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Dear Sage-Grouse Task Force,

Please take note of the following:

1. **BLM Webinar on Plan Outreach** – BLM would like to hold a webinar next week to gather task force input on when and how to conduct outreach to counties/tribes/local partners on its updated plans. Please respond to this [doodle poll](#) to indicate your preferred time for the webinar. The poll will be open through COB Thursday, Feb. 26.
2. **January Meeting Summary** – A summary of the January SGTF meeting is attached for your reference.
3. **SGI Webinar Recording** – NRCS held a webinar recently on its new 5-year rollup of SGI and future commitments. The webinar was recorded and may be accessed [here](#).
4. **March Meeting Venue** – We are finalizing a hotel contract for the March 30-31 SGTF meeting in Denver and I expect to have information on booking hotel accommodations for you in the next few days.

Thanks,
Katie

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Sage-Grouse Task Force: Meeting Notes and Outcomes

January 20-21, 2015

Denver, Colorado

Next Steps

Responsible party in brackets after each next step.

- Provide information on captive breeding work done by Colorado and Washington. [Jeff Ver Steeg and Eric Gardner]
- Provide a briefing paper on Battalion Pro for circulation to state weed coordinators. Keep the SGTF updated on the registration process. [Matt Kales]
- Provide web link to Mike Thabault's presentation. [Matt Kales]
- Potential future meeting topics:
 - Non-traditional ways to get matching funds for SGI work
 - Plan status and implementation by the states
 - Interagency seed strategy

DAY 1 – TUESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2015

Round Robin of State Updates

WY: Wyoming is starting the eighth year of its sage-grouse implementation team. The state finished an analysis showing an increase in males on leks. \$1.2 million was allocated to research and evaluation of plan effectiveness. Additional funds are being sought from the legislature. The Wyoming plan was written with a 5-year life cycle before any boundary adjustments but the plan is currently under review for potential changes.

CO: Colorado is doing quality control review of its inputs to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Conservation Efforts Database (CED). Research is being published on sage-grouse and habitat relationships at two locations. Private land conservation efforts continue.

OR: Oregon's draft plan is going to be sent out soon to interested stakeholders and FWS. The state wildlife agency is revisiting its mitigation policy because it doesn't speak specifically to sage-grouse. Tracking development-based disturbance threats is also something the state is looking at. Monitoring of birds collared post-fire in 2012 is ongoing. CCAAs are being expanded. The Governor's budget calls for additional resources, subject to approval by the legislature.

ID: A states and private lands planning effort was kicked off last fall, working on conservation actions for a wide range of land use activities and also looking at fire suppression and restoration. A new person was hired to help with coordination efforts. The state lands strategy is expected to be approved by the commissioners in late March. The Governor's budget includes money for fire and invasives work. Some funding would go into a quick strike fund for private land activities to match where needed. Idaho will also partner with BLM on fuel break work.

UT: Utah is working with state universities to do an economic analysis of current activities in sage-grouse habitat and the potential impacts of a listing. The legislature is considering additional funds for sage-grouse work.

NV: Tony Wasley from Nevada Department of Wildlife will be joining the Sage-Grouse Task Force (SGTF). Nevada's plan is complete. A two-day workshop was held on Nevada's credit system and pilot projects are being developed. A new pinyon juniper map layer is nearly finished. Work is being done with the legislature on rural fire protection districts. The Governor's budget would move funds to fund technical and on-the-ground work.

MT: Montana's plan is largely complete. The legislature is in session and is considering funding for new staff and \$10 million for habitat stewardship from general funds. The legislative session ends in April.

WA: The greater sage-grouse is state-listed as threatened with a recovery plan in place. A five-year status review is underway; the recovery plan is not being updated but a two-year action plan is being developed. A CCAA is in development and slated for publication in the federal register by April. Additional funds from the legislature are not anticipated. Populations are declining for the fourth year. Translocations are being done to avoid genetic bottlenecks. In response to a Washington question about captive breeding, Jeff Ver Steeg offered to share information on Colorado's work in this area.

SD: The state management plan was revised and formally adopted. Work is underway with various state agencies to establish a more formal process for wildlife agency review of new oil and gas lease applications. The state is looking to renew a Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) position for work with producers.

Sage Grouse Initiative Next Steps

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Chief Jason Weller delivered a presentation on next steps for NRCS and its SGI program. Over one thousand ranches have participated in SGI,

conserving 4.4 million acres across the range. NRCS has invested over \$265 million with partners and landowners contributing over \$115 million for a total of over \$380 million in sage-grouse conservation. He noted the agency's emphasis on taking targeted actions driven by science, with 75 percent of SGI actions taken with the Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs).

Easement acquisition during SGI increased over 1,700 percent; 94 percent of those easements provide permanent protections and 75 percent are located inside PACs. Improving rangeland health and conifer removal have also been focus areas.

Going forward, NRCS is committed to maintaining and expanding its investments in sage-grouse conservation through the current Farm Bill. The Conservation Stewardship Program will be used to offer additional incentives to enrolled landowners. SGI partners will be asked to provide more input on where they want to work and on what type of projects. NRCS is making permanent positions that support SGI and devising the "2.0" version of SGI.

Meeting attendees noted the importance of clearing easement "logjams" and Chief Weller confirmed such efforts are underway. It was suggested that a future task force meeting potentially include a conversation about non-traditional ways to get matching funds. Chief Weller noted that an innovation grants program will be coming out in the next few weeks.

Status of BLM Plans

Ed Roberson from the BLM walked the group through the resolution on key elements of the planning effort for advancing sage-grouse conservation and addressing threats from the Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report. Key elements include limiting or eliminating new surface disturbance in priority habitat and minimizing additional disturbance in general habitat; improving sage-grouse habitat condition; and reducing the threat of rangeland fire to sage-grouse.

To limit or eliminate new surface disturbance in the highest priority areas for sage-grouse, the BLM is identifying Sagebrush Focal Areas, comprised of BLM-lands where the agency wants to provide the most protective management and where conservation efforts will be focused. No-surface occupancy (NSO) stipulations are being considered for new oil and gas leases in priority habitat. Meeting attendees urged BLM to consider potential for reservoir management conflict situations. Other layering protections include focusing disturbance away from habitat and the application of lek-buffers. With the application of lek buffers, local data, best available science, landscape features and existing protections will be taken into account for determining buffer applicability.

To improve sage-grouse habitat conditions, the BLM will require and ensure mitigation provides a net conservation gain to the species, prioritize vegetation management and livestock grazing reviews and monitoring in sage-grouse habitat, increase monitoring and evaluation, and implement adaptive management. The states indicated they want an opportunity to review BLM's mitigation framework. State representatives expressed concern that the livestock grazing policy could result in areas being closed to grazing.

The BLM also discussed its efforts to reduce the threat of rangeland fire to Greater Sage-Grouse in the Great Basin through greater emphasis on preventing, suppressing, and restoring sagebrush landscapes threatened by rangeland fire by means of improved federal-state-local collaboration and coordination. Secretarial Order 3366 will reduce the threat by placing added priority on the prevention, suppression and restoration of sagebrush landscapes.

BLM and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) will be finalizing their proposed plans over the next several months, with an anticipated publication date in late spring 2015. It is not yet known if the plans will all be rolled out together or in a more distributed fashion. There will be two records of decision, one for the Great Basin plans and another for the Rocky Mountain plans, expected in late summer 2015. It was suggested that it would be helpful to the states to see all of the plans relevant to their state at the same time.

USGS Conservation Buffer Study

Zack Bowen from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), joined by lead author Dan Manier, shared the results of a scientific literature summary on conservation buffers put together by USGS. The authors identified six categories of disturbance typically found in land use plans:

1. Surface disturbance
2. Linear features
3. Energy development
4. Tall structures
5. Low structures
6. Activities

Across these categories, the authors surmised that there is large variability in populations, habitats, individual responses and numerous other factors across the range so no single lek buffer distance will be "right." Further, not all disturbances are equal—time, duration, frequency and timing matter quite a bit.

DAY 2 – WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2015

Reflections from Day 1

FWS weighed in to say that any quantitative data that should be factored into its decision should really be in to FWS now for consideration. Data received after March may be qualitatively assessed but FWS anticipates reaching a decision by June 1 so April and May are almost too late. FWS indicated that getting drafts of state actions now is helpful but if the final version is different, it throws a wrench in things. The sooner things can be completed, signed and done, the sooner FWS can give credit for those actions. The states discussed how legislative and regulatory processes may make it difficult to meet the FWS's timeline.

Rangeland Fire

Jim Lyons from the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) provided an overview of Secretary Jewell's new secretarial order on rangeland fire. He emphasized that DOI wants this to be a joint effort with the states and local communities and to build on past success. There was discussion about whether implementing the order would pull resources from forest activities and BLM indicated that project dollars will be used, not fire operations dollars. BLM is also working on fire and invasives assessments that FWS will review prior to finalization. The states indicated that they want to provide input on the order's implementation and DOI is committed to including the states.

Update on Battalion Pro (ACK55) Weed Suppressive Bacteria

With over 40 million acres of cheatgrass (downy brome) on BLM lands, managing cheatgrass is an area BLM wants to address. Rick Lee from BLM updated the task force on two strains of bio-based pesticides that have demonstrated efficacy against cheatgrass—D7 and ACK55. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has already granted registration to the D7 strain. The USDA Agricultural Research Service is responsible for submitting a registration package to EPA for ACK55. The registration package is slated to be submitted this month. Several federal agencies including BLM, FWS, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the National Park Service are evaluating their policies and procedures with regards to the process followed in preparing for use of registered biopesticides, along with how they proceed prior to the actual registration.

It was stressed that biopesticides are not a single option answer; they must be incorporated into a larger management program. If ACK55, with the proposed trade name of Battalion Pro, is registered within the next ten months then application could begin this fall. FWS staff offered to put together a briefing paper on ACK55 and keep the task force updated on the registration process. The states can forward the paper to their state weed coordinators.

Overview of FWS ESA Status Review Process

Mike Thabault from FWS provided an overview of the status review process that FWS will use to make a determination on the greater sage-grouse by September 30, 2015. FWS will evaluate the current status of the species, evaluate its future status, do a legal and policy evaluation, and publish a determination in the federal register. The omnibus rider prohibits publishing a proposed rule but FWS is operating that under the settlement agreement they have to determine the status and could publish it in the annual Candidate Notice of Review.

FWS plans to run seven population models on abundance, distribution or trends and four risk models—oil and gas, fire and invasives, cropland risk and conifer. Independent principal investigators are doing the modeling. State representatives urged FWS to get input from the oil and gas industry on newer technologies that influence surface disturbance and also on how the drop in oil prices impacts planned development. FWS confirmed that it will not rank threats.

Late March and early April is when FWS will be in synthesis mode about what the info means for the status of the species. A recommendation will be made to Dan Ashe by the end of May or early June. The determination or warranted or not warranted will be made by September.

State representatives emphasized the need for independent peer review of the models to avoid flaws. FWS responded that all the models are peer reviewed, as well as FWS's application of the models. The states reiterated the need to engage experts from the geological sector and others to ensure scenarios and input data are accurate and up-to-date.

Stubble Height Policy and Public Lands Grazing

Dave Naugle from NRCS shared a copy of a paper he coauthored on grass height variation and sage-grouse nest survival, along with a Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) press release on the study and the authors' response to CBD. Dr. Naugle said the paper reinforces that there is a relationship between grass height and nest success but does not support the idea of certain stubble height to maximize nest success. A whole pasture does not need the same height

requirements as where a bird builds a nest. This information was shared to provide clarification on the research results and resulting translation into policy actions.

Next Meeting

The following subjects were mentioned as potential topics for the next meeting:

- Plan status and implementation by the states
- Captive breeding (no sense of urgency on this topic; Colorado and Washington can talk separately with interested states)
- Interagency seed strategy

The task force suggested mid to late March for the next meeting and to meet again in Denver.