

**CMR NWR Community Working Group
Meeting Minutes for June 11th, 2015
Malta Public Library, Malta, MT**

Bill Milton called the meeting to order at 10:08 am with 33 people in attendance.

Bill asked each participant to introduce themselves and state who (if anyone) they represented. Bill also requested that each participant give a brief update of their local growing conditions, describe what plants are actively blooming, and to relate if they have heard long-billed curlews singing.

Joe Smith, Ph.D. student from the University of Montana presented his research to the group on cropland conversion and assessing the effects of different conservation options on continued conversion. Joe used crop suitability index to model land likely to be converted and discussed the potential for tools like the Sodsaver program within the 2016 Farm Bill, to reduce the rate of cropland conversion. It was generally agreed by all participants that conversion is a high priority risk, but that voluntary incentives to slow conversion and education were the best tools to reduce continued loss of habitat.

Lorelle Berkley, researcher for MT Fish Wildlife & Parks presented preliminary findings of a 10 year study designed to assess the effects of rotational and managed grazing systems promoted through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) on the nesting success of greater sage grouse. Further analysis and data collection will provide valuable, local data to help with grazing management guidelines for sage grouse.

Members of the Sage Grouse Sub-Committee Work Plan Group, (Diane Ahlgren, Elena Evans, Rachel Frost, Bridget Nielsen, Bryan Martin, & Catherine Wightman), presented their draft work plan to the full CMR CWG group.

The purpose of the group was defined as: *To be an information and educational clearing house for all conservation programs, initiatives, and incentives related to sage grouse, with the express purpose of helping to engage landowners and match them to the program that best fits their needs.*

The main objectives and focus of the group will be:

- **Education** – for landowners, general public, and policy makers
- **Engagement** – landowners and other partners
- **Tangible Products** – conservation options menu
- **Become a model for the state program** – demonstrate the value of partnerships in identifying project areas
- **Support research** – determine what questions still need to be answered and promote relevant research that is designed from the ground up
- **Obtain funding for projects**

Bill asked each participant in the meeting to provide feedback on the proposed work plan in the form of what they liked, and what they disliked. Following are the individual responses of attendees:

- When delivering programs in the field, need to have the latest information and understand how to communicate with producers.
- Need for a central clearinghouse for all information
- The group can help identify “hot issues”
- Has to be interest in the plan from producers, i.e. “buy-in”
- Education component is good
- Good make-up of the group, representative of the region and people
- Outreach & Education is a must
- Communication – people don’t hear about all the different reasons sage grouse are declining
- Would like to see the historic trends of the bird populations
- Worried about government interference - bureaucratic problems
- Doubts the working group can stop the listing of the sage grouse. Questions how in the days & weeks to come the group will deal with sage grouse.
- Have a tremendous leadership opportunity if there is the man power & funding opportunity to put the work on the ground.
- Taking all programs available and getting it to the producers to use is good
- Concerned the group is becoming too completely focused on sage grouse which could be a problem.
- Take all the plans and put into one overall plan would simplify things.
- Educational “booth” with a database for landowners
- Group the six counties = strong point
- Part of the sage grouse group may need to be MSGOT members.
- Research needs to be designed with producer/landowner input.
- Concerned about the overlap of different sage grouse focused groups
- Need consistency and trust
- Revival of conservation district Range Committees would be a plus
- The most complicated issues are the most contentious as well
- Wondering if the group is working on sage grouse out of fear?
- Educate the general public so there is “buy-in” from them as well as landowners
- Most landowners/ managers have to manage several different ways which causes issues so finding a common ground management strategy would be beneficial.
- Have landowners providing information to the agencies and to have the agencies LISTEN to landowners. Need to find the common metric amongst all agencies. Landowners have some unique knowledge of the landscape.
- Getting on the same page – making sure the key players are part of the group.
- Having the groups resource is great for projects/ expertise & networking
- Everyone has a piece to contribute to the overall outcome.
- “ No matter how good the operation is, there is always some place to improve”
- Draft plan is a good starting point but continuous improvement to the transaction point, focus attention on the effort to improve transaction.
- Tremendous words of wisdom within the group

- Need to contact the MSGOT coordinator once they are in place and up and running
- Strength of the group is its diversely effective ambassadors between the conservation community and the agriculture community. SG committee did exactly what it was asked to do. Two – way education is needed to be successful and the suggested products should provide an excellent tool in the toolbox for everyone to use.

Mark Bostrom of DNRC provided a brief update on the MSGOT project coordinator position. The position description will be released within 10 days. It will be a national recruitment effort with a 20 day application period. He anticipates a late August hiring date and the initial meeting of MSGOT following shortly.



Sage Grouse Committee

Appendix to Minutes: Draft Work Plan

Mission: *Be the link between the person on the ground and the conservation efforts.*

Purpose: *To be an information and educational clearing house for all conservation programs, initiatives, and incentives related to sage grouse, with the express purpose of helping to engage landowners and match them to the program that best fits their needs.*

Educate - landowners/stakeholders/agencies, and b) decision (policy) makers about sage grouse and sage grouse conservation.

- Coordinate education events that address threats, compatible land uses and best management practices and these relate to habitat needs of sage grouse.

Model for State Plan - internal partnership/communication/and support within the group, and b) external communication/partnership and support.

- Be a source of communication and coordination amongst the committee, the agencies, the state plan, and the local residents.
- Create a conceptual model that depicts the relationship of BLM plan, State plan, SGI, etc in the conservation picture.
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Products - tangibles produced by the group; most are educational products that fit under the overall "Education" strategy above.

- Create a master list of current incentives, services, and contact information for habitat restoration and conservation

Engagement - Identify key stakeholders and invite them to join the group.

Research - Identify specific information needed for management and encourage research projects that address those questions.

Funding - Explore a variety of funding options to support the group and on-the-ground conservation efforts.