

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
June 18, 2025**

The June 18, 2025 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:

Jonathan Houck, alternate, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Liz Smith, BOCC
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Matthew Vasquez, alternate, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Sarah Elzay, Gunnison County Cheatgrass Coordinator
Jessica Frey, alternate, National Park Service (NPS)
Paul Mowery, Stockgrowers
Angela Trnka, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Tim Kuegler, Gunnison Trails
Sarah Elzay, Gunnison County Cheatgrass Coordinator
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)

Non-Voting Members

Matthew Vasquez, USFS
Nathan Darnall, USFWS

Others in the Audience:

Miranda Middleton, CPW
John Scott, Private Consultant
Matt Holloran, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Mike Pelletier, Gunnison County
Sarah Lowe, USFS
David Baumgarten, Private Citizen
Tom McCracken, Saguache County Board of County Commissioners

Staff Members Present:

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

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Griffin called the June 18, 2025, meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:02 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Caloger to approve the June 18, 2025, agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Mowery to approve the May 21, 2025, meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

NOTE: Full meeting video recordings are available at the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee webpage ([LINK](#)).

DISCUSSION OF MEMO FROM GUNNISON COUNTY ATTORNEY

Smith discussed the memo that was prepared by Cathie Pagano and the Gunnison County Attorney to give input on the current Habitat Prioritization Tool (HPT) update being discussed. Any changes to the HPT recommended by the Strategic Committee will be finalized by Gunnison County's Board of County Commissioners. The goals of the HPT as laid out in the memo are:

- To minimize unnecessary burdens on private landowners.
- To provide land use predictability and transparency through data-based mapping.
- To reduce the risk or severity of future federal listing impacts by demonstration local engagement.

Darnall, the USFWS' 2024 five-year Gunnison sage grouse (GUSG) listing review was focused on changes that had occurred from 2019 to 2024 regarding GUSG. HPT wasn't mentioned because the review focused on things that changed from 2019 to 2024. The last HPT update occurred in 2018, which didn't fall in the review's time frame (2019-2024). The primary changes listed in the USFWS GUSG five-year review were the GUSG recovery plan, the annual GUSG RISK workshops, updated GUSG populations numbers, changes in GUSG leks, and cheatgrass/wet meadow work in GUSG habitat. New staff at USFWS were unaware of HPT at the time as well. Darnall, USFWS views the HPT as an important tool for GUSG conservation. USFWS involvement in GUSG reviews in Gunnison County is minimal due to Gunnison County's GUSG review process.

Smith expressed the importance of the three thresholds that HPT updates should meet. These thresholds are listed in the memo and are as follows:

- Justification must be expressly and demonstrably tied to land use impacts, expressly taking into account the factors listed in the LUR, particularly Section 11-106.
- Changes should reflect measurable, practical implications for permitting, zoning, or landowner decisions.
- Scientific rationale and support is both necessary and critical—any change to the HPT must be grounded in science and how it informs land use decisions. Given the multi-factor approach of the LUR, it further must be balanced with appropriate land use, agricultural and other public policy implications if community support and buy-in erodes. Moreover, the apparent fact that neither the Federal courts nor FWS have cited or relied upon the HPT as necessary, or even important, to protect the species could reduce the County's ability to protect and defend any changes to the HPT in litigation. See, e.g., *N. N.M. Stockman's Ass'n v. United States Fish & Wildlife Serv.*, 494 F. Supp. 3d 850, 1004 (D.N.M. 2020) (applying regulatory takings analysis to cattle grazing restrictions related to Endangered Species Act protections).

Smith believes that local community buy in is a very important factor when considering HPT updates.

Baumgarten discussed his experience with Gunnison County's role with GUSG when he served as Gunnison County's attorney. He questioned whether increasing the 0.6-mile lek buffer to a 1.0-mile buffer is a necessary component to the HPT update. He has read the literature regarding lek buffers and doesn't believe the literature supports a 1.0-mile lek buffer. He worries that changing the lek buffer to 1.0-mile buffer may bring unnecessary attention to GUSG. Landowners may take this change as too much.

Vasquez asked Baumgarten to explain his opinion that scientific literature does not support a 1.0-mile buffer around leks. Baumgarten interprets the scientific literature that he has read as not directly supporting a 1.0-mile lek buffer. Vasquez believes that any HPT update should be guided by science and that the proposed update is based on sound science. The U.S. Forest Service applies a 1.0 mile no disturbance buffer around leks. The BLM has a range of no disturbance buffers from 1.0 to 4.0 miles depending on the activity (mining, drilling, etc).

MINORITY REPORT FOR PROPOSED HPT UPDATE

Scott gave a presentation that focused on the 0.6-mile lek buffer vs the 1.0-mile lek buffer. Buffer distances were compared across several documents including the 1997 GUSG Recovery Plan, the 2024 GMUG

Forest Plan, and CPW's recommendations to minimize impact to wildlife. Scott showed several GID map layers with different buffers applied to certain types of development (houses, power lines, roads, etc.). The presentation also overviewed the tool's different habitat tiers and how past updates have affected these tiers.

Houck asked how much private property Tier 1 habitat is in conservation easements. Scott, over 50% of agricultural land in the Gunnison Basin is in conservation easement. Houck emphasized the importance of the public buying into GUSG conservation and how future GUSG decisions could potentially erode the public's support of GUSG conservation. Pelletier shared a GIS map layer that showed all the private land in Gunnison County that is currently in a conservation easement. Pelletier suggested that the language in Gunnison County' Land Use Resolution (LUR) regarding the HPT should be reviewed and potentially modified. Vasquez discussed his thoughts on the 0.6 vs 1.0 lek buffer debate and emphasized that he supports a science-based approach to this issue.

Mowery talked about the trust issues between stock growers and CPW due to unrelated GUSG problems. He advocates for voluntary measures rather than more possible regulations if the 1.0-mile lek buffer is approved. Diamond suggested that the GUSG Strategic Committee needs to look at how science factors into committee decisions, especially when updating the HPT. Diamond views the HPT as a tool that helps Gunnison County determine if building development will have an impact on GUSG habitat. In Diamond's view the HPT has little to no effect on stock growers and agriculture, it's a tool that deals with building development.

Navy doesn't believe there has been an actual majority report given. She also wonders what the implications and perception of not updating the HPT lek buffer to 1.0 mile since USFS and BLM have both adopted a 1.0-mile lek buffer. Scott, Rummel's presentation during the May 21, 2025 GUSG strategic committee meeting was the majority report. Smith suggests that the technical subcommittee meet again to discuss the thresholds for updating the HPT as outlined in the Gunnison County memo pertaining to the HPT update.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Navy, HCCA hosted a cheatgrass mapping day on Almont Triangle, over 200 points were mapped.

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.

09-17-25	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-15-25	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-19-25	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-17-25	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: June 18, 2025, meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:21 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Ben Prior, Gunnison Conservation District