

**GUNNISON BASIN SAGE-GROUSE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
April 20, 2022**

The April 20, 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)
Amber Wilson, Saguache County
Tim Kugler, Recreation At-Large
Greg Peterson, Gunnison County Stockgrowers Association
Whit Blair, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Peter Caloger, Public At-Large
Matt Vasquez, U.S. Forest Service (USFS)
Dan Olson, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Non-Voting Members

Darren Long, USFS
Steffanie Chain, Public At-Large
Jessica Frey, NPS

Others in the Audience:

Jessica Young, Western Colorado University (WCU)
Marcella Tarantino, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
John Scott, Scott Resource Management Services
Diego La Plata, City of Gunnison Mayor

Staff Members Present:

Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District, Wildlife Biologist

Others present as listed in text.

CALL TO ORDER: Chairperson Seward called the April 20, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee to order at 10:05 A.M.

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

AGENDA APPROVAL: Agenda approved as presented.

APPROVAL OF MARCH 23, 2022 MEETING MINUTES: **Moved:** by Peterson and seconded by Smith to approve the March 23, 2022 meeting minutes. Motion carried unanimously.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS/REPORTS

Caloger thought the presentation by Dr. Pete Coates on corvids on the first day at the Gunnison Sage-grouse Summit was thought-provoking. Coate's work indicated that corvids have significant impacts to greater sage-grouse survival through nest depredation and chick predation. Caloger and Coates had a conversation about USFWS protections for corvids. There are three types of USFWS "take" permits that could be used for corvid control. The easiest level of permit to obtain is most restrictive as to what control measures can be taken, and the most challenging take permit to obtain could potentially be a Basin-wide permit to reduce corvid populations. These permits could potentially cover landowners who wanted to do

some corvid control methods during lekking and brood-rearing periods in a targeted location approach. Caloger suggested that ravens that were removed from the population via the take permit could be sent to a Fort Collins lab to see if they had sage-grouse DNA from depredation. Caloger acknowledged this would likely be controversial and potentially would require careful timing when applying for a take permit to avoid an injunction. Caloger pointed to the lack of data on raven populations in Gunnison other than Christmas Bird Counts. Seward reported that Dr. Pat Magee did corvid point counts at the City, landfill, and several private ranches about five years ago, and the landfill did have the highest counts for ravens. However, we do not have research for Gunnison sage-grouse that ravens are depredating nests and killing chicks, which Seward believed may be important for USFWS to issue a basin-wide take permit during nesting and brood-rearing. Peterson thought that human subsidies have helped raven populations increase in the last few decades, but he also thought that in the past there was a lot of predator poisonings that decreased raven populations as well. Seward said that the Rangewide Conservation Plan outlines a threshold where if sage-grouse populations are lower than the threshold, it may warrant predator control. Blair said he is working with APHIS, the San Miguel Working Group, the Crawford Working Group, and Gunnison BLM (Kathy Brodhead) to explore predator control and raven control, starting with monitoring this year and management next year. Long said he was supportive of private landowners applying for take permits for corvids that are interfering with calving operations currently, and in the long run potentially looking into additional opportunities for larger-scale control. Long mentioned another researcher (Jonathan Dinkins), who frequently works with local communities. Blair said that is who they are working with on their monitoring plan. Olson suggested including more formal protocols for corvid monitoring in lek count monitoring since lots of people are already on the ground and available.

Seward reported that the early lek count period was the best start to lek counts since 2017 (where 78 male and 20 females were counted in the early count period). In the last week of March 2022, 89 males and 12 females were counted during the early count period on the same subset of leks. Seward is optimistic about high male counts for this year. In 2020, the high male count was 629 males, leading to a population estimate of 3,086 birds. In 2017 the high male count was 758 males, leading to a population estimate of 3,700 birds. Peterson asked about other satellite populations, and Crawford's high male count was 7 for the first count period and 5 during the second count period. Magee counted more than 100 birds at the Waunita Watchable Wildlife Site. Seward counted at Ohio Creek at the largest private land lek and they had 110 birds (91 males, 19 females). Seward was wondering if the cicada hatch last summer and July monsoons may have helped.

Smith reported that she attended the Gunnison Basin Weed Commission Meeting (which will be changing their name to something more like "Ecological Stewardship"). The County HR did post the job for the cheatgrass and sagebrush habitat restoration coordinator, and it will be in the paper this week. Smith will attend the state's Noxious Weed Advisory Committee next week on the Front Range. Smith is working with BOCC to complete an out-of-cycle appointment for the education seat on the Strategic Committee, and is hoping to have the regular and alternate appointed by the next meeting or the one after.

Olson reported that the Gunnison Conservation District held their Local Work Group (LWG) meeting last night at their Annual Meeting. The LWG survey uses input from local landowners and land managers to prioritize resources and funding for different projects. Olson encouraged the Strategic Committee to participate in the LWG survey, which Rummel can distribute.

Vasquez reported that Dayle Funka is the new District Ranger. USFS has a few options for who will be regular and alternate members to the Strategic Committee (between Funka, Long, and Vasquez), and will present the options to Funka. They will send a letter to BOCC.

Blair reported that he had received many of letters of support and was planning on submitting the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill Sage Grant application soon.

Wilson reported that two people have come in to propose developments in the Poncha Pass area, and Wilson has referred them to Seward. USFWS did not designate critical habitat for the Poncha Pass area, so the review process will be slightly different given those implications. Seward will follow up with Blair and Wilson to check the implications of non-critical habitat designations.

GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE SUMMIT SUMMARY

Young reported that she was very pleased with the attendance and dissemination of information at the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Summit. After the beginning, the technology worked well for a blended (in person and virtual) Summit. They are meeting with CSU to see the media products on Friday, and will have a debrief for the Summit with session leaders on Friday to discuss where and when to have the next Summit. There were 304 registrants (129 paid registrations, 125 Western students, 16 landowners, and several miscellaneous) plus walk-ins. They think they will break even on costs.

COORDINATOR POSITION UPDATE AND TECHNICAL SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING RECAP

Vasquez reported that on April 11 the Technical Subcommittee met and finalized the Coordinator position Scope of Work. That position is being asked to do a lot, and so the Subcommittee added language to emphasize the partnership and support the position will have. Blair also went through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Sage Grant proposal from USFWS and got feedback on line items to include in the budget, and requested letters of support for the grant.

Smith reported that the contract position has been posted on the Gunnison County website (<https://www.gunnisoncounty.org/bids.aspx?bidID=68>). Smith thought the Technical Subcommittee did a good job outlining which skills were required versus preferred, and what to expect for a reasonable candidate pool.

Smith reported that the next steps will be to begin reviewing applications within 30 days of the original posting date and will continue to accept and review applications until the position is filled. Smith has been working with the County Attorney's office to put together an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) for financial stakeholders, and will send that IGA draft out for the financial stakeholders to check language as presented (not to sign). Please check the language by Friday next week (April 29). Smith will also discuss, primarily with financial contributors, how to form a hiring committee to represent all decision makers but also stay a reasonable and effective size hiring committee. The County HR department is happy to provide a training about the hiring process and legal guidance such as questions that can and cannot be asked during an interview.

CARCASS REMOVAL UPDATE

Being proactive with carcass removal is important for CPW to reduce raven subsidies and thereby reduce impacts to Gunnison sage-grouse nests and broods, but removing carcasses will also be important to reduce subsidies for potential wolf populations in the next few years. Seward is proposing to the BOCC that they approve extending the reduced cost of landfill fees for agricultural carcass waste instead of just reduced costs for roadkill carcasses. CPW has a dump trailer that can be used for hauling away carcasses, and they have technician time. They do not have an estimate for the number of carcasses per year, so Seward would like to initially offer free carcass removal to landowners with CCAAs in place with CPW paying a reduced rate at the landfill. If it is a manageable number of carcasses, they would like to extend the discount for more agricultural producers. Marlene Crosby has been in contact with Seward and they plan to get this topic on the next BOCC agenda, and Smith will support that discussion item. Seward reached out to Eric McPhail at CSU-Extension to try to get an educated number of carcasses per year (McPhail estimated 18,000 cows and calves in the Gunnison area, with 1.5-2.5% mortality, so about 350 carcasses per year). Peterson thought that number could be high because some cows will die on federal allotments and not be recoverable during summer. Seward estimated maybe 10-15 horses per year from ranchers and about 15 per year from hobby horse owners.

Peterson asked what the current fee was for wildlife carcasses (Seward thought it was \$1.50 per carcass, but it would be helpful to have a rate for per pound as well). Smith explained to La Plata that this discussion was also related to raven subsidies in the City of Gunnison's waste including businesses and residents. The City has had discussions about bear-proof trashcans (which could also reduce raven subsidies in addition to racoons, bears, and potentially wolves), which may not be realistic for all of the City residents given the cost. Seward suggested that a phased in approach to reducing conflict via implementing more bear-proof trashcans could be a more manageable approach for one neighborhood in the City at a time.

La Plata said the City does have a bear-proof trashcan program in place. The cost of each can is about \$250-\$280. The City asks residents to keep their trash indoors until trash pickup day, which does not seem to be the way people operate usually. Cost seems to be prohibitive for most people to participate. They City did order a new trash truck that is compatible with bear-proof trashcans. Commercial entities tend to use private waste disposal services, so the City might not have much sway over businesses aside from education. The City did have MEM students conduct a bear conflict study including mapping conflicts within the City. La Plata, Smith, and Rummel will investigate submitting a grant (CPW has up to \$1 million available through the Human-Bear Conflict Reduction Community Grant Program which accepts applications for \$50,000 to \$500,000 for communities interested in reducing conflict by purchasing bear-proof trashcans, due May 6). Peterson said we could ratify an application after submitted if needed. La Plata asked when raven depredation was a bigger concern, and Seward said during hyperphagia for bears (spring and fall) and nesting and brood-rearing for sage-grouse (summer). La Plata will share the bear-conflict study with the Strategic Committee.

Seward asked about City ordinances. La Plata thought there was an ordinance about setting out trash the night before. The Committee thought it would be good to understand the City of CB's ordinances as well.

Kugler asked for education to businesses (and pointed out Safeway often has a significant number of corvids at their dumpsters). City Council meets April 26, so La Plata will look into what it would take to approve a grant application and will have that as an agenda item for the City. La Plata will find out the number of trash cans the City already has.

GUNNISON COUNTY SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN DISCUSSION AND UPDATES

The link seems to not work well so several members were not able to review the Action Plan revisions. Rummel will send the link via email for the edited copy and a clean copy (Smith will provide links). Peterson thought the Action Plan just needs to be finalized so we can move on to some more pertinent things like grant applications, etc. Seward asked Strategic Committee members to come to the next meeting with any final revisions.

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.

05-18-22	9-11	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 April 20, 2022 meeting of the Gunnison Basin Sage-grouse Strategic Committee adjourned at 12:05 PM.

Minutes Prepared By: Aleshia Rummel, Gunnison Conservation District