

DILLON LOCAL WORKING GROUP
SAGE-GROUSE ACTION PLAN
Oct. 2010 – Oct. 2011
(FINAL: November 11, 2010)

Note to readers: The following is prepared primarily for use by the local working group, but it is also anticipated that others outside of the local working group may have interest in this document. So, it is written to provide some basic information to persons who may not be familiar with the local geography, 'surroundings, and issues.

Introduction

The Dillon area working group is one of 4 working groups currently operating in Montana originally identified in the "Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-Grouse in Montana- 2005." Dillon is the only working group in the southwestern portion of Montana; all of the other locations are to the east. The next closest working group location is in Musselshell county.

The Dillon Local Working Group began meeting in December of 2003. Meetings were open to all and participants included agricultural interests, sportsmen, power companies, and representatives of state, federal, and tribal agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Approximately 20-35 persons attended each meeting. The LWG first met in December 2003, and has continued to meet 3-4 times per year since. The primary focus of the meetings has been to review the goals and conservation actions recommended by the Montana state management plan for greater sage-grouse conservation, review programs providing financial assistance to landowners for sage-grouse-related improvements and conservation measures, review pending activities that may impact habitats and populations, host expert presentations on the results of scientific research, review state and federal conservation planning, and to begin on-the-ground projects.

The current co-chairs of the Dillon LWG are Ben Deeble and Nathan Finch, appointed by consensus in March 2010 for two-year terms.

Geographic Area

There was no pre-determined geographic area for the Dillon area working group. Participants in the meetings have included persons from Beaverhead, Madison, and surrounding counties in Montana.

Landownership and public land management in this portion of Montana include:

- Private landownership
- Land and minerals managed by the Bureau of Land Management
- Lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service
- Lands managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
- Red Rocks Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)
- Lands managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

General. Description of Habitat

Southwestern Montana is within the Mountain Foothills Mixed Sagebrush ecotype. In this part of Montana, sagebrush steppe occurs in high-mountain valleys and on forested mountain slopes at elevations ranging from 5500 to 8000 feet. Slope varies from nearly level to 45 degrees on some mountainsides. Grass and sagebrush are interspersed with forested areas. Major drainages include Red Rock, Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby Rivers, and Blacktail Creek.

General Description of Sage-Grouse Population

Based on available data and anecdotal information, sage-grouse populations in these counties experienced declines in the latter half of the 20th century, but more recently appear to have stabilized based on lek counts and fall harvest data including harvest wing counts.

Despite harsh winters that can occur in this part of Montana, sage-grouse survive winters well, especially compared to other upland game birds. Sage-grouse use sagebrush for food and shelter during the winter months. (Refer to the "Management Plan" for more information on seasonal habitat needs.)

Some sage-grouse in southwestern Montana migrate (sometimes up to 50 miles) between separate summer and winter areas. Ongoing research has documented migratory movement across the Continental Divide from eastern Idaho to Big Sheep Creek Basin in southwestern Beaverhead County, and from the Centennial Valley in SW MT in to Idaho.

Research on habitat and sage-grouse populations is being conducted by FWP, BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and National Wildlife Federation in the Dillon Local Working Group Area. This includes work on lek counts, habitat mapping, and migration patterns.

Key Issues for Sage-Grouse in the West

After thoroughly analyzing the best scientific and commercial information available, the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded in March 2010 that the greater sage-grouse warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. However, the Service has determined that listing the species for protection is precluded by the need to take action on other species facing more immediate and severe extinction threats. As a result, the sage-grouse will be added to the list of species that are candidates for Endangered Species Act protection. The Service will review the status of the sage-grouse annually to determine whether it warrants more immediate attention.

The Service analyzed potential factors that may affect the habitat or range of the greater sage-grouse and determined that habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from wildfire, energy development, urbanization, agricultural conversion, and infrastructure development are the primary threats to the species.

Greater sage-grouse populations have been declining since the 1960s. Population projections and our analysis of threats suggest the declining population trend will continue across the species' range, and extirpation is anticipated in areas affected by energy development and increased wildfire frequency within the next 30 to 100 years. The resulting landscape is likely to consist of

scattered sage-grouse populations across the species range with minimal, if any, connectivity placing the species in danger of extinction.

Invasive plants are also a serious rangewide threat to greater sage-grouse habitat because they can out-compete sagebrush and are increasing wildfire frequencies, further contributing to direct loss of habitat. Once established, invasive plants reduce and eliminate vegetation essential for greater sage-grouse to use as food and cover. Sagebrush restoration techniques are limited and have generally been ineffective.

Federal agencies manage the majority of greater sage-grouse habitat in the United States. Overall, the ability of these agencies to adequately address the issues of wildfire and invasive plants across the landscape is limited. However, the Service believes new mechanisms could be adopted to target the protection of greater sage-grouse habitats from fire. Energy development and its associated infrastructure are expected to continue. Protective measures and strategic siting of energy developments away from core sage grouse habitats are needed to reduce threats into the future.

Substantial new information on West Nile virus (WNV) and impacts on the greater sage-grouse has emerged since 2005. The virus is now distributed throughout the species' range, and affected sage-grouse populations experience high mortality rates with resultant, often large reductions in local population numbers. Infections in northeastern Wyoming, southeastern Montana, and the Dakotas seem to be the most persistent, with mortalities recorded in that area every year since WNV was first detected in sage-grouse. Infection rates vary between years, with hotter summers promoting the highest observed mortality rates. Limited information suggests that sage-grouse may be able to survive an infection; however, because of the apparent low level of immunity and continuing changes within the virus, widespread resistance is unlikely.

Dillon Area Issues

The Dillon Local Working Group confirmed that the five issues below are key issues.

1. Invasive Plant Species (likely received this top priority because of large cheatgrass infestations in Nevada)
2. the adverse affects of wildfire or prescribed fire
3. the following appeared "tied" for 3rd place:
 - i. Infrastructure (includes fences, roads, power lines, communication towers, and pipelines, developed for any purpose)
 - ii. Conversion and fragmentation of habitat caused by residential subdivision and development
4. Conifer invasion
5. Unsustainable or incompatible grazing

In addition, the group also identified the following as priority issues.

Key issues are focused on the objectives of the state plan-sage grouse populations and sage-grouse habitat. It is assumed that primary emphasis will be given to those populations that are known or suspected to be at risk, or where future actions or stressors could create new risk factors. Areas with stable populations will be less of a focus (except where future actions could

be a problem).

- Consider populations at risk:
 - Are there populations known or suspected to be declining?
- Identify future actions or situations that could create new risk factors for population viability. In this area this includes:
 - West Nile Virus;
 - Increased recreation activity;
 - Potential threats from increasing use of rural areas for residential development;
 - Energy development and transmission infrastructure;
 - Other?
- Actions that reduce or minimize sage brush habitat. In this area this includes:
 - New conversion of sagebrush land to cropland
 - Eliminating sagebrush (including burning, plowing, mowing, or use of herbicides) as part of efforts to promote grass growth, or other
 - Wildfire
 - Subdivisions and housing development
- Adequate seasonal habitat
 - Drought and other factors can affect forb and insect production, both of which are important food sources for young sage grouse
 - Water availability (especially during drought)
- Noxious Weeds
- Effects of predation
- Conifer Expansion

Actions Taken To-Date

The Dillon LWG, in addition to holding regular meetings, has undertaken several actions to assist sage-grouse conservation.

- Encouraged the BLM to implement some road closures and rehabilitation, and fence removals and marking in the Reservoir Creek allotments;
- Designed and helped designate a public sage-grouse viewing lek in the Reservoir Creek area;
- Formally commented on both a federal proposal to designate an energy transmission corridor through Beaverhead Co. and a subsequent proposal to route the MSTI power line through sage-grouse habitats of the same region;
- Facilitated an informational field tour to inform and give input on a power line route. Participants included the power line company and other stakeholders;
- Supported a 2009 public workshop and field trip in the Twin Bridges and Rochester Basin area examining sage-grouse habitat and management options;
- The SG-LWG has held regular meetings to inform and focus public attention on sage-grouse issues;
- Applied for and received grants to conduct outreach meetings in Dillon, Miles City and

Malta to inform the public on energy development issues; Additionally, funds were received to purchase enough raw materials to manufacture fence diverter tags, enough to safe-guard ten miles of fence. To date five miles of fence have been updated by volunteers in Beaverhead, Petroleum and Valley counties;

- The SG-LWG applied for an Intermountain West Joint Venture grant in 2009 and again in 2010. The applications were unsuccessful.

ACTION PLAN October 2010- October 2011

1. Meetings

The Local Working Group will meet in the spring, fall, and will also conduct an annual field day (either as part of the spring or fall meetings or held on some other date). Purpose of the meetings will be to:

- 1) provide updates on various projects, studies, statewide and multi-state regional sage-grouse conservation efforts
- 2) provide information and training on financial assistance programs for sage-grouse conservation efforts
- 3) identify any new developments (actions or other) resulting in new impacts for sage-grouse in the local area
- 4) identify opportunities for the Local Working Group to provide information to the public regarding the Local Working Group's goals, efforts, and accomplishments, and build support for those actions
- 5) identify new projects or actions of the Local Working Group, for example areas where habitat enhancement opportunities may exist.
- 6) elect co-chairs
- 7) monitor effectiveness of ongoing projects

Co-chairs may call other meetings as relevant, including for purposes of project planning, implementation, and monitoring.

2. Logistical Support

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will coordinate with co-chairs through their coordinator position to provide the following logistical support:

- Preparation and distribution of meeting announcements and written meeting summaries
- Management of the Local Working Group mailing list database
- Preparation of news releases
- Meeting logistics (e.g., meeting location, refreshments, etc.)
- Preparation of annual progress report (as draft to be reviewed by local working group) submitted to FWP.

3. Action Items for 2010-2011

Between October 2010 and October 2011, the Local Working Group will:

- Identify and implement at least two habitat conservation or enhancement project; Provide at least one public information session (e.g., presentation at a conservation district meeting, grazing district, public meeting, other)
- Provide written information to agencies on local working group consensus items of relevance to agency actions (e.g., supporting specific projects, etc.)

- Submit at least three proposals to fund the activities and management of the LWG and associated habitat conservation and enhancement projects;
- Assist and facilitate NRCS Sage-grouse initiative outreach, communication, and education
- Identify areas where travel management enforcement could be improved in important seasonal habitats.
- Stay updated on and engage issues related to energy transmission planning, impact assessment and mitigation;
- Collect and review Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances currently being prepared across the West, and advance preparation of one for southwest Montana if deemed appropriate for private landowners;
- Support NRCS sage-grouse initiative that provides certainty for private landowners who implement conservation practices for grouse;
- Update the action plan for 2011-2012 (including identifying other projects for subsequent years and role of local working group).