

EOC Meeting – AFWA, Omaha, NE  
September 13, 2011

Attendees:

|                       |                             |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Jeff Ver Steeg – CO   | Ken Mayer – NV              | Juan Garcia - FSA     |
| Tom Kirscheman – SD   | John Emmerich – WY          | Danielle Flynn - NRCS |
| Alan Clark – UT       | Sal Halso (?) - ID          | Gene DeGayner - USFS  |
| Anne Kinsinger – USGS | Dave Ridley – MT            | San Stiver - WAFWA    |
| Dwight Fielder – BLM  | Kevin Cading/Jeff Vonk – ND | Pat Deibert - FWS     |
| Noreen Walsh – FWS    | Roy Elicker - OR            |                       |

Absent: Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, California, Washington - absent

Observers: Miles Moretti, Tammy VerCaurteren, Steve Knick, Larry Kruckenberg, Renne Loehoeffner, Steve Knick, Carol Schuler, Bob Hasenyager, Steve Riley, Sandy Kratville,

Minutes from July - approved

Agency Updates

FWS – Noreen Walsh

- Expressed continued appreciation for NRCS and BLM efforts
- Working under timeframe – listing decision by 2015 – many efforts for habitat loss and fragmentation but not likely to turn things around by deadline. So FWS is and will continue to work with BLM on short-term action to revise RMPs for regulatory mechanisms.
  - FWS is on all teams – has been taking a lot of time
- Financial support from FWS
  - funded WAFWA coordinator, wind research, sagebrush decision support tool, WAFWA technical meeting
- Litigation update – MDL agreed to on Friday; WWP opening brief with court on Sept. 19, with FWS response by Oct. 19.

USGS – Anne Kinsinger

- Continuing their broad sagebrush research program; working on seasonal predictive models, population estimation, early brood rearing habitat relative to population response, large scale habitat
- Ken expressed his thanks for work in NV

NRCS – Danielle Flynn

- Danielle expressed appreciation for folks helping with SGI
- NRCS provided funding to increase capacity working with IMJV – 17 to 24 (maybe more – 30+), 3 year positions
  - The new positions have the primary purposes to work with private landowners to get conservation on the ground.
  - Will be a 1 week SGI “boot camp” in SLC end of Nov 28 – Dec. 2. This will also be via webinar for NRCS and IMJV staff to help continuing educating their staff.

FSA – Juan Garcia

- In 2010 continued CRP sign-up – 2.8 million accepted, but up to 6.6 million anticipated to expire in next few years.
- 90 SAFE projects – unused agriculture acreages being re-allocated for conservation. Giving it another year to get things done,
- Ken expressed his appreciation for their attendance and action.

ND – Kevin Cading

- working with SGI – received 500K this year
- LWG is now in place,
- experimenting and growing big sage- is meeting with some success;
- Would like more SAFE acres!
- Population declining at a rate of 5%/year

OR – Roy Elicker

- OR has completed core area mapping;
- OR continues to work in habitat projects with NRCS, especially juniper removal

SD – Tom Kirschman

- About to interview for NRCS joint position;
- Continue to work on mitigation for Keystone project.

WY – John Emmerich

- working to implement make core area strategy (sorting nuts and bolts)
  - developing an on-line tool for analyses;
- Participating in research on effectiveness of habitat treatments (NRCS and private efforts).
- San asked John to extend appreciation to Amanda Losch for monthly updates on what is happening in WY.
- Wind research – 2 projects up and running in WY; one pending in ID.
- John expressed appreciation for additional funding for the wind work.

UT – Alan Clark

- Have 11 LWG – 10 for greater and 1 for Gunnison- had to cut funding this year, but made it a priority to keep the LWGs running.
- Working on habitat map with BLM – working to protect all active sage-grouse areas so can work on restoration in the future.
- Management guidelines on hold pending BLM interim guidance;
- Alan is on two regional teams for BLM and staff on two sub-regional teams;
- additional NRCS/IMJV positions – funding provided at last minute with good partner match – UT will get 2 plus the 4 that work for UDWR (2 work for Mule Deer Foundation) – got some additional funding, so the UT department of ag were able to add one more.
- Would like more interaction with the FS

NV – Ken Mayer

- has 2 NRCS cost-shared positions; 2 more coming;
- Working on map with BLM;

- Governor's sage-grouse team continue to meet;
- Spending a lot of time on the Bi-State (2013)

MT – Dave Risley

- Doing a lot of work on CAPS (?)

ID – Sal Halso (?)

- working on NRCS projects
  - unfortunately had to return funding this year, but did use funding near Ketchum;
  - received additional SAFE allocation – about gone, but hit cap quickly
  - 3 SGI positions coming on;
- mild fire season for sage-grouse areas;
- continue to watch China Mountain

CO – Jeff VerSteeg

- developed high resolution seasonal habitat models and using to update priority maps
- involved in research on adequate disturbance buffers, sagebrush restoration, sage-grouse response to PJ removal

Tall Structure research proposal – San Stiver and Bob Hasenyager (provided support material)

- Scientific Oversight Committee (SOC) –
  - San will chair SOC
  - want to go outside sage-grouse world for these members to maintain separation between science oversight and science researchers
- Governance Committee – takes recommendations from SOC, allocates funding, and maintain overview of projects.
  - Nominations for vacant seats (wanted FWS and BLM specifically, also someone with WGA ties)
    - Dave Risley – MT
    - Pat Deibert – FWS (for now)
    - BLM will hold off, but nominate someone in the near future
- Research protocol – should be considered minimal protocol – can be restrictive if desired.
  - Noreen asked for clarification on RISCT recommendation 2 (c) – that direct impacts will be mitigated, unknown impacts researched
    - if unknown impacts found companies will mitigate up to a pre-set agreement (that is part of an overall mitigation package – e.g. 100 million, 10 million for research, so leaves 90 million for additional mitigation).
- Ken asked for motion to accept RISCT recommendations and nominations for Governance Committee – Approved

Bi-State update – Ken Mayer

- Governor's sage-grouse committee included the Bi-State in their 2004 plan; lots of jurisdictions (land ownership) involved.
- Given the short timeframe there is concerns from FS and BLM that modification of LUPs not possible. There are also concerns at staff levels regarding executive support.

- Had an interagency meeting- identified this as a priority for all agencies
  - Developing a working agreement to help re-prioritize workloads.
  - Meeting again at the end of the month.
  - Former NDOW employee, now with NV Wilderness Project, Greg Tanner organized a field trip for key folks which highlighted how critical the private lands are – 17% of total area, but own key areas for population persistence. Dealing with major landowners that are not living off the land, but the land is an investment – major threat is exurban development so want to get easements now.
  - Senator Reid staff will likely get involved.
- What if don't have the regulatory mechanisms in place, but have a plan or IM's? Ken is hoping that's enough.
- Want Bi-State coordinator – NV Wilderness Project will likely fund, so may defer to Greg Tanner, but need to work out logistics with federal and state agencies.
- Primary listing concerns have been identified
  - effort will build on 2004 plan to develop an actions to address those concerns, including administrative measures that need to happen (working in conjunction with FWS)
- Need to engage with partners programs to focus on key projects
- Want to move up timeline on getting easements going
- Will develop MOU amongst all agencies for operations to memorialize efforts
- Involving military on Mt. Grant (major landowner there)
  - have agreeable colonel to develop agreement
  - working with FWS on effort.
  - Need better lek inventories, particularly in areas that are inaccessible by ground – use helicopters. Intel says there are lots more leks out there.
- Land management plans (FS) out-of-date (25 years plus) and don't adequately address sage-grouse concerns.
  - Noreen cautioned that revising the LMPs was as important as the habitat projects FS is involved with.

#### Inadequate Regulatory mechanisms -

BLM – update since Big Sky –

- NPT has met and will continue to meet intermittently to oversee the process.
- IM for interim direction in the field has been vetted internally and will go out today for agency review –comments due back 9/21.
- NTT meet in Denver 2 weeks ago – product will be available 9/23. Will be sent to the field for consideration in current actions (will be in the form of an IM).
- 73 plans affected, 28 will be amended (already in progress), rest revised. Will do about 6-8 EISs. Planners felt fewer EISs would not achieve the level of specificity needed to ensure the actions were adequate.
  - Would like FWS and State wildlife agencies to be cooperators on planning process.
  - NOI to amend plans out by EOY, scoping then begins – until March 2012. FEIS publish Dec. 2013, with RODs Sept. 2014
- Two regional management teams in place – will make decisions on how planning exercise will move forward and will oversee the subregional teams – ensure keeping the path.
  - Regional management teams will also be responsible for identifying those plans currently in progress that need additional work.

- Project managers for east and west temporally filled – will be advertised as permanent. At end of 2014 those positions will be re-directed but not eliminated.
- Workshop for both regional teams will be Oct. 26 – 28 in Denver.
  - Will have one day of overlap between the two regions to cover “basics” of each agency (e.g. BLM planning, ESA listing). Each team will also have a day on their own.
- Applications National sage-grouse coordinator will close Sept. 19. Will be based in DC, although WAFWA requested they be located in the West (question from Roy).
  - BLM clarified this did not need to be a sage-grouse technical expert – more of a policy and budget person, will also be a sagebrush biome person, work as a liaison with other agencies.
  - The regional management project leaders will serve as pseudo-coordinators in the West.
- In other news, BLM directed 250K from renewable energy to wind research

NRCS – Danielle Flynn (provided handout)

- NRCS relies on breeding bird density map to identify priority areas, with input from local states on other important areas.
  - Also look for opportunities to work across land ownerships even if not in a high density areas.
- WHIP and EQUIP continue to provide funding, but began funding conservation easements this year.
  - Types of actions implemented vary across the range, and depends on type of local threat.
- Funding in handout does not reflect partner contributions.
- Continue to retain Dave Naugle to evaluate the effectiveness of conservation practices. Working with Charlie Rewau (sp?) – including prescribed grazing (both grouse and sagebrush response), conifer removal, fence collision rates, benefit of easements on cumulative future fragmentation,
- NRCS has a strong Interest in tool regarding gene flow across range.
- SGI is working to develop web site for information sharing – available at the end of the year.
  - Have also hired Conservation Media to do outreach programs.
- Want to do a one year feedback session with FWS on conference report.
- Was a discussion on how to track all the projects implemented on the ground.
  - San suggested use conservation database FWS used for PECE for listing – WAFWA has it now – needs to get it active and address private land concerns.
  - Was further discussion of adequacy and consistency in recording data and project progress using on-line tools.
  - All agreed that some sort of tool was necessary.

Forest Service – Gene DeGayner – provided July 1, 2010 memo

- New planning rule coming out in December – Congress does not like and FS expects litigation.
- 2010 funding – restored and inventoried habitats,
- FS recognized that there is more they can do
- Requested letter from EOC/WAFWA (similar to the one for BLM identifying opportunities and identifying things good for sage-grouse and influential for listing process.

- San and Pat will work with Clint on letter (and also Sandy Kratville – new FS national wildlife lead). Will be circulated to EOC for review. FS would like specificity in the letter for allocation of the funding.
- Three tiers to address: LMP amendments, specific projects to do and are happening, and identification of those items that will be influential in the listing decision.
- Identify specific forests that need to review – Pat will review for priorities for FWS.
- Would like to have it done within the month.
- Need to review 2008 information regarding specificity of the plans relative to listing to help in developing letter.
- Noreen suggested that FS could benefit from the NTT so they don't have to "re-invent the wheel".
  - Are MOUs already in place that allow cross agency coordination to occur.

#### Other lands:

- BIA – 5%
  - Have been relatively unsuccessful in outreach with BIA.
  - Carol Schuler – outreach may be more fruitful if go directly to tribes and not BIA
  - Ken suggested an inventory by tribe of resource value for sage-grouse
  - There was a question (Alan?) regarding the authority of ESA on tribal lands – interpretations are variable, and Noreen expressed that FWS would rather use a "carrot" vs. stick
  - Was a suggestion to do a mapping exercise on tribal lands overlaid with sage-grouse habitats – birds, connectivity, etc. to help prioritize efforts.
  - Roy expressed that this needs to happen state to state, vs. a larger entity. Requested the mapping effort be completed, prioritized, and the information provided to each state wildlife agency.
- NPS – minimal habitat –
  - San identified that they have interest in playing, have good regulatory mechanisms in place.
- FWS – Refuge planning –
  - OR is going through a lot of CCP actions and Roy is concerned that sage-grouse are not a priority on refuges in that state.
  - Noreen will work throughout the affected regions to ensure sage-grouse are addressed/considered.
    - OR specifically concerned with Malheur Refuge, Sheldon-Hart.
  - Noreen indicated that FWS was starting analysis across all refuges on needs, status and where they are going. She asked folks to identify other refuges for which they wanted specific information.
    - Sheldon-Hart plan requires removal of wild horses and burros, is managing for sage-grouse via several mechanisms.
    - Charles M. Russell – since mid-80s reduced AUMs and continue that today, in middle of CCP now, delayed final as new refuge manager is trying to develop better partnerships, will finish in 2012.
    - Arapaho is trying to acquire the last in holding within the refuge for benefit sage-grouse.
  - Good news is plans are in process of being updated so there are opportunities for meaningful revisions for sage-grouse.

- DOD – locally has a big role to play, especially in WA
- BOR – no information
- State Lands –
  - Received a request from WGA regarding regulatory mechanisms within States and on State lands.
  - WY is probably the only state with regulation on state lands that have any teeth.
  - WGA is providing opportunity to address this now.
  - Roy and Alan expressed the need for WGA support on this issue.
- Ken asked RISCT to follow up on “little” owners and identify priorities there.
- Dave Risley mentioned that there is a sage-grouse summit at the end of September in Jackson, WY but had no other information. No one in the room had heard about it except for Pat Deibert who explained that it was an effort of the Wyoming Governor to encourage surrounding states to develop a strategy for sage-grouse conservation in an effort to preclude listing.
  - **FOLLOW-UP** – Pat checked with the Wyoming Governor’s staff regarding this meeting. The meeting is only for states that have any part of MZ II (ID, MT, WY, CO and UT) and will occur Oct. 4. It is a Governor level meeting with the hope that the Wyoming Governor can convince the Governors of the surrounding states to identify and protect sage-grouse core areas via a gubernatorial decree in all of MZ II.

#### SAB Connectivity proposal – Steve Knick (ppt presentation)

- Steve reminded folks of data availability on SAGEMAP – great repository for non-proprietary data
- Steve expressed appreciation to State agencies for supporting his work and for the biologists sharing knowledge and insights.
- Reviewed SAB book – represents what is happening with sage-grouse and sagebrush – did a brief overview of the results.
- Presentation on connectivity analyses – need to identify and maintain core populations
  - Steve was requesting the level of information to be shared on SAGEMAP. Rangewide connectivity does not require lek location data, and therefore would not be divulging any non-public data on SAGEMAP
    - EOC appeared comfortable with posting that information.
  - Population connectivity and linkages – vertices represent lek locations which most states are uncomfortable with posting in a public forum.
    - Steve would be willing to give the map to WAFWA if not posted on SAGEMAP so it can be used. Steve recognized the sensitivity of the data so wanted to pose the request before posted.
    - Dave Naugle has expressed his support for doing so for use in the NRCS SGI program.
  - Alan expressed concerns about risk of future listing actions with posting this data publically
    - Pat said that was a potential risk, but felt the risk of not having this tool for prioritizing conservation opportunities may be much larger.

#### Range-wide Sage-grouse mapping Project – deferred

#### Coordinator reports

- USFWS – Pat Deibert
  - Service is actively involved with BLM in all levels of their RMP revision/amendment process
  - Listing proposal for Gunnison sage-grouse is nearly ready for internal review. Intent is to publish the presumed proposal early in 2012.
  - FWS/Pat is sponsoring a Smith Fellow through the Society of Conservation Biology who, if accepted, will be looking at climate effects on sage-grouse population regulation.

Next Meeting: The EOC expressed the desire to meet at the mid-winter WAFWA meeting to facilitate communication given all the activities surrounding sage-grouse

Meeting adjourned.