

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
MAY 15, 2024**

The May 15, 2024 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 (Gunnison Trails)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Petar Simic, Research and Education At-Large
Matthew Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Paul Mowery, Gunnison County Stockgrowers

Non-Voting Members

Brandon Diamond, CPW
Jonathan Houck, Gunnison County

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Jon Hare, HCCA
Ben Prior, CPW
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Nick Catmur, Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation (STOR) Committee

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District
Misty Castillo, Gunnison County Community and Economic Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the May 15, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:05 AM.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Caloger to approve the May 15, 2024 agenda as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF APRIL 17, 2024 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Navy to approve the April 17, 2024 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS / REPORTS

Seward reported that a wolverine reintroduction bill was approved by the Colorado legislature and that the next steps would include drafting a reintroduction plan. Smith confirmed that the bill did include some funding and staff time. One of the reintroduced wolves was depredated by a mountain lion about a month ago. Seward also reported that there was a Colorado Sun article that illustrated some of the concerns with the use of County Road 26 regarding Gunnison sage-grouse breeding activity and long-term impacts. Seward also reported that the letter in support of the National Park Service grant for road crossings was finalized and submitted.

Vasquez reported that the Forest Plan Revision included updates to the species of concern; Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, desert bighorn sheep, black swifts, and 2 plant species were added. Whenever a USFS project is initiated, it must demonstrate that it meets planned conservation measures for the species of concern. This will involve some surveying to determine species distribution, habitat use, and populations. The Record of Decision is likely to be signed by early June and the plan will take effect 30 days later. Vasquez reported that the USFS is continuing sage-grouse habitat monitoring as required under the Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA), and Liam Duggan is finishing his related thesis now, but they are coordinating with a new Western Colorado University (WCU) student named Jenna to continue and expand monitoring efforts. Vasquez also mentioned that he went to the Black Sage Pass wet meadow restoration site and did an assessment of needs for maintenance and new structures. Tomorrow, the USFS plans to assess Lick Park north of Sawtooth, which would be a new USFS site to assess for restoration potential. Diamond reported that the USFS is planning prescribed burns in the Willow Creek drainage north of Centennial in the next couple of weeks, and CPW has granted access through Centennial after 9:00 am.

Simic reported he has had good recruitment from private landowners interested in cheatgrass treatment, including a \$68,000 contract with Silhouette for 3 large acreage landowners. Bradley Wigginton with Native Landscapes Company will take care of some smaller acreage projects. June 8 at 11:00 am to 2:00 pm will be the cheatgrass pull day, and June 15 will be a cheatgrass blitz using the app Cheat Maps to inventory cheatgrass at Hartman Rocks. June 30 will be Simic's last day as cheatgrass coordinator. Smith asked about ongoing monitoring or maintenance with private landowners, and Simic said it depends on the owner. Some engaged landowners have been following up with monitoring, whereas others are absentee or have very large acreage. There is no protocol for monitoring. Simic planned to ask the people that had treatments last year to check for cheatgrass and see if there is a need for follow up. Seward asked Smith about timeline for hiring a replacement, and Smith said they are going to try to list it quickly and start a new job search. Caloger and Navy thought it would be good to work with Mesa and Montrose County Commissioners to inspire them to work on cheatgrass infestations, but Smith thought cheatgrass was a low priority for most counties and that they lacked funding. Smith thought conversations with CSU-Extension could lead to replicating the position in other counties, and Houck said that the County Coalition no longer exists and some of the other counties do not have a stewardship interest. Simic reported that Wigginton worked on a contract with CDOT to treat some of the highway rights-of-way in Gunnison County, and he was awarded a bid to treat along highways in multiple adjacent counties, and the funding from that will allow him to hire additional help and purchase additional equipment.

COUNTY ROAD 26 USE

The Middle Bridge on Blue Mesa (near Dillon Pinnacles) failed an inspection on April 18 given noticeable cracking in the steel, the road was closed to all traffic, and the road closure has now been designated a federal emergency. The Strategic Committee was not given an opportunity to weigh in on any decisions, given how quickly events transpired. Public Works looked at alternate routes (County Road 26 and County Road 25) including inspecting the roads and removing the snow plugs. CDOT provided crews to assist with alternate routes on April 19, and Diamond immediately provided input about significant concerns for wildlife. Houck contacted Cochran who agreed that there were concerns about wildlife but that the County Road is County jurisdiction. Recommendations for minimizing wildlife impacts included keeping cars on the road and moving, minimize impacts beyond the road way, and be mindful of timing. The County and State worked together to address the road, initially with gravel from Montrose to address soft spots on the road.

Houck acknowledged that County Road 26 likely has larger sage-grouse impacts than other alternatives. County Road 25 crosses Ute Mountain Ute property, and there was a weight restricted bridge and a series of switchbacks, making it less suitable for the County. There was initially only an opening in the morning and evening with construction work during the day between openings. Despite community feedback for an earlier opening from Montrose to Gunnison, Houck said the County pushed back the opening time frame 30 minutes after the first two days, and opened the road from Gunnison to Montrose first to reduce impacts to the leks. Additional openings were then allowed during the day. The road normally opens on May 15, but the County will not fully open the road until at least Friday, May 17th.

Houck said partners have concerns about the long-term impacts to wildlife. The County and BLM have worked proactively to have road closures in sage-grouse habitat 8 years prior to the listing decision, so Houck said they did not take the opening of this road lightly. CDOT will continue to use a pilot car and will apply magnesium chloride to reduce dust and travel speeds to reduce impacts to wildlife.

Navy asked about the distance of leks to the road, and Seward and Childers said the roads were multiple active leks that were very close to the road and in direct line of sight to the road. According to a 12-year telemetry study by the NPS and observations from biologists of multiple agencies, sage-grouse frequently cross County Road 26 and have nested adjacent to the road. Some nests are likely already initiated and frequent traffic near any nests may cause nest abandonment.

Houck said he believed it was unrealistic to expect the road to remain closed until May 15 or until after 10:00 am. He thought there was social collateral for wildlife issues in the Gunnison community, and Houck thought there would be a loss would be a loss of Gunnison sage grouse conservation support because people would think the County was prioritizing sage-grouse over school, work, or hospital appointments. They had several outraged citizens plowing County Road 25 and trying to get through seasonally locked gates.

Smith was at the capitol during the initial closure, and said there was talk of paving County Road 26, but she said the County and CDOT did not want to do that.

Navy asked about lek counts, and Childers said that the counts were a little bit lower this year even before the road closure. During both counts after the road was opened, there was significant dust. The highest attendance per morning occurred when the roads opened, and the birds hunkered down and stopped displaying when cars drove by but did not flush.

Simic asked who can pass through the opening. Houck said the State has declared an emergency and is working on County Road 26 with federal funds, and the State can choose to take over jurisdiction on the road. However, the County says they have maintained control and management of the road. Anyone for any reason will be let through the closure at the opening times. Houck thought it is not practical for semis to use it right now and that most of the semi traffic will continue to come in from the east, although several people noted they have seen semis using County Road 26. Houck expects heavy summer traffic. Normal traffic is about 140 cars per day on County Road 26, and they are already exceeding that. Simic was concerned about tourist traffic coming through that area, and asked why during the lek season the timing could not be pushed back until 9:00 am. Houck said there is a portion of the workforce that live in Montrose. Simic said it was risking the viability of the species and decades of conservation efforts, but Houck disagreed and said sage-grouse conservation loses out to people paying a mortgage. Simic pointed out that tourist traffic is not people paying a mortgage. Houck said that the recreation traffic in Gunnison comes from Denver, and that recreation traffic from the west only goes to Blue Mesa so he believed tourist traffic on County Road 26 would be limited. Caloger asked how much of the traffic is discretionary versus emergency, and suggested education about using alternate routes when possible.

Blair did say the County would have to engage in emergency consultation before he left the USFWS.

Houck explained that depending on the time frame to repair or replace the bridge, the County may engage in different mitigation efforts. Navy asked how long it would take to repair the bridge, and it could be weeks to years depending on what scenario was required. Smith thought the pilot car would continue, which she thought was enough of an inconvenience to deter some traffic. Hare suggested improving protections in other places in Gunnison to make up for this unforeseen wildlife habitat sacrifice, and was hopeful for more funding for conservation efforts.

Mowery thanked Houck on behalf of the agricultural community, given the increased costs that they were facing for trucks and gas. Mowery asked about Kebler as an alternate. Houck said CDOT is helping open Kebler earlier than they might have otherwise, including use of equipment that the County does not normally use and replacing culverts, but they might not be able to open much more than a week early given the time it will take to dry out.

Caloger brought up Google Maps, and CDOT and the Federal Highway Transportation Administration have been working with Google to show Middle Bridge is closed, and that County Road 26 is open but has designations to deter people from using it. Smith said the commissioners would work with the Tourism and Prosperity Partnership and airlines for messaging about how to avoid going through Sapinero Mesa.

I & E SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP REVIEW FOR ROAD CLOSURE MESSAGING

Tabled until the June meeting.

STOR WILDLIFE DECISION TOOL

The STOR Committee is working on a Wildlife Decision Tool for land use decisions and processes. There is an increased demand for outdoor recreation both given a growing population in Colorado and growing tourism, and this results in trash, resource damage, human waste, and other concerns. There is also a decrease in agency funding, but 95% of citizens have an interest in managing recreation for wildlife in a Chaffee County community survey. The CPW Outdoor Regional Partnerships Initiative (RPI) was created to build local collaboratives to address sustainability issues with wildlife and recreation. Gunnison County is part of a tri-county collaborative with Chaffee and Lake County, and the STOR Committee received funds through the RPI in 2022 for creating the collaborative and creating the Wildlife Decision Tool.

Diamond introduced the tool by explaining how nearly everything humans do impacts wildlife and their habitats, and any compromises where the viability of a wildlife population is considered, wildlife and their habitats often are overlooked or undervalued. Habitat fragmentation is incremental and tends to build up in an area over time. The tool aims to identify high quality blocks of habitat for multiple species, similarly to a multi-species Habitat Prioritization Tool (HPT) for Gunnison Sage-Grouse. The HPT will be incorporated directly for sage-grouse instead of replicating that effort. This tool would incorporate species and their habitats based on the species rarity, population trend, economic impact, specificity of the spatial data, and the species sensitivity to recreation. The maps can be produced by season (such as elk production versus critical winter range). They also have maps of existing human impacts which can be added together with the species maps to create a continuum of disturbed low quality habitat to undisturbed high quality habitat.

The tool can work in conjunction with and support agency policy. For example, it can be used by CPW for land use comments, federal agency recreation planning, county land use planning and code/resolution updates, etc. The map is available on CODEX for Lake and Chaffee Counties. Houck thought it could be useful for County land use planning, and Diamond agreed that the specificity of the layers was important so it could be used to identify species of concern at specific times of year. Catmur said Lake and Chaffee County are incorporating the use of the Wildlife Decision Tool into their land use planning codes.

Lake and especially Chaffee County did community surveys prior to designing the Wildlife Decision Tool, but Gunnison will be working on the tool and then STOR will do community surveys to determine how people want to see the tool used and what updates are important for the future. Chaffee, Lake, and Durango counties are working on or have completed similar Wildlife Decision Tools and Gunnison is expected to finish around mid-June. Smith thought it was important to have public education and outreach.

LEK COUNT UPDATE

Prior showed the third count period report. So far, the 2nd count period was the highest male count of the first 3 count periods with 517 males, likely the peak of breeding. The highest high male count (HMC) at any lek was 104 at Teachout in Ohio Creek. The HMC for the year is the highest HMC per lek, so the HMC for the season should be higher than any individual count period. Access was not a problem this year. Several people asked about Sapinero leks given the significant increase in traffic on County Road 26 during the peak of breeding season, so the Committee looked at the numbers for all 5 active leks in the area. Any detrimental impacts to counts are more likely to occur in next year's lek counts, which will demonstrate any avoidance response or population level impacts from removing the road closure.

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.

06-12-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
07-17-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
08-21-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
09-18-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-16-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-20-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-18-24	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

June meeting is rescheduled for June 12 10:00 am – 12:00 pm given the Juneteenth holiday on the regularly scheduled meeting.

ADJOURN: The May 15, 2024 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:24 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District