



AWA Sage-grouse Partnership Committee

Date: July 24, 2013

Time: 5:30-9:45

Location: Manyberries Curling Rink, Manyberries, Alberta

Participants:

Ralph Heydlauff

Bayot Britschgi

Sue Michalsky

David Heydlauff, Co-Chair

Travis Reesor

Christyann Olson

Darcy Wills

Tanya Jangula

Cliff Wallis, Co-Chair

Sharon Good

Ronda Reesor

Dr. David Naugle

1. Introductions

Laura Good welcomed as new member of the committee. Laura sent her regrets, Sharon Good here in her place.

2. Agenda -- approved

3. Meeting Notes of June 25, 2013 accepted as circulated

4. Draft Terms of Reference - distributed prior to meeting

Discussion

Adding critical to habitat - will leave as is: Vision reads: "To identify habitat and recover Canada's Sage-grouse populations while also benefitting other prairie wildlife through positive working relationships between environmental non-government organizations, ranchers, industry and government agencies.

- Significant ecosystem services definition - Sue Michalsky will write definition and will include footnote of definition that will encompass biodiversity, grazing as a viable activity on the land, carbon sequestration, water infiltration, productivity for livestock and some indication of what ecosystem we are referring to
- Principle 2 clarified – "honour existing rights", does not mean there won't be any changes to operations on the land but there must be a fair process and fair compensation if people/businesses are impacted negatively
- Governance partners include other ranchers not sitting on advisory committee
- Communication will be open - delete "amongst the partners". Governance section reads: "The working advisory committee will work by consensus. Meeting notes will be recorded and made available to participants by email in a timely manner. Communication will be open and will occur on a regular basis. While most shared information will be publicly available, if information is sensitive, confidentiality will be respected."

5. Other: Recognition given to Darcy Wills for the excellent Milk River Watershed Council's State of Watershed report

6. Dr. David Naugle-see also attached powerpoint and materials, including video, provided at meeting

- Sage brush Conservation Initiative in USA western states-see <http://www.sgi.com>
- providing birds with options to meet their habitat needs
- Size and connectivity of these landscapes are important





- Incentive voluntary-based approach to slowing decline to prevent listing and regulatory burden that may be associated with that
- biggest conservation strategy going on in USA
- Canada is in serious restoration mode; good chance of extirpation with just one bad event, e.g. West Nile
- USA wants Canada to be successful as edge of range is where contraction is first evident; North Dakota also similarly at edge of range

Threats: Agricultural conversion, energy development, urbanization, infrastructure

- Subsurface rights take precedence
- Things don't go well for Sage-grouse when you add human interaction and density of activity
- Cumulative impacts of energy and other developments
- Canada's story is one of cumulative impacts not really one thing fundamental biologically

Approach:

- State based solutions to further limit fragmenting effects
 - macro more important than micro when prioritizing—first need to get the whole landscape right with limits on energy development and no subdivision or sod busting in core areas
 - State based strategy policies aligned with conservation easements signed - payment incentive/third party land trusts
 - Landowner contribution 25 per cent
 - Permanent small number 20 30 year leases - most perpetual
 - Easements reduce resale value of ranch in return getting big one time cheque--personal decision not coercive process
 - Approach is limiting the decline not necessarily reversing the decline. USA is slowing the bleed – may still not be enough but there has been recovery in some areas--Washington state conservation reclaimed sandy soils and Sage-grouse through Conservation Reserve Program voluntary contracts; Incentive based habitat restoration where native bunch grass and sage brush came back
 - "leks" are not the only thing to consider when planning -- need to consider nest, brood-rearing, overwintering etc.
1. Remove threats to sage-grouse and improve sustainability of working ranches
 2. Implement enough of the right practices in the right places to benefit populations
 3. Scale has to be big enough—require large landscapes protected from industrial activity, subdivision, cultivation and fragmentation.
 4. Voluntary approaches with sufficient resourcing to get the job done

Mapping:

- Identify priority areas for conservation

Conifer encroachment: (not relevant to our area)

- Out of work logging crews removed encroaching conifers

Fences:

- Selecting high risk fences applying the fence collision risk tool
- marking reduces by 83 percent strike risk





Grazing: Sagebrush rangelands are the best habitat

- Grazing systems not one size fits all

Extension Services:

- Service centre for Sage-grouse in every town in the west - ranch plan for all private and leased land
- Tweaking current grazing—making seasonal and other adjustments expressly for Sage-grouse
- Sustainable grazing strategy with 75 percent cost sharing
- Tweaking grazing is not the big effort needed but it is part of the solution. Even small increases in nest success equate to increases in population growth.

Conservation Easements:

e.g. Craters of the Moon National Monument --16 easements on 30000 acres

- Appraisal based on habitat easements—government pays 40 percent of difference in value (comparing with/without conservation easement)
- Job 1 stop the bleeding by keeping ranchers in business
- Sustainable grazing is predominant use

Cultivation:

- Sod busting risk map

Resourcing:

- Partnerships and capacity – make sure there are enough people to get the job done

Research:

- Important to do some research but may need to find less invasive measure where populations on edge of survival
- Found winter migratory pathway using GPS transmitters and demonstrated connectivity; migrate with stopovers; actively avoided crop and badlands; 300 km round trip to windswept open ridge with sagebrush

Predator Control:

- Predators--if you don't fix the habitat no need to fix predators
- Have to do hard stuff first—fix the landscape
- predator control might be reasonable to talk about when start bringing in more birds

Other Issues/Concerns/Group Discussion:

- So much land already impacted what can we do with the infrastructure
- Chick survival 13% in AB
- Wintering Sage-grouse avoid oil & gas disturbed area
- facing energy, West Nile, tillage problems
- Population vortex -- what is a biological way out
- What would be best way to spend first dollar





- Rule of thumb is that the farther away the birds have come from the more difficult it will be to have success
- Can be raised in captivity both got some females to lay eggs spending millions better off spending on habitat stuff
- Of all years no birds came to Mt not convinced isolated population - need feathers for analysis
- Vital rate comparisons: nest initiations, nest success, chick survival, winter survival
- Range health assessments from Sage-grouse perspective
- What could be wrong here when on the edge of range-- less safe
- The habitat base there isn't much there to work with even though some of the habitat is excellent condition
- Expand the habitat -- give birds options at big scales
- Reclaiming farmland
- Something will be done but what and who will make the decision Ottawa or here
- If we can do well with habitat improvement we can change the trajectory
- Human footprint
- Ecological minimums do you have a big enough base to start with?
- What are smallest core area landscapes with silver sagebrush in MT?
- Hunting user group is at table in USA but birds are still hunted there
- Enforcement/access control tools
- Intensity of oil and gas is high in some areas; non-existent in other areas of Alberta range
- no above ground structures is a possibility - Suffield is an example, but still have activity/roads
- Habitat quality -- could work on
- Have good habitat but there is something wrong with it
- 1 million acres may not be enough -- but birds were here now they are not
- Landscape may be perceived by birds as too small and getting more and more disconnected/fragmented, including to south through USA
- Well densities may be worse than we think—need to see mapped
- Lag effects can be up to 10 years so don't always see cause and effect immediately
- Fencing, researchers, roads, activity all have impacts
- Solve oil and gas issue (no new leases), remove infrastructure tweak grazing
- voluntary based approach
- In USA, motivation is manifold—preventing listing; some land owners like birds; others see the things we can do to increase sustainability and associated payments; overlapping objectives
- Per acre payments: \$3 to \$10 NRCS range program
- 700 ranchers signed up in USA
- Alberta oil and gas and province are identifying and removing some structure on landscape here
- Oil and gas want to work in collaboration with us

Where to from here:

- Have to list all potential actions and identify priorities
- Need to work on policy as well as on the ground actions
- Policy: e.g. Province could stop issuing leases—province owns much of the subsurface
- Next meeting review potential policy and on the ground actions and prioritize
- Not just what, when
- Pilot in one place still need to look at whole landscape





- Do ranch planning voluntary participation; get advice; get money at same time
- Near term action plan defines threat and says what we can do about it and ranks feasibility
- need the Alberta recovery plan
- Collaborating with USA important
- Retaining habitat versus restoring habitat
- Getting data from Alberta, e.g. infrastructure
- Preparing landscape map – do not reinvent what has already been done
- Suggested that we can help determine more information about Alberta's Sage-grouse by collecting feathers from leks to be part of larger study (with necessary permits of course)
- Scope out the breadth of the problem
 - Critical habitat identification and protection from industrial activity (highest priority)
 - Tweaking grazing in critical Sage-grouse habitat
 - More bird translocations
 - Predator control
 - Importance of Canada to USA and vice versa—may be opportunities for partnership there

Group thanked Dr. Naugle for his presentation and insights

7. Next Steps

- check summary (these notes) of Dave's presentation with Dave
- Cliff Wallis and David Heydlauff to prepare complete list, including from previous meetings and interviews, of all potential Work Plan Ideas for Working Committee review and approval
- work through then send to advisory group for one week review
- Next Working Committee by conference call to vet above list for workplan and priorities
- Email to Working Committee about one week before conference call (mid August-3rd week possible) then plan for early to mid September for full meeting (Note: Aug 13 not available as meeting date for David Heydlauff and give at least two weeks' notice to larger Sage-grouse Partnership group)
- Try to get Alberta Recovery Plan for September meeting
- Oil and gas and Government of Alberta will be invited to September meeting

Thanks to everyone for attending and continuing to provide your valuable inputs

8. Meeting adjourned 9:45 PM

