

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
December 16, 2020**

The December 16, 2020 Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee meeting was conducted by Zoom virtual online meeting, Gunnison, CO, 81230

Committee Members Present:

Voting Members:

Jonathan Houck, Chairperson, Gunnison County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC)
Greg Peterson, Secretary, Gunnison County Stockgrowers' Association (GCSA)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Sue Navy, High Country Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Elijah Waters, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Nate Seward, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) Alternate

Non-Voting Members

None

Others in the Audience:

Kathy Griffin, Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Pat Magee, Western Colorado University
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
Paul Jones, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District
Leah Waldner, BLM
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Brandon Diamond, CPW
Courtney King, Education Outreach Coordinator GB-SEA
Wendi Maez, Saguache County Administrator
Amber Wilson, Saguache County Land Use Administrator
Joe Lavorini, Gunnison County Stewardship Coordinator
Brandon Miller, USFWS Partners for Wildlife Program

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist
Rebecca Ricord, Gunnison County Community Development

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Houck called the December 16, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:02 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF AUGUST 19, 2020 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Peterson to approve the August 19, 2020 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

APPROVAL OF OCTOBER 21, 2020 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Navy and seconded by Peterson to approve the August 19, 2020 meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Peterson reported that the Stockgrowers' Association is working on how they want to move forward with the lawsuit that was filed against the USFS, BLM, and others. They have not met yet.

Vasquez reported that the Forest Service is working on responding to the complaint. They are hoping to have it done by early January. Reported that he accepted the position as the Wildlife Fish and Rare Plants Program Manager position for the GMUG National Forest. He will continue working with the committee until he is replaced, but would like to continue being a part of the committee in some form. Reported that he and Magee have been talking about a partnership with the University and the Forest Service, for livestock grazing and monitoring. One of their biggest challenges has been the more frequent drought conditions and how they manage during that time.

Olson reported that Alison Hearne will be the Area 1 wildlife biologist with NRCS.

Kugler reported that they started grooming trails at Hartman Rocks. Will be working with the BLM to monitor compliance with closures at Signal Peak. The trails are shut January 1st for bicycle use.

Diamond reported that CPW's intent is to have him replace J Wenum on the committee. They will send a letter with Seward continuing as the alternate. Kathy Griffin will also participate.

Waters reported that Kristi Murphy has accepted a job with the Medicine Bow/Routt National Forest and will be starting at the end of January.

Navy reported that on the field trip they had two months ago they gave J Wenum the stewardship award and believes it went well.

Houck reported that the County, CDOT and CPW were trying to look at roadkill issues along the highway. They will start bringing the roadkill to the County landfill, where they can be placed and covered. They are digging into the lawsuit that was filed on December 7, 2020. The County will work with their partners on their response. Houck reminded everyone that elections for the chairs will come up at the beginning of the year, January 2021. Reported that David Baumgarten will be retiring at the end of the year.

Navy asked about the proactive potential they had talked earlier on about potentially putting in some sort of over pass to prevent the roadkill from occurring and wanted to know if it had been moving forward. Houck stated that issues around roads is the funding. Diamond stated that it is important and that they have been working on collaborative efforts with agencies and isn't sure when it will trickle down to Gunnison County. Griffin reported that US Fish and Wildlife Service has a Conservation Efforts Database that they have been building to allow everyone to track their conservation efforts towards Gunnison Sage-grouse. They are still working on it. The main person, Leif Weichman has moved onto USGS, but he is still working on moving this effort moving forward. Griffin stated that dealing with roadkill appropriately will be a really important project to capture in that CED and asked who she should contact. Houck stated that she should contact Marlene Crosby, Public Works director.

Diamond stated that moving forward he thought that watching different leks that there is a lot of legitimacy in disposing of beef carcasses in a similar way and believes it is worth looking at hauling them away for ranchers. Houck believes having that he will take steps on working on that. Peterson agrees that if there is a way to create that it would be good. Peterson believes that if they get to where they are having issues with roadkill that if there are portable trailers with the sides on them letting people know there are issues with wildlife and to reduce their speed. He would also like to see happen is that on the highways that at night time the speed limits should be 55 at the highest and have it enforced and there would be less issues with roadkill. Houck reported that the volumes are getting higher on Highway 50. The County has advocated wildlife fencing when there is funding available. The initial feedback that they have heard is that it would be easier to work on projects on the east of highway 50 and that it is a more difficult on the west side. It will

stay on the County radar. Magee asked if there is a plan on the frequency of when the roadkill will be picked up. Diamond stated they don't have a plan right now but are working on one.

2021 SUMMIT UPDATE

Magee reported that they changed the Summit to 2022 so they do not have to have a virtual meeting. They are having their first annual Pre-Summit workshop on February 24, 2021. They will be working on a process for implementation and aligning their efforts with the recovery plan and conservation efforts. They are still hoping to raise funds to offer a fellowship for one of the students to help plan the meeting and the 2022 summit.

They are thinking about doing a Summit and a Festival to celebrate the 21st birthday of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse. They are hoping to have some art ready that they can reveal in fall of 2021. They are possibly looking at having some viewing at the Waunita Lek in April 2021. They are trying to create opportunities to celebrate the bird and the accomplishments that have happened over the years.

WET MEADOW RESTORATION 2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Jones reported that they started out with an ambitious schedule but COVID significantly altered their work. They were able to get a lot of handwork done in Pinon Mesa, built 44 structures. They built 99 structures this year, along 1 ¼ mile river miles and they calculated that it was just under 11 acres of riparian habitat influenced by that, which translates to almost 54 acres of sage-grouse habitat. 44 structures outside of the basin and 55 structures within the basin. Cumulatively they are up to 1,946 structures, just under 27 stream miles, 181 acres of wetland habitat and roughly 1,259 acres of Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse habitat. They have worked in Pinon Mesa, San Miguel and Crawford. They have started initial scoping in Poncha this year. They have a project lined up in the Cerro Summit Sims Mesa population. The Pinon Mesa project is going to continue for at least another year, maybe two.

They are trying to think ahead for next year and have staged 120 tons of rock on Flat Top work for next year. He stopped by the Waunita Hot Springs Reservoir and noticed that there was a lot of rock there in the parking lot there. He reached out to the State Land Board. The State Land Board is coming in as a new partner in the Gunnison Basin. They donated all the rock in Waunita to them. They have roughly 200 cubic rock available to the program. They have about a million dollars in grants or money obligated available to the program for work over the next couple of years. They have been putting in for other grants. They applied for the US Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Implementation grant but have not heard back yet. They are working with CPW to develop a CPW wetlands grant. They are looking pretty good financially for the next couple of years. Went over the additional grants that they have been working on.

They are bringing on a field crew for four months that they can assign to work on various projects within and outside of the basin. He reported that HCCA has really stepped up in including a stewardship aspect to their advocacy work and they went after a grant from the CWBC, Colorado Water Conservation Board. They were able to get a \$98,000 grant to augment the Wet Meadow program. In addition to that, they were able to get work done in the basin this year with the help of HCCA and students from Western and ended up with 107 volunteers for 46 hours to help them build a number of projects.

Navy stated that HCCA is looking for more money this year. They are partnering with the MEM program at WCU. It will be another interesting season. HCCA has a number of projects lined up, at least eight already. All they need are volunteers.

Seward reported that they worked on hiring a local contractor to do some juniper removal within their wet meadow treatments. The contractor is trying to go out to Sapinero Mesa today to look at the treatment on the BLM land they have done. There are sporadic junipers within the wet meadow valley bottom and Seward believes that there is just enough juniper that it is likely deterring grouse use and junipers are known to suck up gallons of water a day from the systems. He believes that if they can remove them they will be able to retain a fraction of the water in the systems, which will promote the overall resiliency and seasonal waterflow available in those areas. They are going to prioritize removing junipers from the wet meadow areas and depending on the amount of funding that is available in the next couple of years they will be able

to then look at lek sites and venture out within the 6/10ths of a mile buffer around the leks and remove any encroaching juniper that is popping up. It isn't a significant threat in the Gunnison Basin compared to other areas but his fear is that if they leave the junipers unchecked they will be a seed source and they will continue to see more and more juniper within the sage brush ecosystem as it continues to dry out in the future. They will see how the work goes in the future. The contractor wasn't able to access the Sapinero area. The next window to of opportunity would be after July 15th and through the Fall. Peterson asked if they are just cutting them, Seward stated that it is a one person crew with his chainsaw, who will cut down the juniper and cut it into smaller pieces and left to rot out within the sage brush. They are looking at using the trunks as additional material for the wet meadow treatments.

GUNNISON BASIN SAGEBRUSH ECOSYSTEM ALLIANCE 2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

King reported that in early October they had Public Lands day. They had over 70 volunteers. The day involved multiple concurrent projects, which allowed people to split up and have some space so they were a safer. They pulled thistle and collected a lot of trash. They removed unfriendly wildlife fencing. They pulled invasive weeds by Western. A few days after that, a crew participated in their third annual interagency strike force day. The group consisted of individuals from CPW, NPS, the Forest Service, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, the Conservation District, people from Western and Mayor Gelwicks. Over a couple of hours the group used backpack sprayers to spray a large patch of cheatgrass near the Mountaineer Bowl, as well as some smaller patches on the trial system. It was another example of collaboration between agencies and allowed them to play around with some sort of mapping of cheatgrass.

In early October they submitted a grant application for the Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Implementation Strategy grant and tied a few projects with the draft recovery implantation strategy for Gunnison Basin sage-grouse, developing a strategy and working towards greater capacities for cheatgrass mapping and data collection. Their ultimate goal is to develop a map that would prioritize areas for treatment based on the extent of the cheatgrass outbreak, as well as the area's importance for Gunnison sage-grouse. To accomplish that, they hope to identify someone with a strong skillset with remote sensing and mapping. They have discussed funding a graduate student assistantship and that person would also carry out education and outreach. The grant application also includes funding for treatment and reseeding. They proposed a few potential areas where this would occur, that would ideally tailor the treatment based on that prioritization map. They are still waiting to hear about the results of that grant.

Earlier in December they submitted a separate grant through the Western Integrated Pest Management Center. They developed a project to hire a crew from the WCC for about two to three weeks of spraying and reseeding. The idea for that grant was to tie into the Conservation District's private landowners' cost share program. Through the HPP the District previously received funding to provide free herbicide to landowners, specifically agricultural producers, and many expressed interest in the program but lack the time or ability to carry out the treatment themselves so this grant application is designed to improve their capacities for treating cheatgrass on private lands. Their ultimate goal is to have the project to serve as a model that they can take to neighboring counties. The project will also provide education and outreach.

SAGUACHE COUNTY UPDATE AND DISCUSSION

Seward reported that they had a conference call last week with Amber Wilson. Over the past year they haven't had good representation from Saguache County and reached out to them to invite them back to participate with the Committee. They wanted to make them aware of the most recent Recovery Implementation Strategy, that was finalized by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, that there was an action in there, 3.11, to improve County involvement throughout Gunnison Sage-grouse range. A large part of the sage-grouse population is in Saguache County.

Wilson reported that they will be working with their Commissioners to get approval to follow guidelines that they need to follow before they can move forward because it will change their land development code. They will discuss who can be the member on the Committee with a possible alternate with the Commissioners, as well. Asked that Seward send her the Recovery Implementation Strategy. Seward reported he would email it to her. Houck stated that he will be reaching out to their Commissioners and help move that work along. Peterson stated that he can also help.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

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

1-20-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
2-17-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
3-17-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
4-21-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
5-19-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
6-16-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
7-21-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
8-18-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
9-15-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-20-21	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
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

ADJOURN: The December 16, 2020 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 11:50 AM.

Minutes Prepared By: Rebecca Ricord, Gunnison County Community Development