From: "Pontarolo, Christine S" <cpontaro@blm.gov>
To: Chi, Renee
Cc: Hotze, Bekee; Burghard, Elizabeth R; Fletcher, Dan T
Subject: RE: Sage-grouse questions related to Hamlin Habitat Improvement project
Date: Monday, December 19, 2011 9:56:02 AM
Attachments: sagrdata.xlsx

Hi Renee,

Thank you for the comments. I have attached an excel spreadsheet summarizing the vegetation studies that BLM has completed within the Hamlin Valley project area. These data summarize the line intercept (% cover), vegetation heights, forbs, and documentation of sage grouse sign (pellet counts). A total of 60 sites were surveyed throughout the sage grouse habitat as mapped by UDWR at the time of the studies. The data obtained from the transect studies were compared to Table 19 Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Guidelines to manage sage-grouse populations and their habitats (Connelly et al. 2000) of the EA, which is demonstrated in the Site Suitability Status worksheet 1 of the excel table. You will see from this spreadsheet that grass and forb percent cover is well below 15% at all sites sampled. The basis of BLM's vegetation studies and the telemetry studies being completed by Dr. Nicole Frey is to provide much needed baseline data regarding the sage grouse within the project area. Telemetry studies were initiated in 2010 and due to difficulty in trapping sage grouse for collaring, limited information is available from the telemetry studies to date; however, the graduate student is finding sage grouse concentration areas and gaining valuable data on fenceline studies (documenting grouse impacts, raptor and corvid use). Unfortunately, not all sites within Utah have the benefit of multiple study efforts such as the Parker's have, so please acknowledge that this information is baseline and through additional funding we are hoping to continue such efforts.

In regards to removal of sagebrush within sage grouse habitat, the excel spreadsheet demonstrates the % cover of sagebrush across all the sites sampled within the project area. When compared to Table 19 in the EA, you can see that the sagebrush cover is marginal to unsuitable at many of the sites sampled. Much of the Project Area was mechanically chained during the 1950-60's, which resulted in the creation of a monoculture of crested wheatgrass and loss of sagebrush. BLM's vegetation studies indicate that these sites are recovering and now exhibit a diversity in perennial grasses and forbs, and the sagebrush is coming back into these sites. Many of the old chainings exhibit some of the highest concentration areas for grouse. It is not BLM's goal to remove sagebrush from the sage grouse habitats within the Hamlin Valley Project Area, but it is our goal to improve the ecological site. Currently, much of the Sagebrush Vegetation Management Area has pinyon pine and juniper encroaching, which is resulting in the loss of shrubs, grasses, and forbs, as well as habitat connectivity within sage grouse habitat. As demonstrated on page 66 of the EA, the objectives as set forth in the Utah Greater Sage Grouse Management Plan (UDWR 2009) would be used to guide any projects within greater sage grouse habitat.

Page 112 of the EA states that winter habitats would be maintained within the Project Area. BLM recognizes the importance of these areas and would manage to maintain these habitats in accordance with Table 19 (or most current information). The value of Dr. Nicole Frey's telemetry studies will be to refine the locations of winter concentration areas.

BLM's goal is to improve ecological site conditions with sagebrush habitats (and other habitats within the project area) in accordance with the guidance, regulations, and plans outlined in Section 1.5 of the EA. Based on the protective measures and analysis in the EA BLM does not agree that conducting habitat projects would lead towards the extirpation of sage grouse within the project area. As identified in Section 2.2.1, BLM recognizes the natural variation in vegetation communities and the role environmental factors play in the success of project. BLM would implement an Adaptive Management Strategy and encourages stakeholder, such as USFWS, involvement to guide vegetation treatments within the project area and have an active role in monitoring the success of treatments. BLM agrees that the Project Area is a landscape level project, incorporating many watersheds that are important to sage grouse populations within this area. It is important to realize that projects will be implemented based on funding (such as through Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative); typically any given treatment within a single year will likely not exceed more than 3,000-5,000 acres, which is why BLM has identified priority or focus areas as identified on map 3 of the EA. The Sagebrush Focus Areas identified on Map 3 are areas where pinyon pine and juniper are encroaching and resulting in the loss of valuable shrub habitats. These areas were identified by BLM specialists as areas where we could make great efforts towards improving sagebrush habitats with relatively little effort because many of the ecological site components (shrubs, grasses, and forbs) are still present and the removal of pinyon pine and juniper would go a long way towards improving habitat. I am attaching the GIS shapefiles for the Sagebrush Focus Areas and would encourage you to look at aerial photography, as it demonstrates that much of what BLM intends to do is remove pinyon pine and juniper from these areas to restore the shrub community.

I received an email from Kate, saying that the Utah prairie dog section looked okay and would support a NLAA.

I appreciate you taking the time to review the EA. If there are further questions or clarifications, please let us know. Thank you.

Christine Pontarolo
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-----Original Message-----
From: Renee_Chi@fws.gov [mailto:Renee_Chi@fws.gov]
Sent: Friday, December 09, 2011 4:31 PM
To: Pontarolo, Christine S
Cc: Hotze, Bekee; Brown, Nathanael; Madsen, Steven C
Subject: Sage-grouse questions related to Hamlin Habitat Improvement project

Hello Christine,

On page 69 of the EA, it sounds as if Dr. Frey's vegetation surveys and ocular observations conclude that perennial grass and forb communities are limiting factors for the local sage-grouse population. Please provide the report or publicaiton with the data that supports this statement. On Parker Mountain,

this was assessed by doing vegetation measurements at each sage-grouse brooding location and at each coupled random site. The data showed, with statistical strength, that the sage-grouse with broods were keying in on areas with higher grass/forb components.

I have some very serious concerns about removing any sagebrush in any sage-grouse habitat....First, none should ever be removed from wintering areas. Second, consideration in other sagebrush areas are especially a concern in low elevation areas susceptible to non-native invasion. Doing experimental treatments on Parker Mountain was deemed appropriate because the treatments were a minute proportion of the available habitat to the birds (~1200 acres in a 200,000-acre contiguous sage-grouse area). Based on the maps, the current proposal seems like a significant portion of the sage-grouse habitat in the area. If the habitat improvements are not successful, this project could lead to the extirpation of this sage-grouse population.

Preliminarily, we do not see adequate justification for removing any sagebrush in any sage-grouse habitat.

This email does not consistitute our consultation with you on this project.
I am just requesting more information.

Thanks!!

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Renee Y. Chi
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- sagrdata.xlsx - SagebrushProjectArea_UWC.zip
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Site	% Canopy cover Sagebrush	Grasses	Forbs	Sage-grouse sign?
BR051-01	7.2%	0.2%	0.0%	No
BR051-02	22.4%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-03	17.1%	0.6%	0.0%	No
BR051-04	32.5%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-05	12.9%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-06	9.2%	0.1%	0.0%	No
BR051-08	14.2%	0.5%	0.1%	No
BR051-11	17.8%	0.5%	0.3%	No
BR051-12	12.0%	2.7%	0.0%	No
BR051-13	10.6%	0.2%	0.0%	Yes
BR051-14	15.7%	0.5%	1.2%	No
BR051-15	17.1%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-16	24.1%	3.0%	0.1%	No
BR051-17	16.3%	0.6%	0.1%	No
BR051-18	18.3%	6.6%	0.4%	No
BR051-19	1.6%	5.7%	0.6%	No
BR051-20	16.5%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-21	27.1%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR051-22	6.8%	5.2%	0.2%	No
BR051-23	12.1%	2.6%	0.7%	No
BR051-24	8.1%	7.1%	0.1%	No
BR051-25	4.0%	7.1%	0.0%	Yes
BR051-26	4.5%	4.8%	0.0%	No
BR051-27	3.3%	2.9%	0.2%	No
BR051-28	8.6%	3.0%	0.0%	Yes
BR051-29	11.7%	1.3%	0.2%	No
BR051-31	8.9%	2.2%	0.0%	No
BR051-32	15.7%	8.8%	0.1%	No
BR051-33	12.4%	5.7%	1.0%	No
BR052-01	27.0%	1.3%	0.0%	No
BR052-02	16.5%	0.4%	1.7%	No
BR052-03	39.2%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR053-01	9.7%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR053-02	34.6%	1.5%	0.7%	No
BR053-03	18.3%	0.9%	0.6%	No
BR053-04	19.3%	3.0%	1.1%	No
BR053-05	23.1%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR053-06	14.2%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR054-01	15.6%	0.3%	0.0%	No
BR054-02	10.7%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR054-03	5.9%	0.2%	0.0%	No

BR054-04	8.7%	1.1%	0.0%	No
BR054-05	17.3%	0.0%	0.6%	No
BR054-06	13.4%	0.4%	0.0%	No
BR054-07	8.1%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR054-08	8.5%	0.2%	0.0%	No
BR054-09	13.5%	4.4%	0.0%	No
BR054-10	17.8%	0.2%	0.0%	No
BR054-11	22.4%	1.1%	0.0%	No
BR054-12	10.2%	0.0%	0.0%	No
BR054-13	21.5%	0.2%	0.0%	No
BR054-14	15.6%	0.0%	0.1%	No
BR054-15	14.1%	0.3%	0.0%	Yes
BR054-16	13.6%	0.6%	0.0%	No
BR054-17	15.2%	1.0%	0.0%	No
BR054-18	20.2%	0.2%	0.0%	No
BR054-19	0.1%	3.4%	0.0%	No
BR054-20	11.2%	0.3%	0.0%	No
BR054-21	18.0%	0.6%	0.0%	No
BR054-22	4.1%	0.0%	0.0%	No

Color Key:
Suitable breeding habitat
Marginal breeding habitat
Unsuitable breeding habitat
Sage-grouse sign found