

CMR Community Working Group Meeting Summary

Where: Hybrid meeting, Cottonwood Inn & Suites, Glasgow, MT and Zoom

Date: March 24, 2022 from 10:00am-3:00pm

Attendance: 19 in-person and 22 virtually

Self-Introduction:

Everyone introduced themselves and answered the grounding question, “With all that is going on in the world, what is one thing you are grateful for?”

People in attendance included:

Bill Milton – Producer and Facilitator

Diane Ahlgren – MSGOT and Producer

Tory Scribner – Senator Daines Office

Jerry Collins – Garfield County Commissioner, Board for MT Association of Counties

Morgan Marks – Montana Wildlife Federation

Laura Kiehl – MRCDC, Petroleum CD, and Producer

Pat Gunderson – BLM at Glasgow

Scott Cassel – Agriculture

Drew Henry – FWP

Marisa Sather – USFWS

Heather Harris – FWP

Leonard Swenson – Valley County Rancher

Aaron Johnson – FWS/CMR

Ron Garwood – VCCD

Molly Masters – MRCDC

Emily Mitchell – MT Fish Wildlife and Parks

Molly Masters – MRCDC Coordinator

Martin Ellenburg – NRCS in Miles City

Paul Santavy – USFWS at CMR

Autumn Holzgren – Montana conservation Corps

Paula Gouse – USFWS at CMR Refuge

Mike Freeman – Governor Gianforte’s Natural Resource Policy Advisor and MSGOT

Therese Hartman – Supervisor Sage-grouse Habitat Program at DNRC

Stacey Barta – Range Resource Coordinator DNRC

Cora Knowles – Range Conservationist SGI

Matt Comer – BLM

Trent Haseau – BLM

Kathy Terby – BLM

Corrie Williamson – American Prairie

Damien Austin – VP of American Prairie

Dona Stafford – Fergus County CD

Michael Kelly – BLM

Cam Ogland – BLM

Makayla Ingman – PCCD

David Wood – USGS

Shilo Messerly – NRCS in Malta

Brian Martin – The Nature Conservancy

Nath Descheemaeker – MT Grass Conservation Commission

Veronica Grigaltchik – DNRC – Conservation District Specialist

More in-depth partner and organization updates were shared by participants who wanted to. Items and projects mentioned included:

- FWP, Region 6: FWP has reorganized divisions, creating a new ‘Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division.’ Working on hiring a new regional recreation manager.
- Erin Johnson, manage East side of CMR: Busy with prescribed burning, getting grazing permits taken care of for the year.
- Scott Cassel, contractor with BLM: working on new project with crested wheatgrass acreage to turn back into native range species.

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- Ryan Johnson, NRCS Glasgow: working on contracts and EQIP program signups, as well as CSP and CRP signups.
- Brittany Johnson, Valley CD: it is grant season so working on getting those submitted along with taking tree orders and getting those out.
- Jerry Collins, Commissioner: One of their bigger concerns is fixing roads after the winter season.
- Laura Kiehl, PCCD: main thing PCCD is working on is helping aged irrigation infrastructure in the area find grants to update them. Trying to lead effort in upgrading the airport in Winnett. Also working on tree sales and looking into purchasing a no-till drill.
- Molly Masters, MRDC: working on Fort Peck Dam Test Flow issue. If they occur, will cause large economic loss to Mon-Dak region. Working on getting the MT Saltcedar Team back up and going, next meeting will be in April.
- David Wood, USGS: They have several ongoing projects with partners at the table today.
- Corrie Williamson, American Prairie: working with lessees to renew and update leases. Also gearing up for spring work.
- Michael Freeman, Governor's Natural Resource Policy Advisor: A lot going on in natural resources world. Feel free to reach out at any time.
- Therese Hartman, Sage-Grouse Program DNRC: recently updated their web app. MSGOT just approved a new grant cycle.
- Stacey Barta, DNRC Rangelands: have been working on the working lands internship program. If anyone is not getting her newsletter, let her know and she can add you to the list. It has a lot of great resources and information in it
- Matt Comer, BLM: Usually doing prescribed burns this time of year, but the drought hasn't allowed for that. Will be doing mechanical treatment for conifer encroachment. Have lots of antelope collared and working on wildlife friendly fences and removing some fences when possible.
- Emily Mitchell, FWP: Similar to region 6 FWP report. Have officially transferred Hell Creek State Park to the Little Shell Tribe. Starting spring surveys including sage-grouse, deer, and elk.
- Morgan Marks, MT Wildlife Federation: They have their annual membership meeting in Lewistown on May 14 in the evening. It is a free event so anyone can come. In August they will be moving forward with low-tech restoration work with a NFWF grant they received.
- Veronica Grigaltchik, DNRC CDB: With her new position, she provides legal, technical, and financial assistance to the Eastern Conservation Districts.
- Autumn Holzgren, MCC: MCC has a lot of projects planned for this summer and fall in Central and Eastern MT that are aimed at restoring sagebrush habitat. Their crews will also be taking down old fence and putting up wildlife friendly fence and marking it for birds on top of their low-tech restoration work.
- Michael Kelly, BLM: working on many fuels projects in Sage-grouse habitat as well as fence structure.
- Paul Santavy, CMR Refuge: it is sage-grouse counting time. Japanese brome increase concern, have been developing spatial tools to identify where it can be found at and putting treatment proposals together for funding in those areas. Partnering with MT FWP with reestablishing sharp-tailed grouse East of the continental divide. Have been able to do some prescribed burning in wetland areas this year. A couple

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big projects in timber on CMR that they will likely not be able to do this year because of drought. Have two additional fire positions to fill for a total of five.

- Leonard Swenson: Working on antelope fence, replaced about one mile. This last week was ag week. On a radio show they were talking about the BLM permits getting cut on cattle by 25% and delayed turnout until June 15 due to the drought. It is said that 30% of cattle have already left Phillips County, and 40% in Valley County. Is there a chance to utilize pastures for cattle grazing in the CMR that haven't been grazed?
- Ron Garwood, Valley County CD: mentioned there used to be a lot less predators on the ground, including coyotes and foxes, that are a lot of the problem with sage-grouse numbers. Working on St. Mary's systems going into the Milk River. They have also been working on the issue of the Spring Rise (test flows) that has come back after they thought it was a done deal 15 years ago. For this year, the lake is too low to do the test flow. Irrigation is super important on the Missouri River – especially this year with the hay situation.
- Pat Gunderson, BLM: Range staff are working closely with permittees with the grazing cuts to permits. They had sent out a letter in November last year. Several contracts working on fencing and water development. Helping with crested wheatgrass. Their first project they started about seven years ago. One thing they have learned is to not walk away from it. Ph.D. student finishing up a habitat project in Valley County he's been working on over 3 years. It was looking at key winter ranges and nesting habitat. Also continued work with Montana State University on West Nile; that is probably the biggest threat to sage-grouse. A couple years ago they lost about 25% of their tracked birds to West Nile.
- Martin Ellenburg, NRCS: Working on special sage-grouse initiative projects, and sage-brush habitat through the farm bill.
- Scott Cassel added: Work on invasive species has pivoted to more of a watershed approach, less of an ownership boundary approach. Has helped tremendously in controlling invasive species.

Panelist presented their information regarding sage-grouse.

Michael Freeman, MSGOT Chairman: At their meeting in February, they opened up a new grant cycle. They have a two-sided system with negative credits and positive credits related to sage-grouse habitat. It has been working well. They are accepting proposals for term easements which is new. Looking for additional ways to improve sage-grouse habitat across the state. In the latest congressional spending bill, there was a provision that would prevent the listing of the sage-grouse. FWS thinks MSGOT has been doing a good job with their program. MT has set the standard for state led management of sage-grouse. MSGOT is carrying out the law and executive orders that state there should be no net loss of habitat.

Questions:

Clarification of term lease for the program? Depends on the proposals they receive. At the state level they have a fund, but they want the most bang for the buck. This is one tool in the toolbox to do so and they ultimately want several projects to choose fund to choose the best. This gives people more options to do so.

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Is there any additional money coming into the system? Right now, they have the money they have, without additional state or federal monies coming in. As projects roll in, they will get more money into the bank. It is set up to be self-sustaining with the credit system. The windfarm going up in Garfield County contributed \$4.2 million.

How was the \$4.2 million arrived at? They run numbers through the HQT and then a lot of discussion was had, including multipliers involved and balance mitigation of impacts to sage-grouse to economic development in the region. The MSGOT votes in the end. HQT does give a scientific foundation to start at in the discussion.

One problem with the term lease is finding a holder. The one lease MSGOT has, Garfield County CD stepped up to hold. Potentially Winnett ACES could hold them as well. It might be more beneficial to have one entity be the holder, rather than several CDs, etc. It is a logistical issue ultimately that does need future discussion.

Why doesn't a state agency hold the term lease? FWP would have to provide access if they hold it. If holding and paying for the lease, it seems better to have a third party hold it.

Heather Harris, Grasslands and Wetlands Coordinator Montana FWP: Their role is population monitoring, working on TAWS, and some technical assistance programs. FWP overall objective is managing wildlife population in Montana. Sage-grouse records go back to 1899. When counting populations, they look at the trend more than actual numbers. Based on about 8% of known, active leks, they base their adaptive harvest management numbers. 1,063 leks were observed in fall of 2021. Populations do have peaks and valleys to keep in mind when looking at population. Targeted Annual Warning System (TAWS) is a new 13 stage, hierarchy framework to look at sage-grouse populations across the West. Smallest hierarchy is a lek all the way up to the largest being a climate region. FWP is trying to get a way from a species specific plan to more of a habitat level focus, what benefits sage-brush steppe will benefit sage-grouse along with other sage-brush steppe species.

Marisa Sather, USFWS Partners with Fish and Wildlife Private Lands Program: Her program is all voluntary, incentive-based habitat enhancement. They help with restoration and enhancement programs with 20-year agreements, providing cost-share programs. In Montana, transitioning towards more work through community-based collaborative groups such as Rancher's Stewardship Alliance and Winnett ACES. Some of the things they help with are grazing plans for individual ranches, often with special attention to riparian areas. Conifer encroachment is another area they help with. They are interested in doing something with annual bromes and their impacts but don't have anything currently related to this. If you sign up for their Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA), if the species are to be listed later, any work you've done is counted towards helping the species retroactively. The only required thing if signing up to participate, is to not have any habitat loss or fragmentation.

Ryan Johnson, NRCS: Have a voluntary, incentive program. Everything they do sage-grouse related goes under their EQIP program. The four major threats under the sage-grouse initiative they help with is annual grass expansion, land-use conversion, woodland expansion, and riparian and wet-meadow degradation.

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One of the reasons for their land-use conversion threat is, if you take one square mile of conversion, it can negatively impact up to 12 times that area. The interest for the riparian and wet meadow threat is it accounts for only 2% of rangeland but about 80% of wildlife species rely on it. Locally they have 8 applications worth over \$1 million for sage-grouse initiative funding for this year.

Mike Kelly, BLM: This year they have just under 7,000 acres of conifer encroachment projects occurring, a few invasive weed contracts going out, another contract for 20 miles of fence removal occurring, and then their typical land use plans work with oil and gas, minerals, etc. Helping FWP with lek counts upcoming up. They have a few other habitat projects but unsure what will occur with the drought conditions.

Questions:

One of the reasons this panel was convened was potential listing of sage-grouse coming from Department of Interior? Mike says that is at a way higher level than them. At some point they are supposed to rework land-use plans. Molly Masters filled in about the letter saying it was for a scoping comment period that was opened last fall regarding BLM's sage-grouse land management plan. This fall, they plan to have a draft EA on changing the land-use management plan. There was no-mention of listing them in scoping proposal.

Additional questions and conversations regarding sage-grouse:

Sagebrush

Is there a way to plant / establish sagebrush after fire, etc.? This has been tough. It is important to use a local seed source for better establishment. They have had better luck with planting plugs, better luck yet when you plant them in groups of five. Planting plugs is very time consuming and expensive though.

Would it ever be possible to have a program to help control burn small swaths of sagebrush to help young sage-grouse? It could be something to look into, but in general, they don't want to get rid of any sagebrush that is already healthy. Discussion went to this may help with fire suppression if there were breaks in the sagebrush. And if you see young birds, they are often found in open areas near sagebrush, not in the sagebrush itself.

It was also mentioned that sagebrush does not like competition. Pending on range management, if there is an increase in grasses there is a decrease in sagebrush.

Predators

Have predator populations been looked at and their relation to sage-grouse populations? Eagle populations are counted, but other avian predator populations are not really. That anyone knows of, populations of predators and sage-grouse have not been looked at together to see if there are any trends. From observation of producers, there seems to be many more predators than there used to be which may contribute to the sage-grouse decline.

The challenge and uncertainty in data with a large, moving landscape was discussed briefly.