

GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
February 16, 2022

The February 16, 2022 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)
Theresa Childers, National Park Service (NPS)
Kathy Brodhead, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
Allison Hearne, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Sue Navy, High County Conservation Advocates (HCCA)
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Peter Caloger, Community At-Large
Polly Oberosler, Development At-Large
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large

Non-Voting Members

None

Others in the Audience:

Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Virginia Adams, Saguache County
Brandon Miller, USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
Sonja Chavez, Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District (UGRWCD)
Cheryl Cwelich, UGRWCD
Jess Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist
Beth Baker, Gunnison County Community Development Department

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the February 16, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:02 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF JANUARY 19, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: Moved: by Smith and seconded by Brodhead to approve the January 19, 2022 meeting minutes as amended. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Smith updated that there are two proposed mural designs for IOOF park and there is a public comment period. To comment on the mural options, visit the Tourism and Prosperity Partnership or Gunnison Arts Center websites to provide feedback. One mural design does feature a sage-grouse. Smith also said that Les Owen at the Department of Agriculture passed Smith's name along as an appointment to the state's

Noxious Weed Advisory Board. Smith will be looking for comments and feedback to advocate for the Gunnison community on that board. The WCU representation on the Strategic Committee is on the agenda for the Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) work session on February 22, so Seward, Magee, and Young will be invited to that meeting to explain the importance of WCU representation on the Strategic Committee and how that would fit within the organizational structure of the Committee.

Kugler said the lack of snow will likely mean recreationists will want to be on the dry trails early. Kugler is looking to put up educational signs at Signal Peak, and hoping Hartman's can open earlier so people can go there instead of Signal Peak.

Brodhead also had concerns about dry conditions and road/trail closures. The BLM is working on educating the receptionist and they are considering putting an article in the Gunnison Times for the public. Additionally, Brodhead noted that the BLM has had staffing issues in the last year, but they do now have an archaeologist, so this summer they should be able to move projects along. Brodhead also just found out the BLM will be hiring a second wildlife biologist as a GS-11 but that position has not yet been announced.

Seward reminded the Committee that the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site dates were set in CPW's regulations for State Wildlife Areas (SWAs) given it's designation as an SWA. This year, the site will open April 1 and be open through April 9, closed April 10 through April 16, reopen April 17 through April 30, and be closed May 1 for the remainder of the season. In addition to many overall website updates, Magee has updated the Sisk-A-Dee website so the dates are correct. Seward reminded meeting attendees that people visiting the SWA do need a hunting or fishing license to access the SWA given CPW's new SWA regulations. Because this is the second year of that regulation, Seward expected there to be more enforcement this year.

Navy reported that HCCA is working on planning stewardship projects for the upcoming season, including one on Trail Creek.

Wilson said that Saguache County received an initial contact from someone looking at developing a single-family residence and septic system in the Poncha Pass area. Saguache County let the applicant know it was a sage-grouse area and they would need additional information, so they are working through that process now.

Childers said NPS has a lot of senior staff on details or new to the park. Kim Hartwig, the Resources Chief is on detail at least through March, the Superintendent is on a detail at the regional office, and 2 division Chiefs are new to the park within the last few months. The new Chiefs are also relocating to Black Canyon instead of Curecanti given lower housing prices.

DEVELOPMENT FLOWCHART

Rummel worked with Blair to update wording in the last box on the private side to include the possible USFWS requirement for a take permit. Additionally, they revised the federal land portion of the flowchart to consider projects in or near Critical Habitat rather than just in Critical Habitat. The newest version also addressed Navy's concern that a sage-grouse review does not guarantee building permit approval.

Wilson said Saguache County may use this in developing their process for sage-grouse reviews. They will pass it along to their Commissioners and Planning Department to revise it for their County.

Smith will see if the development flowchart needs formal approval from BoCC, but she and Pagano thought it would likely not since it is informational and not revising policy.

MINUTES AND ACTION ITEMS DIRECTION

Pagano explained that the Community Development Department records and writes minutes for five different committees, including the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee among others. The Community Development Department is short staffed, and having a difficult time keeping up with recording

and revising detailed minutes. The County Attorney's office said minutes must record action items, policies adopted, resolutions proposed, etc. but do not need to be detailed recordings of the discussions that occur at the meeting. The Community Development Department will continue to record Zoom meetings and they are looking into options that they can post on YouTube, but they need some clarification on transcripts and ADA requirements. Transcripts from Zoom with timestamps may help people find the discussions they are interested in. YouTube can generate subtitles, but they are automatically generated and do not differentiate who is talking so it can be confusing to follow along. Brodhead said it is nice to be able to skim minutes from when she misses a meeting, whereas she is less likely to be able to watch the entire video. Pagano said that it can be a conversation that evolves and continues to change, including if their staffing changes and they are able to record more detail in their minutes.

CHEATGRASS AND COORDINATOR POSITION UPDATE

The Technical Subcommittee meeting was January 31, 2022. Julie Kraft presented on her work with Sublette County on controlling cheatgrass. She discussed what chemicals they used and why, how the program began, and where the program is now including their staffing (20 seasonal technicians plus support staff in the office to track grants/proposals, etc). Kraft collaborates with partners and federal programs (such as NRCS EQIP contracts, which Kraft helps get those going). Seward believed her model could be a long-term goal given her success on the ground.

Also at the Technical Subcommittee meeting, the subcommittee worked through a draft Scope of Work.

Blair also discussed the USFWS opportunity for infrastructure bill funding for sagebrush projects at the Subcommittee meeting. Blair is putting together a proposal, including money for cheatgrass treatments and potentially some capacity. Long discussed Planet Labs Planet Imagery, which may be an effective tool to identify patches of cheatgrass from aerial imagery, and it is affordable, though it does require appropriate timing with cheatgrass in the purple color phase. Blair is including funding for this imagery to help guide where treatments occur. Blair plans to include one-quarter of the basin each year for mapping. The coordinator would be key to interacting with private lands and reaching out to them about their cheatgrass being mapped and potentially treated in the future. If landowners do not want their land mapped, they could be blurred out of the imagery. Although the infrastructure bill funding may not allow money to go towards capacity, Blair believes it can be used for capacity directly related to deliverables and could support the coordinator working with private landowners in that way.

Miller brought up that the infrastructure bill funding proposals also include funding for Greater sage-grouse projects, not just Gunnison sage-grouse. The majority of the proposal will go towards on-the-ground implementation funding. USFWS has not decided if capacity can be included in the proposal yet, but Blair will include capacity funding if the USFWS decides that is something that can be included. Because it would be related to deliverables, Blair also is writing in time for the coordinator to develop a monitoring program, and complete monitoring pre- and post-treatment. Blair also wants to support the cost of materials (backpack sprayers, leasing vehicles, purchasing chemical, etc). The proposal will be due at the regional USFWS level in mid-March to April. Blair would work on adding a monitoring action item for the proposal, which would go into post-treatment restoration work.

Brodhead advocated that this should be a full-time position to increase everyone's capacity within the other agencies. She believes the BLM is likely to continue finding funding for the position as long as there are demonstrated results. She is concerned that if the coordinator is funded as only a part-time position, they may not have the time or resources to successfully complete projects, and then the BLM may be less likely to provide money in the future for the position. That would be unfortunate for the BLM and all other agencies to be able to complete projects.

Smith said that Kaminsky attended the BoCC work meeting and said BLM will contribute \$25,000 for the coordinator position, and money for treatments, seeding, restoration beyond that. Brian Stevens (BLM) said that Rejuvra will be approved within 17 months at the national level, though it would still require an Environmental Assessment locally.

Smith found information on salary and benefits for a similar position within the County (\$74,000 salary plus benefits for a Weed Management Program position in Gunnison County), and can provide that information

to Rummel to send to the committee via email. Smith thought it would be okay for minor tweaks and adjustments to the Scope of Work throughout the hiring process until funding approval comes, at which time the job should be announced. Smith thought it was more important to determine a hiring timeline, and Seward thought creating the timeline for hiring would be a good Technical Subcommittee agenda item. Smith said County Management has started looking into how this person might be affiliated, employed, or contracted by Gunnison County. With the multitude of contracts, grants, and revenue streams associated with this position, it might be harder to have them as a County employee (e.g. they may have to be a contractor).

For the Scope of Work, Scott recommended the requirement that the Coordinator needs to have a Qualified Supervisor license to be able to do on the ground work. This license would help the person to keep up with herbicide regulations, recommendations for application rates, etc. Brodhead asked if the applicants could work towards receiving the license within a year, if they were supervised during chemical applications to get the on-the-ground experience. Scott thought the testing process for the Qualified Supervisor license would not take much time, and there are a lot of educational resources. Applicants for the license do need to meet minimum requirements for time spent on chemical applications under supervision of a Qualified Supervisor, but the Colorado Department of Agriculture does sometimes make exceptions depending on work experience. A person can do the testing for a Certified Operator license, and then get experience for a Qualified Supervisor license. A benefit for the Coordinator to be a Qualified Supervisor is that they must go through "continuing education" credits every three years to renew their license. Smith thought it would make sense to list chemical application experience and Qualified Supervisor licensing as "preferred", but required within a certain time frame if not currently a Certified Operator or Qualified Supervisor. Blair mentioned that Colorado Department of Agriculture takes reciprocal licenses from other entities, so a person that has a similar license in a different state might be able to get a reciprocal license.

The Scope of Work was focused on treatment and application of herbicide, and Young said she would like to see more duties related to restoration of sagebrush, seeding, and seed collection/growing. Others on the Committee agreed. Kaminsky believed that adding in more skills and job duties than just herbicide application could assist with higher job satisfaction given the complexity of the job and therefore likely higher retention for the position.

With the current Scope of Work, Seward thought a MS degree with 2 years of professional experience would be good minimum qualifications. In the Required Skills and Experience section of the Scope of Work, Childers thought the job would be more equivalent to a GS-11 or GS-12 and should have more requirements, such as knowledge of restoration techniques, and experience with coordination of meetings and contracts. Navy wanted someone that would be able to work with people, including to potentially be involved in coordinating volunteer projects, and to reach out and partner with everyone. Smith suggested cross-referencing the Scope of Work with Julie Kraft's presentation.

Chavez and Cwelich had a potential funding opportunity for the Coordinator, through a WaterSmart grant from the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). WaterSmart grants are typically focused on the establishment of a watershed group, including a coordinator. BOR is trying to distribute money from the infrastructure bill, with a focus on water, but Chavez thought there could be a lot of potential overlap with other nexuses (sage-grouse, drought, etc). This is an annual application, so UGRWCD could partner to put together an application potentially next year because they would need to know where the position is housed, if it is part-time or full-time, and other critical components before the application was submitted soon. There is also funding from the Colorado River District 7A funds (Community Funding Partnership), which supports projects throughout the basin related to water resources. Chavez thought day to day communication and strong leadership would be important qualifications. She thought having someone housed in the County would be a good fit. Chavez thought the coordinator should seek funding in the long-term for core support to have a local crew that was able to treat cheatgrass.

UGRWCD also reminded the Strategic Committee that approximately \$15,000 was set aside for aerial mapping of cheatgrass in a NFWF grant they received. There was also another \$4,200 for the GBSEA group, which could likely be used to fund the Coordinator position.

RAVEN DEPREDATION CARCASS MITIGATION UPDATE

Seward had a discussion with Marlene Crosby (Gunnison County Public Works) relative to the current carcass agreement with the Landfill. CDOT and CPW can collect roadkill carcasses and take them to the landfill to properly dispose of them at a discounted rate. CPW will be allowed to expand that discounted rate for euthanized animals. CPW would like to reach out to agricultural producers (specifically those enrolled in CCAAs to start) to let them know this is available to them, and Seward would cover the cost of the disposal fee. Seward is working on the logistics of using technicians to remove the carcasses so that is not a barrier. Seward is working with Crosby to get the expansion of the discounted rate on the agenda for the March 1 BoCC meeting. CPW would track CDOT carcasses, CPW carcasses (roadkill and other), and agricultural carcasses that went to the landfill. Seward plans to send a letter to CCAA holders, to notify them of the opportunity, and to get feedback on how to implement this program effectively in a manner that is useful to the landowners. Oberosler thought there were still a lot of carcasses out on the land, and Seward explained that timing of carcass pickup can lead to some carcasses remaining on the road.

Oberosler brought up an overpass as a potential way to reduce roadkill carcasses. Seward explained the state had allocated money for overpasses but that other highways were prioritized for funding. Navy supported getting money locally for migration routes. Kevin Blecha's (CPW) GPS elk and VHF deer monitoring provides excellent supportive data. Navy thought emphasizing the link between carcasses and sage-grouse might increase the ranking of Gunnison highways, but Seward thought that it might be difficult to conclusively link those and that CPW would be unlikely to pursue a rigorous scientific study on it.

Smith had a conversation with Diego La Plata about the City waste management. The City is more focused on bear and human conflict, and less on ravens. La Plata had some data from an MEM student on bears, which he will try to find to pass along. There may be an educational piece for the City, and La Plata will reach out to Jason Kibler to talk to him. Seward thought there was potential to overlap sage-grouse funds to support the use of more wildlife-proof trash containers in the City.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN DISCUSSION AND UPDATES

Action Item 8G is a newly proposed Action Item drafted by Scott, and calls for a USFWS Habitat Conservation Plan for the City's 3-mile development plan. Scott explained that the 3-mile buffer is around the edge of the current City limits. Seward was supportive of adding the action item, but wanted to know more about what the HCP would include such as number of leks, amount of critical habitat encompassed, etc. Scott will provide a map to the Strategic Committee. Scott and Seward thought that Mike Pelletier (Gunnison County GIS) would be helpful for mapping since this HCP would be for the County.

For Action Item 9, Seward thought it was an important model to continue. No further revisions were required.

For Action Item 10, Brodhead thought monitoring should have more emphasis than mapping. She said BLM has tons of locations they know need to be treated, but not the capacity to treat them or to monitor after treatment. Seward thought there was a lot of benefit to the BLM Assessment, Inventory, and Monitoring (AIM) data, and wondered about including AIM experience as a requirement for the Scope of Work. Brodhead said AIM is a very detailed dataset for a very small area (25 m radius), but might need a less detailed and rapid assessment for a larger area for cheatgrass. Seward suggested photo points, and Brodhead recommended larger scale transects. Matt Germino might come out to do fieldwork in Red Creek to monitor treatments and he may be a resource for determining monitoring methods. Childers thought the Rangeland Conservation Plan methods were pretty in depth; although it does reduce observer bias, it takes 1-2 hours per point. Sometimes mapping (aerial or on-the-ground) is more successful during a boom year for cheatgrass and depending on timing.

Smith though it would be easier to update the Action Plan (Action Item 10) after finalizing the Scope of Work, but Nate wants to wrap up Action Plan soon.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

None.

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

March 16 is the Gunnison schools Spring Break. Seward and Smith are unlikely to attend. Reschedule to March 23 at 10:00 am.

03-23-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
04-20-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
05-18-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
06-15-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
07-20-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
08-17-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
09-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
10-19-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
11-16-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room
12-21-22	10-12	Regular Meeting	Blackstock; 221 N. Wisconsin 2 nd floor meeting room

ADJOURN: The February 16, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:54 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District