Crawford lek counts had a HMC of nine, which up from 2023 HMC of six. The 2024 Crawford high female count (HFC) was eight, up from five in 2023. The 2024 Crawford GUSG population estimate is 44. This is an increase from 28 in 2023. The Crawford population is still trending downward.

For the Gunnison Basin 83 leks were visited in 2024, resulting in a HMC of 646, a decrease of 159 from the 805 males counted in 2023. The HFC was 216, a decrease of 139 birds from the 355 females counted in 2023. Population estimates for the Gunnison Basin were calculated using formulas presented in the Gunnison Basin local conservation plan (1997) and the Gunnison Sage-grouse (GUSG) Rangeland Conservation Plan (RCP 2005). Based on the local conservation plan formula, the minimum population estimate for the Gunnison Basin population is 2,583, a decrease of 637 birds from 2023. Based on the RCP 2005 formula, the minimum population estimate for the Gunnison Basin is 3,169 birds, a decrease of 780 birds from 2023.

The three-year HMC moving average for 2022–2024 is 744, a 0.81% change from the 2021–2023 HMC moving average of 738. Total number of active Lek Areas in 2024 was 37 with an average of 17.5 males per active Lek Area, down from 32.2 males in 2023. Male lek attendance peaked during the second count period (11-20 April). Female lek attendance peaked during the first count interval (1-10 April). The Doyleville, Gold Basin, Ohio Creek, Lost Canyon, and Spinero zones decreased in total numbers of males and females compared to 2023. In 2024, HMCs increased on 19 leks, 4 leks had the same number of males, and 31 leks decreased in the number of males observed compared to 2023. The HMC decreased 20.7% from 2023. Possible reasons for decrease, many new lek counters for 2024 season and grouse likely more disbursed during 2024 season compared to 2023.

## SETH OWENS' LEK PHOTOGRAPHY

Seward shared grouse photos taken by photographer Seth Owens. Seward took Seth Owens to several leks for grouse photograph opportunities.

## End of January for photo applications 2025

## RAVEN SUBSIDY SUBCOMMITTEE MEETIN SUMMARY

Seward gave a summary. The meeting was on May 20<sup>th</sup>. Talked about raven research with Emily Latta, looking at raven numbers in Crawford. Pat Magee doing bird point counts in Gunnison Basin with a grad student and getting transmitters on ravens to see travel throughout Gunnison Basin. Emily has money for a five-year project, funneling money through Texas A&M. Pat is keeping money at Western, and plans to start bird counts in fall. Green laser for Gunnison County landfill raven control is still a possibility. Meeting next Monday, 10 am at CPW office. Delta waterfowl membership will be discussed.

## 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.**

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
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**ADJOURN:** The June 12, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:00 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Ben Prior, Gunnison Conservation District