

**Upper Snake River Sage Grouse Local Working Group**

March 9th, 2007

Wyoming Game and Fish Conf Room, Jackson 1-4:45 pm

Members Present: Joe Bohne, Bert Raynes, Doug Johnston, Eric Cole, Doug Wachob  
Absent: Paul Bruun, Franz Camenzind, Lance Koch, Randy Williams, Sue Wolff,  
Guests: Bryan Bedrosian, Beringia South; Aly Courtemanch, GTNP; Will Letzel, USGS.  
Geneva Chong, USGS; Mack McFarland, GTNP  
Facilitator: Barbara Hauge, Center for Resolution

**Administrative Matters**

The minutes of the January 19th meeting were approved.

The next meeting was scheduled for Thursday, April 5th, 1-5 pm. Joe will have a complete draft plan available on March 29<sup>th</sup> for review and comment before the meeting.

The month of May is planned for public comment, with an open house at the end of May.

**Update on Airport Survey, Sam Crowe**

Sam reported that the sage-grouse left airport and haven't returned. They wintered on the east side of Blacktail Butte. He was surprised that the area they winter in is 300 acres. They stick there even if bumped. He never saw them fly or go anywhere. He does not know for sure that they are the airport grouse, but the airport is the closest place (5 to 5.3 miles from airport lek). Joe said Bryan's research will give an idea of whether there is movement between the airport and Moulton lek as well as how the sage-grouse use the surrounding area for nesting, brood rearing, living success of birds on lek.

It appears grouse are adaptable to disturbance, even pedestrians (in 1980's) or jet blasts.

Sam will submit his study data to the airport board. They will write up a wildlife management plan, (likely in 2008 but because the airport is in a park there will be input from Park Service. Doug Johnston said that the airport board will not comment on the LWG's draft plan this spring.

Sam said he was looking at an alternate reality: sage-grouse rely on disturbed forbs that grow at airport. The limiting factor may be what they eat from July to October as opposed to sagebrush in the winter (which has been concern of most of the working groups) and its height about the snow. If GTNP and the airport would agree, we could blade some disturbed ground and encourage more forbs. Eric asked whether there was more soil moisture near runway. Sam said he was sure there is.

Geneva said there can be no management changes to habitat without a food study, so let's see what Bryan's work shows. Weeds should not be introduced without a solid well-understood plan. Bryan asked why natural forbs aren't present. Sam said the sage and grass are too old, and that was probably why the Park has the most critical sage-grouse population in the State. Geneva is putting together information on vegetation.

Doug said he did not know which County Commissioner took Larry Jorgensen's position as liaison to the airport.

**Fire History, Mack McFarland**

Mack McFarland, prescribed fire and fuel specialist with GTNP since 1990, reviewed the recent history of fire management in the Park. The process for getting fire on the ground is a 3 to 5 year process from the time of the first mapping to blackening the acres--that includes getting feedback from special interest groups and dealing with internal agency politics. This is relevant to the LWG

because of its commitments table, which addresses the concern about losing critical sage-grouse habitat.

The Park's recent history of prescribed fire started in 1993-94 with the Lost Creek prescribed burn (to burn big chunks of 500-800 acres in a mosaic of burned and unburned), back when cattle were present and sage removal was the goal. Now, when fire professionals go to the Park's resource council, the group scrutinizes every acre of sagebrush transitioning to a grass-forb state. Fire personnel were asked to preserve winter habitat sage in a recent burn. It was successful and showed that it could be done.

Once every ten years, there can be a large fire in the sage flats. With changing climates, there could be an increase in that, so Fire Management proposed a Sagebrush Strips project that looks at the current existing breaks and treats them as blocks in subdivision for sage-grouse. The Park believes the blocks are too big (160 acres is too much to lose), so Mack asked for input on how large the blocks should be. He suggested 40 to 80 feet from the center line of road, on one side of road.

Sam suggested burning east of the airport runway.

Burning a 5-acre patch wherever McBride lek used to be was also suggested, because the sagebrush is so dense.

Mack encouraged the LWG to identify to Fire Management the areas where we can't lose and sagebrush that needs to go. "We will continue to propose projects that alter sagebrush habitat," he said, "so keep us informed."

The State plan says that no more than 20% of sagebrush habitat can be altered. Mack calculated that GTNP was at 23.3 % already.

### **Winter range delineation**

Aly Courtemanch of USGS presented her report titled "A Remote Sensing Analysis of Sage-Grouse winter Habitat in GTNP and BTNF," in which she used satellite imagery to identify and map potential sage-grouse habitat (exposed sagebrush) in an average and high-snow year (March 6, 1996 and March 10, 2006) in Jackson Hole.

Geneva ground-truthed it in summer of 2006, and found that 88% of plots had some sage in the plots.

Aly said that there is sage habitat that the grouse are NOT using. She concluded that in a high snowfall year, winter habitat is a limiting factor for the JH sage grouse population. However, since the sage-grouse use only certain areas and not others, there may be other factors involved. Geneva pointed out that if winter habitat is limiting, then why was there no population crash after Blacktail Burn? The low numbers were before the burn.

The report will be included as an appendix to the conservation plan.

### **Beringia South research project**

Bryan has received the GPS transmitters and neck collars. He showed the leg bands for the males. He will e-mail the band colors assignments to the LWG.

The Pinedale LWG asked for proposals for a raven study. Beringia South's was the only proposal submitted, so he will study ravens down there.

### **Hunting season guidelines**

The LWG recommend a closed season for hunting for the foreseeable future.

**New issues**

Joe reported that southeast Idaho is starting a sage-grouse LWG that will address the 3 leks in Star Valley. Our plan needs to be consistent with it. Joe will add language saying that we know of their plan and will work with them.

**Commitments table**

Joe asked the group to resolve a few outstanding issues in the draft table including utilization levels and base data year, and reviewed the changes made to the table after conversations with BTNF staff.

After reviewing the question of including RMPs, the LWG decided that the Recommended Actions already covered the topic sufficiently.

**Completing the draft plan**

The group reviewed the list of missing pieces to the plan:

fire history	Steve
historical section	Franz
introduction	
weather	
regional tables	Joe will get from the graphics person in Lander

The meeting adjourned at 4:45 pm. The next regular meeting is planned to be April 5th 1 – 5 pm on at the WGF conference room.