

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
November 21, 2025**

The November 21, 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:

Kathy Griffin, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Liz Smith, Board of County Commissioners (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
Brinnen Carter, 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
Andy Stokes, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Non-Voting Members

Nathan Darnall, USFWS
Jessica Frey, NPS

Others in the Audience:

Aleshia Rummel, NPS
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Miranda Middleton, CPW
John Scott, Private Consultant
Amanda Aulenbach, Upper Gunnison River Conservancy District's National Fish (UGRCD)
Sarah Lowe, USFS
Liam Duggan, USFS
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 November 21, 2025, meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:03 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Caloger to approve the November 21, 2025, agenda as provided. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Caloger and seconded by Navy to approve September 17, 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](#)).

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Smith, letters for committee membership are required by February 1, 2026.

Frey, NPS is currently advertising seasonal positions for 2026. The NPS grazing management plan has been signed.

Vasquez, there were four fires that occurred during the government shutdown. One was on private land and the other three were on public land. Two were started by hunters and two were started by lightning. These were small fires, none in sage grouse habitat. USFS sent a letter of support for UGRCD National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) RESTORE grant application. The application includes restoration work on USFS lands (Lost Canyon and Lick Park).

Navy, HCCA is currently getting 2026 projects planned.

Caloger, had a question about the regulations of sage grouse in northern Canada. Griffin, this population is a Canadian endangered species and is reintroduced. The population is down to 10 birds. A captive rearing program supports this population but there have been major issues in reintroduced sage grouse survival.

Elzay, the Natural Disaster Mitigation Grant application submitted by Gunnison Conservation District was not selected for an award. CPW's Habitat Partnership Program awarded Elzay funding to treat cheatgrass USFS land. Sarah is working on several other grant applications to treat cheatgrass. The Cheatmaps app is being updated. When the update is completed, a presentation will be given to the committee about the updates.

UGRCD's NFWF RESTORE APPLICATION

UGRCD's RESTORE application is in collaboration with Sarah Elzay, Gunnison Conservation District, and Trout Unlimited. There are three wet meadow restoration projects included in this application (Lost Canyon, Lick Park, and Red Creek). Cheatgrass treatments and a fish passage project are also included. Capacity funding is included for UGRCD staff, Sarah Elzay, and Gunnison Conservation District. UGRCD has requested a letter of support for this application from the Gunnison Basin Sage Grouse Strategic Committee.

- Approval for the Gunnison Basin Sage Grouse Strategic Committee to submit a letter of support for UGRCD's RESTORE application. Motion moved by Smith and seconded by Navy. Motion carried unanimously.

HPT UPDATE DISCUSSION AND VOTE

Griffin, the Technical Subcommittee has been working on these updates since the beginning of 2025. These updates include modifications to Geographic Information System (GIS) layers in HPT and increasing the lek buffer distance from 0.6 miles to 1.0 miles. The Technical Subcommittee voted to bring these updates to the greater committee for approval. If approved by the greater committee, these updates will be presented to the BOCC for final approval. Rummel provided the majority report to the committee and Scott provided the minority report.

Smith, discussed the memo from Gunnison County's attorney regarding these HPT updates and asked the committee to think about the potential impact these updates may have on private landowners.

Rummel, the charter for the Technical Subcommittee is vague and provides little guidance about how the Technical Subcommittee should go about making recommendations. The only guidance the charter provides is that Technical Subcommittee members should be interested stakeholders with technical expertise related to sage-grouse conservation. Most of the Technical Subcommittee members agreed that the Technical Subcommittee should focus on science and not political/legal issues. Most agreed that the

political/legal issues should be discussed by the greater subcommittee. Rummel believes that having a clear mandate for all subcommittees would be helpful for future subcommittee work. Most recently, the Technical Subcommittee was tasked with the following: 1. Ensuring that their proposed updates met the goals/thresholds outlined in the Gunnison County Memo and 2. To determine what scientific literature is most relevant to this update. The Technical Subcommittee's response to these tasks is summarized below.

1. The HPT goals/thresholds outlined in the Gunnison County Memo and the Technical Subcommittee's responses are below.
 - a. **Goal 1:** To minimize unnecessary burdens on private landowners.
 - i. The Technical Subcommittee members agreed that the proposed update would not increase private landowners' burden. The HPT has no regularity mechanism; the Gunnison County Land Use Regulation (LUR) provides the burden/regulation to landowners.
 - b. **Goal 2:** To provide land use predictability and transparency through data-based mapping.
 - i. The Technical Subcommittee agreed that the proposed update would improve this goal. The proposed update aims to make the HPT documentation more transparent. A slight change in predictability could occur due to some parcels being changed from Tier 2 to Tier 1. This would be minimal because only four undeveloped parcels would be changed from Tier 2 to Tier 1.
 - c. **Goal 3:** To reduce the risk or severity of future federal listing impacts by demonstrating local engagement.
 - i. The Technical Subcommittee agreed that local engagement has been present throughout the entire update process. The Technical Subcommittee believes that their proposed updates would help protect GUSG habitat and subsequential reduce the need to elevate the bird's listing to endangered.
 - d. **Threshold 1:** 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.
 - i. Rummel expressed concern about the lack of guidance in the LUR about what the HPT should look like. The Technical Subcommittee did reference the LUR and Section 11-106 throughout the update process.
 - e. **Threshold 2:** Changes should reflect measurable, practical implications for permitting, zoning, or landowner decisions.
 - i. The Technical Subcommittee agreed that the proposed updates reflect everything outlined in threshold 2. Rummel addressed previously expressed concerns regarding the proposed HPT updates effects on agricultural lands. Rummel explained that HPT is only used to evaluate building permit or land use change applications. HPT is not used to evaluate agricultural practices. There are agricultural exemptions in the LUR to reduce burdens on agricultural producers.
 - f. **Threshold 3:** 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).
 - i. The Technical Subcommittee discussed that the HPT is mentioned in USFWS's final listing decision. During the listing decision process, the HPT helped prevent GUSG from being listed as endangered.
2. The Technical Subcommittee spent a tremendous amount of time figuring out what scientific literature should be used to guide the HPT update. Studies that looked at sage grouse spatial usage around lek sites were relied on heavily to determine optimal buffer zone. Please see the bibliography attached to November 19, 2025 meeting packet for a list of the scientific literature used by the Technical Subcommittee.

Rummel shared that the Technical Subcommittee's proposed HPT update is guided by science. The majority of the Technical Subcommittee members believed that the greater committee should assess the political/regulation impacts of the proposed update. The Technical Subcommittee members are mostly composed of members that have expertise in GUSG science rather than political and regulatory areas. They thought it best for the greater committee to look at the political and regulatory impacts of the HPT, since the greater committee has a diverse membership with experts from different fields. The Technical Subcommittee discussed potential mitigation strategies for the proposed HPT update such as notifying the affected landowners and giving them a time window to submit a GUSG review before the HPT updates are implemented, updating the LUR regarding GUSG to be more concise and transparent, and/or providing more funds to the Gunnison County Cheatgrass Coordinator and Gunnison Conservation District to expand their activities to benefit private landowners.

Rummel wrapped up her discussion by reiterating that there is no change in regulation with the proposed HPT update. The HPT is not regulatory and is a tool that is primarily used to conduct building site analyses. The LUR is the regulatory tool for land use. For 99.6% of parcels within Gunnison County and GUSG habitat there is no change in the HPT resulting from the proposed updates. The 0.4% of parcels that would face change are primarily composed of federal lands and lands that already have existing development. There are only four undeveloped parcels in the 0.4% of affected parcels. Rummel concluded that the Technical Subcommittee's proposed HPT update was guided by science and that the greater committee was better suited to address the political/regulatory aspects of the update.

Smith opened the floor to the committee for further discussion on the HPT update. Smith explained the reclamation permit process and why the cost of reclamation permits increased. Gunnison County reclamation permit cost increased from \$75 to \$675 because Gunnison County was subsidizing \$250,000 per year from the county's general fund to support the administrative activities associated with reclamation permits. Smith expressed her concern that the proposed HPT update would increase the burden of some landowners due to the increase in Tier 1 habitat and the requirement for reclamation permits for future construction.

Scott asked Griffin if the GUSG Range Wide Conservation Plan was being used to guide GUSG conservation efforts. Griffin explained that the USFWS's GUSG Recovery Plan/Recovery Implementation Strategy is the primary document being used to guide GUSG conservation. The USFWS's plan recommends a one-mile buffer around leks. Scott asked Rummel for clarification about the number of parcels impacted from the proposed HPT update. Rummel explained that 99 parcels would decrease from Tier 1 to Tier 2 and 105 would increase from Tier 2 to Tier 1. Many of the 105 parcels have existing development, have existing GUSG reviews, are forested (forested habitat is generally not good sage grouse habitat), are under conservation easement, and/or are public land. Only four parcels out of the 105 have none of the things listed before and would be affected by the HPT update. Scott believes that the 0.6-mile lek buffer the HPT currently uses is sufficient and that it should not be increased to 1.0-mile buffer. Rummel clarified that if the proposed HPT only included spatial data and lek status updates (lek buffer increase left out), four parcels would still change from Tier 2 to Tier 1.

Smith asked to hold a vote on updates regarding the "data" updates (lek status/location/polygon and spatial data) versus the lek buffer increase to 1.0-mile update to see if any committee members had issues with these updates. A majority of committee members voted that they felt comfortable/supported with the "data" updates. A majority of committee members voted that they felt comfortable with the lek buffer update. Committee discussion continued about the lek buffer update.

- Vote on accepting the Technical Subcommittee's proposed HPT updates (including the 1.0-mile lek buffer). Motion moved by Elzay. Seconded by Navy. Six members voted in favor. Four members did not vote in favor. One member abstained. Motion passes with a majority vote (six to four). These updates will be passed on to the Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners for final approval.

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.

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

ADJOURN: November 21, 2025, meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:31 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Ben Prior, Gunnison Conservation District