

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
October 20, 2021**

The October 20, 2021 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
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Greg Peterson, Stockgrowers' Association
Peter Caloger, Community At-Large

Non-Voting Members

Jessica Frey, National Park Service

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Brandon Diamond, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)
Jessica Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Jessica Fry, National Park Service
Joe Lavorini, Sustainable Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Committee
Whit Blair, US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Darren Long, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist
Shannon Frias, Gunnison County Community Development

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the October 20, 2021 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:05 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF September 15, 2021 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Caloger and seconded by Kugler to approve the September 15, 2021 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Chairperson Seward informed the group that the Sage grouse summit will be held April 4th and 5th of 2022. The location TBD.

Childers shared about the Crawford working group meeting. Both Childers and Seward attended. They had a field trip 2 weeks ago looking at BLM treatments, and some Park Services treatments on the North Rim. At the meeting they talked about catalysts groups and about the Sage Grouse Summit. Looked at new lek. The new lek is named after Chris Lazo. Seward explained that they toured the BLM Juniper removal. Roughly 400 acres of juniper was thinned on the east end of C77 road. They then went to the far western end of C77 and looked at a mastication project at an Oak Brush dominated site. It will be determined if anything needs to be done after the mastication project. It is expected that the Oak Brush will come back very thick. Peterson asked what cheatgrass is like there. Seward explained that cheatgrass isn't bad. There is a fair share of noxious weeds there. Childers informed the group that out of all of the satellite working groups, the Crawford working group is the only active group. The group is only meeting 1 to 2 times a year.

Sue Navy met with Jessica Young a few weeks ago and talked about her being chair of I&E. Navy believes the bylaws say the chair needs to be an official member of the Sage Grouse Strategic Committee. Smith asked if that is the case, is there a way to have a member of Western represented? Smith spoke with Young and believes she would be amendable to representing Western as a member of the Strategic Committee. Navy asked if there is an open seat for community representation? There is an open seat for an alternative. Does Dr. Young need to apply and be appointed by Commissioners? Seward commented that the committee would need a letter and the committee would then vote on it. Peterson presented a couple of issues to the committee, 1. Not sure why the requirement for a person to be a member of the Strategic Committee to be a chair of a committee was kept in place. Possibly to keep the connection to the Strategic Committee. The committee opened up seats so outside people could sit on them and report back. 2. If Dr. Young wants to apply for an open seat, it would be a simple way to solve her being able to get on the committee as chair. 3. If we want to have a seat representative for Western, it will need to go in front of the commissioners. Peterson commented that there are a few different levels of what we can do as the Strategic Committee. Navy stated that it is not in the bylaws (regarding a chair being an official member of the Strategic Committee), it is in the policy standing in ad hoc. The Committee wouldn't need to change the bylaws. The policy states, "Standing sub-committees chaired by a committee member who is appointed by a committee chair with concurrence by committee as a whole." Peterson stated that the committee can change policy. Seward's concern is that there hasn't been a Western representation in the past. Seward stated that he does not know why the committee could not have Dr. Young chair the I&E committee if the Strategic committee votes and approves a new seat. Smith stated that the idea of a Western seat needs to be looked at separately and if it is valuable should be considered. Caloger seconded what Liz stated. Navy commented that all the members of the committee are impowered by the groups they represent and vote on behalf of those groups, that may be why Western has not had a member representative. Seward asked, "Is the public at large alternate member what we would propose to Dr. Young?" Seward stated members need to vote. Seward will reach out to Jessica Young. Peterson stated that the committee needs to look at the policy and draft a revised policy that states a person does not have to be a member to chair a group. Peterson is willing to draft that change in policy so the committee can have something to review at the next meeting if they choose to take that action. Peterson stated that there should be a discussion for someone from Western being on this committee. When the Strategic Committee was created Western was not as involved as they are now. Smith agreed. Smith stated that if the policy is not working for our goals then there is no reason to have that barrier in the policy. Seward explained that the committee needed to change wording in policy to state a non-member can chair a sub-committee with the goal of expanding participation. Peterson stated, "draft policy changes to be looked at and accepted or declined by committee."

Seward stated that he would speak with Dr. Young and see if she would want the at-large alternative seat. If not, then they will look at the current policy. The executive committee will come up with some draft language to revise the policy for the next meeting.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN DISCUSSION AND UPDATES

Originally approved in October 2009. Seward stated that to his knowledge the action plan has never been gone through with a fine-tooth comb or revised. Seward stated the first thing should be a discussion on the relevancy of the action plan. Wording and introduction need to be revised. The introduction needs to be revised to state, "recovery of a threatened species". It is believed that the recovery implantation

strategy supersedes any action plan this committee puts together. There has not been a conversation since the species was Federally listed as endangered in November 2014. If you look at our Strategic plan, which is the guiding document for this committee, the goal has not changed. The goal of this committee is to essentially increase the abundance and viability of the Gunnison Sage Grouse and its habitat. Things did not change when species became federally protected. Sue Navy agreed. Navy looked through the plan and noticed a few things have been accomplished. Navy pointed out that on page 6 it talks about reallowing the mitigation fund. What is that and is there \$ in it and how is it being used? On page 10 it talks about the land preservation fund renewal which was done in 2012 but will still need to be reauthorized by the voters in 2031. Navy suggested that we may just need to change the dates but leave it in the plan. Seward stated the committee spent significant time going through the action the plan, line by line and made sure everyone agreed with the wording and each item was prioritized by what could be accomplished in 1 to 3 years. The guidance was the plan would be reviewed yearly. Update successes and add wording on ways to make things more efficient and accurate. Databases are not completely accurate. It references projects being captured in Colorado Parks and Wildlife's habitat database which is no longer applicable but we do have the conservation efforts database that Fish and Wildlife Service is putting together. There is a different database that is capturing the accomplishments of this committee. Seward stated he would like to start at the beginning and go through the action plan and get it up to today's standards. Go through the first 6 action items. Number 6 is relevant to the cheatgrass discussion. Number is "Coordination of Invasive Plant Control Efforts". It is timely to get that action item up to date. Liz Smith commented, maybe we could focus on the global big picture items in this session then have a draft that people can propose language changes we can go through that at the next meeting.

Seward asked if everyone agreed to look over the action plan on their own and we can reconvene at the next meeting? Smith suggested that if there was a digital document people's suggestions are there on the document and can be reviewed. Aleshia Rummel informed the committee that she does have a digital copy of the action plan that is in Publisher, and she will see if she can convert to into a word document.

Peterson informed the committee that one thing he wanted to talk about today was Action item # 1, grazing research. The whole action item needs to be rewritten or reworded. None of it is relevant right now.

Seward proposed to add an additional line, to add accomplishments. This line will capture accomplishments and list results. Also, what was spent to reach those accomplishments. Seward would like to show what was accomplished, the potential to continue, and potential for community outreach.

Peterson agreed with the path but it is going to take quite a bit of work. Action item 2 was another item Peterson looked at there are positive things that came out of the work done but not sure how to encapsulate the successes. Sue still have the same title and it would be about how this group wants to monitor our actions. Childers stated that some of these are going to be a lot easier than others. Some have been done, some will take a complete rewrite. It will be easy for some to just add a column and list the accomplishments. Childers suggested that everyone goes through it and look at low hanging fruit, easy ones first then discuss as a group. Seward commented that he is understanding that the best path forward is to get a word document that everyone can have access to and delegate today which action items each person is willing to go through. Seward asked Peterson if he would be willing to go through the number 1 action item, grazing and to capture the accomplishments. Seward then recommended that Navy take on action item #2. Seward suggested that a second edition to the action plan be created so original won't be lost. Kugler asked if they foresee any new action items. Seward stated that new ideas and action items would be welcomed to discuss.

Childers stated that the committee shouldn't reinvent the wheel and investing a lot of time.

Peterson agreed. Instead of trying to rewrite it but we could have accomplishments box below to show what has been done. Then if things come out of them and cause a new action item then we add that to the plan.

Seward asked what do we want to call the additional box? Accomplishments? Seward asked if the committee wanted to stop with that or add action items accomplished or ongoing. Kugler commented that priorities are going to shift but we will still have all action items listed. Kugler stated that the priorities could

be tweaked or re prioritized. Whit Blair likes the ideas and does not mind going through the action items and putting them how they ranked them and who were the activity partners.

Seward told the committee that the additional line items to be added to the action plan are: accomplishments, current status, and Fish and Wildlife service priorities. Seward asked if the committee had any other potential thoughts on additional lines to the action plan. Liz Smith commented that those needs will come up as the committee digs into the plan.

Smith volunteered to go through the whole document.

Navy volunteered to go through action item #5

Peterson will go through action item #1 and will also go through others.

Blair is willing to go through each action items and add activity partners

Childers volunteered to go through each action items and edit items she knows about and skip the ones that are not familiar to her.

Seward asked if a word document of the Action Plan can be distributed. Aleshia Rummel has converted it to a word document. Aleshia also added in the 3 new lines that were talked about.

CHEATGRASS AND HABITAT ISSUES FOLLOW-UP

Liz Smith since last time we met had great conversations, one was with John Whitney, with the senator Bennet's office, litigation on cheatgrass and what that would like. Senator Bennett is interested in carrying this proposal forward and trying to get some significant funding. The first step is to get a letter that Senator Bennett can pass along that describes in detail the significance, need, and urgency of the project and what is at stake. Seward has begun a draft letter. The conversation included talk about sage grouse.

Seward shared the start of a letter to Senator Michael Bennet. Seward wanted to demonstrate that Gunnison Basin is a very unique geographic area and a biologically diverse area. Seward wanted to elaborate that the Gunnison Basin is home to the largest population of sage grouse. Seward wanted to hammer home the importance of our public lands as far as economic drivers of our community, recreation economy-(Kugler will get numbers to Nate) and hunting/fishing/and wildlife were the 3 main areas impacted by cheatgrass. Seward commented that he wanted to stick to those 3 but is open to other ideas. Seward wanted to capsule what this committee has done for the preservation of sage grouse and feels it is very important but cheatgrass expansion and that impact is so much greater and is going to have a greater impact then just sage grouse. Don't want to lose the past work that this committee has done so Seward tried to capsule some of the LUR wording, seasonal road closures. The letter touches on sage grouse being federally protected. Then it expands on the threat of cheatgrass and the potential of cheatgrass to degrade Gunnison Sage grouse habitat. Seward feels the letter is missing is the threat of wildfire. Seward asked the committee if anyone had any thoughts or ideas of what needs to be in the letter. Navy suggested that how rampant the cheatgrass is spread, how big the threat is to sage grouse and the history and information on cheatgrass itself should be added. Seward questioned if we know, have data how many acres we effected 20 years ago compared to current. McGee suggested 1. Idea that Gunnison Basin is one of the relatively intact ecosystems in Colorado, stage of invasion is early, the timing is important 2. Bring cheatgrass to the top of the letter, heighten what we are talking about. Smith agreed. And she would add that cheatgrass has been successfully mitigated elsewhere. Kugler also agreed. He stated that we shouldn't bury the lead, don't want the main point to get lost.

Seward said he would like to have a letter in a shared folder where everyone can access and make comments. The letter comes from the committee.

Peterson commented it is good start on the letter, be specific as possible what we want to do and on how we are going to move forward. We have talked about having a staff person/coordinator if we are ready to do that it needs to be added to letter. If we want to implement in 2022 we already have our backs against the wall, timing wise. Smith stated, John Whitney did say it might be impossible for 2022 but 2023 might be more plausible. Seward asked if the committee should play it safe and ask for funding for a coordinator for the 2023 funding budget? Smith commented that the committee could list what they need without putting a date on it.

Seward asked if it is still the consensus to hire a new coordinator and that coordinator would then hire a team of technicians. Caloger commented that he is opposed to hiring a coordinator. With the cheatgrass we are still unsure of what works and we may need more research. Having a coordinator might be too soon. Seward stated his opinion is that different agencies are all doing their own projects now, we all have time constraints to invest the time that we need so having a point person would be beneficial. We are far enough along to get moving on the ground. Pat McGee stated that part of what the coordinator could do is help implement some of the projects and add a monitoring component to put together other information. A coordinator is important to try to get an aerial component going on areas that we cannot get to on foot. No one right now has capacity. Smith asked is it worthwhile to get on this now? Looking at county fund balance for the sage grouse there is a projected fund balance in 2022 of over \$200,000. Is it reasonable that the committee starts to explore a facilitator now? Vasquez commented that we need the capacity now. The committee could leverage the sage grouse fund and work with other partners for grants. Sue, using the county money we could possibly get additional funds. Vasquez could see a coordinator coming on and integrating with TBC and merging that with all the efforts. Navy commented that there may be a way to get a co-grant given the county funds. Navy asked if Liz Smith is referring to the mitigation fund money. Smith responded that the fund is titled Sage Grouse fund. Kugler asked would it make more sense to have this coordinator to live next to the weed mitigation department? Smith commented that she would have to follow up with Marlene Crosby on that. could talk to Marlene to check on the Gunnison County weed department. McGee added that he is concerned about that. We wouldn't want this coordinator to get lost in the county program. We want to add value to the program. Peterson supports a coordinator and we should get started. I would want a large-scale collaborated program in 2022. We need to get a jump start. Not sure how much this coordinator will cost. We need to have numbers in place. Smith's perspective is within reason we can green light a certain figure. Smith will check with Juan Guerra to check on the numbers in the fund. Seward stated he believes that someone with the knowledge of different agencies, experience, and we could be looking at \$50,000-\$60,000/year, ball park estimate. Caloger asked if the committee would be looking for someone full time? The response was, yes. Kugler reiterated McGee point that the coordinator would have to be able to take on big contracts. Experience would be desirable and that might be hard to find locally.

Seward asked if we need a budget on the letter. Smith responded, no. Seward and Smith will work together on letter. Smith suggested we get letter online for people to view. Have completed letter in next meeting packet to be approved. Peterson approving letter at next meeting would be fine but the sooner we can get it out the better. Committee member can review and approve before next meeting unless there is a huge issue with the content. If everyone on the committee agrees on the letter we can get it out before next meeting. Seward commented that the committee has done that before. Letters have been circulated to members for review and the approve it outside a regular meeting.

Seward we will have a polished draft by November 3rd. Circulate it through the committee.

McGee added that the language of cross fence collaboration would be important in the letter because it is amazing of the different agencies working with each other and on others properties. As well on private landowners.

Additional Comments:

Liz Smith shared with the committee some opportunities. Smith spoke with John Swartout from Colorado Counties Incorporated there are possible funding opportunities through Colorado Habitat Exchange, Oil and Gas companies that have an obligation to do habitat restoration and they can purchase credits through

organizations. Smith commented that she is happy to look into those funding opportunities. Kugler stated that funds from those organizations are usually used in the population where the impact is high.

McGee asked what are the obligations of the sage grouse fund? Smith responded there are some obligations but she does not have details. For this year, 2021, there are expected \$49,000 in expenditures and next year just under \$44,000. With those expenditures there is still \$183,000 in the budget.

Seward explained that some of that money has paid for the Sage Grouse summit, Jim Cochran's contract salary, and some of the money is earmarked for the conservation poster.

McGee informed the committee that they are working on the summit. Hopes to build momentum There is a budget but they are looking for donations. Looking to offer lunch. Looking for overall keynote speaker, if anyone has any ideas.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

FUTURE MEETINGS: Future meetings will occur by Zoom online meetings, unless changed for a specific reason.

11-17-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-15-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
01-19-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
02-16-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
03-16-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
04-20-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
05-18-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
06-15-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
07-20-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
08-17-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
09-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-19-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-16-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The October 20, 2021 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:17 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Shannon Frias