

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

The November 20, 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)  
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)  
Paul Mowery, Gunnison County Stockgrowers  
Matthew Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)  
Pat Magee, Research and Education At-Large (Western Colorado University, WCU)  
Thersa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)  
Andy Stokes, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)  
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large (Gunnison Trails)  
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large  
Liz With, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)  
Angela Trnka, USFWS

**Non-Voting Members**

Jessica Frey, NPS  
Liam Duggan, USFS  
Sarah Lowe, USFS  
Angela Trnka, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Brandon Diamond, CPW  
Aleshia Rummel, NPS

**Others in the Audience:**

Brian Brown, BLM  
John Scott, Private Consultant  
Kathy Griffin, CPW  
Cathie Pagano, Gunnison County  
Mike Pelletier, Gunnison County  
Jared Dunn, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute

**Staff Members Present:**

Misty Castillo, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department  
Ben Prior, Gunnison Conservation District  
Others present as listed in text.

**CALL TO ORDER:** Chairperson Seward called the November 20, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:01 AM.

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

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

**APPROVAL OF September 18, 2024 MEETING MINUTES:** Corrections for minutes pg.2 “Cross Bar”, pg.3 “3 have died”, pg.3 “Garfield, Eagle, and Pitkin counties” **Moved:** by Navy and seconded by Magee to approve the September 19 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

## **COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS**

Seward, reviewed 19 application for Gunnison CPW conservation biologist. Have narrowed down the 19 to 7 for interviews. None of these applicants have extensive experience with Gunnison sage grouse (GUSG), so whoever is hired will likely not chair this committee. Seward has asked and recommends Kathy Griffin to be the chair of the Gunnison Sage Grouse Strategic Committee. Griffin is open to being the chair in the interim and sees the committee as important. She will plan on being in person at most of the future meetings. Smith, elections for board members is scheduled for January but could do it in December.

Smith, thanks Magee for leading the hiring committee for the cheatgrass coordinator position. The job has been offered to Sarah Elzay, a professor at Ft. Hayes University. She has a strong agriculture research background and was deemed to be very qualified for the position by the hiring committee. She will be coming to Gunnison sometime in early February. Smith, temporary housing through the county is setup for Sarah and her family. Scott, thanks Pat for heading the hiring committee. Smith thinks the county funding for the position is solid for the next couple of years to sustain the position. The contract is a one-year contract for now, but funding is in good shape.

With, NRCS 2025 funding opportunities have been released. NRCS has a conservation practice to facilitate transportation of carcasses. This practice was primarily to address predator conflict. This practice will be an EQUIP contract with the NRCS, will have to go through the entire contract process. Must have an active contract that includes this practice. The producer would keep record of mortalities and receipts for dropping off at landfill. There is an established rate for carcass reimbursement. Smith, CDOT may not be able to remove carcasses for road side. With, the NRCS chief has allowed Colorado NRCS to fund projects related to animal migratory corridors within the state.

Vasquez, seasonal closure order for Flattop and Red Mountain area. This area is the biggest area of GUSG territory within Gunnison National Forest. The order will close the area to all human use from December 31 to July 15. This order is currently under review. Outreach will be important for the public, so they understand why this closure is happening. Livestock will still be allowed, will not affect grazing permits. The closure is for roughly 28,000 acres on Flattop and Red Mountain. It covers all GUSG critical habitat in these areas. Lowe, planning to put up signage to inform the public. Vasquez recommends trying to better inform the public of this closure. The shed season overlap will be challenging. Vasquez wants this first year to be an education year, but 2<sup>nd</sup> year would be more law enforcement heavy. Navy, asked about Smokey Bar Road and it being open. Vasquez confirmed that this road is part of the closure.

## **Habitat Prioritization Tool Overview and Discussion**

Scott, 2011 was when this Habitat Prioritization Tool (HPT) was first talked about, and the development started from there. The technical subcommittee was meeting monthly to develop this tool during 2011 and they brought the tool forward to the committee in 2012. It was developed as “Gunnison County’s tool”. Many layers are included in HPT such as lek buffers, powerlines, etc.

The last HPT update was in 2018 and was mostly updated with soil data and official lek statuses. Lots of agencies were involved in the initial development. Pelletier, this tool is vector based rather than raster based. This allows one to see what layers are touching and the constraints, and what is affecting the score.

This tool been used extensively by the county to determine how development should be managed in GUSG habitat. Seward, every application for building sent to the county is being put through this system. It has been an important tool in helping mitigate development in GUSG habitat. Tier 1 designates the most critical GUSG habitat within this tool. Mike pulled up an example of a contested area, where a building application was denied. All the different layers are added together in the tool to determine habitat score. Scott, HPT development started with soil maps to determine habitat types. With, spatial information that covered entire Gunnison Basin was important. This tool is a predicative tool but must be validated in person. An update

plan should be put forward with what should be updated. Things to possibly update: Brood rearing habitat, tree layer reduction impact, updated soil maps. Soil maps are accurate and representative of what the habitat should be. Scott, slope and aspect were also considered along with riparian areas. The addition of open range mapping for cheatgrass contains information on grasses and bare grounds and could be incorporated into the tool. Mike, LIDAR available for updates as well. Smith, RUMBLE vegetation layers could be incorporated into the tool.

Scott emphasized the importance of field verification. Seward, the technical subcommittee needs to meet to determine HPT updates. Seward has passed on lek statuses to Mike and those have been updated. New one mile buffer around leks may be applied to the HPT to see how this would change scores. The current HPT buffer around leks is 0.6 miles. Scott advises being careful of increasing the buffer to minimize overreach on private property. Cathie, this new buffer could impact the county immensely and would be hard to implement on the ground. With, when tool was developed, they wanted a way to show high quality habit and how development could impact these areas.

Scott, Cam Aldridge suggested highways (i.e. HWY 50 and 149) should have up to a two-mile buffer, but this was not accepted for the tool. Scott explained the Gunnison Rising development. Scott determined that the Gunnison Rising developmental imprint towards GUSG habitat was limited due to existing development in the area. Griffin, 0.6-mile buffer zone was based on disturbance to lek area. New research suggests a one-mile buffer is better for disturbance mitigation to leks. Seward, always try to find a compromise with the landowner for developments in sensitive GUSG areas. This involves lots of education and trying to steer development to more distrusted areas. Maybe have the one-mile buffer be identified in the HPT. Seward would like to see the one-mile buffer identified in the tool.

With, further discussion should be had at the technical subcommittee meetings. Smith, recreation impacts might be good to include in tool update. Pelletier, lots of long driveways have been mapped for 911 purposes. The next update will include these driveways. New housing can be added relatively easily. Pelletier has not mapped new recreation differences from 2011 to present day. New roads aren't completely mapped but has improved.

Navy, any data to GUSG response to 0.6-mile buffer? Seward, no formal before and after disturbance review on 0.6-mile buffer. With, scientific literature was used to back why layers are what they are. It was decided that recreation values were left out in the initial version because it was hard to quality. Seward doesn't recommend adding in a recreation/seasonal closure layer. The primary purpose of this tool is to guide land use within Gunnison County, not so much guide recreation on public lands. Adding recreation and seasonal closure layers may make tool more complicated than it should be. Smith, adding recreation layer in might have an impact on quality of habitat.

With, an encompassing weed map for the entire basin wasn't found for the 2018 HPT update so weeds were not included. Smith, they are mapped now. Pelletier, these can all be added to the tool see how they overlay and affect scores. Pelletier, it was found that 88% of bird location data fell within this tool's habitat tier mapping. Might add newer bird location data in next update.

Scott, HPT is helpful tool for weed treatment areas and other scenarios. Especially Tier 1 areas. Griffin, this tool shouldn't have certain things within the tool. Smith, tool could be more used to assist with other projects. Seward used this tool to identify potential conservation easement areas. Used to identify ACEC areas. Pelletier, basin wide stats were applied to this tool. Smith, board appointment renewals/elections are coming up in January 2025. Rummel, two-year appointment for committee membership and most people were renewed last year. Smith, two different components to future HPT updates; the easy GIS updates that Mike Pelletier can add (driveways, new houses, etc.) and recommendations on how scoring can be updated. Stokes, possibly increasing number of tiers for the HPT.

With asked if BLM and USFS were using the HPT for their work. Vasquez does use the tool to see where areas are critical GUSG habitat areas. Pelletier, the two-tier system used in HPT was used to hide lek locations. Stokes, BLM has used it to identify unauthorized routes to decommission. Vasquez, maybe include the one-mile buffer in the update, so it is visible. Everyone agrees that the technical subcommittee should proceed in meeting to discuss HPT updates. Mowery, go forward with updating the tool with new data but

leave the 0.6 buffer. Smith, motion for tech subcommittee update. Sue, motioned for update to HPT. With, amend the motion to Technical Subcommittee discuss what needs to be updated and bring results to full committee before finalizing updates. Seconded by Caloger. Motion carried unanimously.

**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.**

06-12-24	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	Canceled	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	Canceled	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 November 20, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:00 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Ben Prior, Gunnison Conservation District