

CMR NWR Community Working Group Meeting Minutes for February 9, 2012 McCone County Fairgrounds, Circle, MT

Attendees: Ron Garwood, Jason Holt, Laurie Riley, Jeanne Kirkegard, Dyrck Van Hying, Monte Billing, Mary Jones, Mark Good, Dave Pippin, , Dean Rogge, Phoebe Patterson, Heidi Finke, Tim Ouellette, Tom Pick, Ken Nelson, Penny Zimmerman, Maia Aageson, Regan Kirchner, Kelvin Johnson, Jenny Granite, Jerry Meissner, Holger Jensen, Rick Potts, Shannell Kirchner, Sylvan Walden, David Wood, Todd Wolff, Cathy Kirkpatrick, Wes Jensen, Kami Kilwine, Scott Anderson, Rebecca Smith, Karl Christians, Carie Hess, and Bill Milton.

The CMR NWR Community Working Group held our 12th meeting on February 9th, 2012 at the Mc Cone County Fairgrounds in Circle, Montana with 35 people in attendance. Coffee and pastries were available prior to the start of the meeting.

Facilitator Bill Milton opened the meeting at 10:10 a.m. by asking the grounding questions how far did you have to drive today and share something that you are grateful for in your community. The participants were seated in a circle and each person introduced themselves and answered the questions in turn.

Bill introduced the speakers for the day.

Rebecca Smith, Graduate Student at the University of Montana – Rebecca is finishing a research project on identifying migratory pathways of sage grouse in northeastern Montana and southern Saskatchewan. In 2006-2007, the longest sage-grouse migration was documented from Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan 122 km south into Valley County, MT. This migration was tracked using traditional radio-telemetry that was unable to capture the actual routes or time frames of migrating grouse. In 2010 we began tracking individuals from this population of sage-grouse using satellite transmitters that record 4 locations per bird per day. Using this technology, we were able to observe that this migratory population takes several days, stopping along the way, to migrate over 100 km to the south side of the Milk River in MT.

The first fall season of tracking was followed by the worst winter seen in nearly a century. At the onset of rising snow levels, the GPS-marked grouse moved south approximately 40 km farther than what is considered their traditional wintering grounds. These grouse spent the remainder of winter 2011 in the CM Russell National Wildlife Refuge in terrain and locations considered atypical for sage-grouse habitat because of ruggedness and proximity to junipers and pines.

The longest straight-line distance traveled from northern summer habitat to where an individual spent her winter on the Refuge is 160 km. Not only is this remarkable in the sage-grouse world, but it has implications for sage-grouse management. In Canada, sage-grouse are an endangered species. In the US, managers, conservationists, landowners, and scientists are working to keep sage-grouse from landing that same designation. The migratory population of sage-grouse that are the focus of this study migrate across international boundaries, travel across public and private lands, and in a severe winter, reside in a National Wildlife Refuge. Their needs are met across a large landscape cared for by a variety of stakeholders, and it is with that in mind that sage-grouse may be successfully managed so that Canada does not lose the species and so that Montana maintains healthy populations.

Kelvin Johnson, Wildlife Biologist with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Region 6 – MT Dept of Fish, Wildlife and Parks started to get involved with greater sage grouse in the 1950s, but really took action in the 1990s. He stated that in Region 6 there are over 300 leks (breeding grounds where birds gather; males display and perform a mating dance) with 200 of these being active. Even though the overall national trend is decreasing, in Mc Cone, Phillips, and Valley Counties the trend is increasing which he attributes to good core habitat. He noted that in Phillips and Valley Counties the numbers are constant with 15,000 to 20,000 birds and the state-wide numbers are about 100,000 in Montana. In 2007 the West Nile Virus came through and wiped out about 55 percent of the populations in these counties and two years later the numbers were back and even above the 2007 numbers. He explained that on a map the leks are marked with a GPS waypoint but in reality they are up to a 1 mile in length with multiple breeding sites. Fish Wildlife and Parks is updating their maps to better reflect this by taking GPS points around the entire area to show the polygon of the lek. He also noted that the dancing area within the leks change as conditions change over the years. He discussed hunting of sage grouse and how Fish Wildlife and Parks has cut the national percentage from 10 percent to just 3-5 percent and from a daily limit of 4

to 2. He discussed the translocation with Canada and that the partners are working together to help to get the numbers up in Canada. Animals do not recognize borders or boundaries and will migrate across them. Fish Wildlife and Parks will translocate about 40 birds to leks in Canada to augment the populations. The area to which the birds are being translocated is about 80 percent public land and it is not likely to be developed.

David Wood, Conservation Biologist with the Montana- Dakotas BLM State Office –

- I. National Planning Strategy (<http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sagegrouse.html>)
 - a. National Level – Organization and commitment to addressing listing concerns in partnership with states, FWS, USFS, NRCS, and others
 - i. FWS listing decision - One reason for the FWS decision was an identified need for improved regulatory mechanisms to ensure species conservation. The BLM manages 30 million acres of habitat which is over 50% of the sage-grouse range, therefore we can do a lot to protect habitat through our high level planning decisions.
 - ii. Due to a settlement agreements entered into by the FWS they have to make a final listing decision in 2015, meaning we only have a few years to do our part to demonstrate habitat management can remain in our hands and species management in the states hands.
 - b. Regional Level
 - c. State Level
 - i. Will address the national strategy in ongoing RMPs in Miles City, South Dakota, Billings, and HiLine (the national strategy enhances and brings extra resources to our existing sage-grouse planning strategy)
 - ii. Amendments being evaluated for others field offices (ND, Lewistown, etc.)
 - iii. BLM MT/Dakota: 8.3 million surface acres, 47 million subsurface in total, we have about 30% of the high quality sage-grouse habitat across the three states
- II. Partnerships and Restoration Work
 - a. Sage-grouse Initiative work with NRCS (Tim's presentation)
 - b. Continued work with FWP on monitoring, habitat enhancement/protection, and restoration
 - c. Restoration projects (crested wheat grass, sagebrush planting, fire rehab)
- III. Research
 - a. Grazing and Enhancing SG Habitat – partnership with NRCS, UM, MSU on effectiveness of habitat enhancement practices)
 - b. Feather collection for genetics (MT wide and now range wide connectivity analysis)
 - c. Habitat Pathways (Glasgow project Rebecca talked about)
 - d. Oil and Gas Impacts (long term research including the Powder River basin that forms the basis of instituting management decisions that allow for responsible development)

David made two closing points to the group.

- 1) There is no silver bullet (some folks though the issue was just about fences or predators) and different approaches need to be talked to cover the series of issue impacting sage-grouse.
- 2) Natural resources management does not have a target that you achieve and stop. There is an ongoing need to adjust to changes in a dynamic system. Think of sage-grouse as one of the larger issues currently being dealt with in the challenges we all have managing and making a living in the natural environment.

Tim Ouellette, Assistant State Conservationist with NRCS - There are 8.3 million acres of land with only 10 percent of that sage grouse habitat. There are 7000 leks across the 11 states. Thirteen core areas account for 25 percent of the total potential habitat for sage grouse and 75 percent of the population. Risks to sage grouse habitat are human population development, energy development, wind energy development, and conifer encroachment. Tim explained that what is good for the ranch is good for the bird, meaning healthy range lands equate to healthy sage grouse habitat. The question that NRCS is dealing with is the sustainability of the ranch community and how that relates to the sage grouse. NRCS is focusing on habitat restoration, not on predators, because habitat is sustainable. Fences are the number 1 cause of sage grouse mortality as they fly into leks before dawn and can't see fences. The NRCS has provided for marking 350,000 miles of fences in core sage grouse areas. He stated that marking fences in making a difference in the costs associated with fence maintenance as well. The species needs 8 to 12 inches of residual cover under the sagebrush for escape cover,

forage and nesting. Tim said that this can be accomplished by using the 3-5 year grazing plans, especially in pastures that correlate with leks. In Wyoming several Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapters are getting involved in sage grouse projects.

Lunch was served

Bill Milton had the group break into smaller working groups of 4 - 5 people each and had them answer 2 questions. The groups were given about 20 – 30 minutes to gather their answers.

Q-1) What is one important thing you have learned?

Q-2) What concerns or questions came about from the presentations?

Group Summaries:

Group 1:

Q1: This is an ongoing learning experiment; populations in some areas are increasing; did not know that fences were a concern; ESA may be moving towards being proactive instead of reactive; NRCS is looking at management changes with long-term benefits rather than annual inputs.

Q2: There are no penalties for those destroying habitat but it is on ranchers to fix habitat; drilling on private lands may have a significant impact; Montana sage grouse populations are critical to the survival of the sage grouse in Canada; threats are acknowledged (i.e. predators) but they are cumulative and cannot all be sustained; what if we deal with the habitat but other factors, like West Nile, get worse; is a lack of grazing a potentially negative impact to the sage grouse; what is the definition of a sustainable “saved” population so we know when we are done.

Group 2:

Q1: Didn't realize such a large network working to benefit of sage grouse; refreshing to hear that habitat is the most important factor; didn't realize endangered is so near to us; sage grouse not common on CMR; reminded of how much sage grouse habitat and population is under BLM's charge in Montana.

Q2: Like to see a tour of a lek; balancing the demand/ desire for energy with the sage grouse habitat needs.

Group 3:

Q1: Migrated to the south close to the CMR but then left and went north; fences main cause of death; grazing wasn't mentioned as a reason for decline; their movement- some move great distances; kill coyotes – need to control predators – won't need to worry about the population of sage grouse; need fur prices to come up; nest 4 miles away from a lek.

Q2: Decisions are made based on limited information (using 1 study to make major decisions); budget cuts in the future could affect the sage grouse – collecting data, adding more lands to the core areas of leks or habitat will affect the private landowners; can we reach consensus; can't start pipelines until after June 15th because of sage grouse, so when are they going to say can't graze cattle on these lands until after June 15th; fragmentation is a key problem- how is development going to be addressed in these key areas.

Group 4:

Q1: migrating patterns were interesting- the different patterns seem to create more questions- unknowns; how large a lek can be; nests can be found up to 11 miles from a lek; high mortality of sage grouse being fences; 75% of population is on 25% of habitat (core areas).

Q2: Information sharing between agencies- how effective is the communication; how do agencies across the border cooperate with US Agencies.

Group 5:

Q1: NRCS has a sage grouse initiative; we are shipping grouse to Canada; what is good for sage grouse is good for ranching; we need to think from Saskatchewan to Yellowstone; grouse from north Valley County winter in south Valley County; BLM has good ideas for working with ranchers; grouse can summer in silver sage landscape; in a tough winter grouse concentrate in the Breaks; sage grouse need: visible fences, meadows for brooding habitat, unbroken landscapes, large blocks of Wyoming big sage, residual cover; we can accomplish more working together.

Q2: What happens to sage grouse initiative after the election; SGI (Sage Grouse Initiative) needs to consider predation (raptors); how will increased fire frequency affect grouse on CMR; how do we get big sage brush to set seed; will we have the attention span to follow through; focusing on core areas misses chance for expansion.

Rick Potts, CMR Refuge Manager updated the group about the Montana Water Rights Compact Commission and the meetings for the CMR's federal water right proposal. He stated that scoping meetings will be held on February 13th in Lewistown at 1 pm and February 14th at Fort Peck at 10 am. He stated that on March 15th there would be a negotiation meeting held at the Yogo Inn in Lewistown. He also noted that he was to meet with the regional director to brief him and then the CCP (Comprehensive Conservation Plan and EIS) would be out for final comment for 30 days prior to the Record of Decision. This could be concluded by the April meeting.

Laurie Riley explained that the group has just under \$5,000 in new funding from NRCS to cover operations for another year. Laurie handed out the work plan that was included as part of the grant application. She explained that we have deliverables and activities for which we are responsible to be in compliance with the grant.

The group discussed the possibility of a tour in sage grouse habitat including an active lek viewing. We decided to have Rick Potts discuss the Final CCP (present an executive summary) at the next meeting in April in Jordan.

It was agreed that the group should continue to work on and prioritize the list of natural resource concerns/issues that they had come up with in Fort Peck. This list should be discussed in all 6 counties to get the best representation of the group before a final list is made.

Bill asked what worked well what could be done better.

Done Well	Need Improvement
Format of the meeting	Acoustics
Table set up	Landowners for Sage Grouse Initiative to talk
Having multiple speakers	More people in attendance
	Speakers to have handouts

The next meeting date was announced as April 18th in Jordan.

The group adjourned at approximately 3:02 pm.