# MEETING SUMMARY

## IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
## MAY 28 AND 29, 2014

**LOCATION:** Idaho Department of Fish and Game Headquarters
600 S. Walnut, Boise, Idaho

### Attendance

The following individuals attended all or part of the May 28 and 29, 2014 Idaho Sage-grouse Advisory Committee (SAC) meeting:

John Beals (OSC)
Donna Bennett (Owyhee LWG)
Jared Brackett (Jarbidge LWG)
Lynn Burtenshaw (Upper Snake LWG)
Sam Chandler (Big Desert LWG)
Courtney Conway (Univ. of Idaho)
Jack Depperschmidt (DOE)
Brett Dumas (Idaho Power)
Dave Ellis (Challis LWG)
Diane French (IDL)
Chris Gaughan (IDFG)
Stephen Goddard (IWF)
Wendy Green (West Central LWG)
Vince Guyer (Challis LWG)
Don Kemner (IDFG)
Karen Launchbaugh (Univ. of Idaho)
Paul Makela (BLM)
Dustin Miller (OSC)
Ann Moser (IDFG)
Dallan Nalder (Curlew LWG)
Rochelle Oxarango (IWG)
John Peavey (North Magic Valley LWG)
Katie Powell (USFWS)
Wendy Pratt (East Idaho Uplands LWG)
Brent Ralston (BLM)
John Robison (ICL)
Kabel Satterwhite (Shoshone LWG)
Megan Satterwhite (Shoshone LWG)
Richard Savage (ICA)
Scott Scroggie (PF)
Alison Squier (Facilitator)
Will Whelan (TNC)

**MEETING OBJECTIVES:** Support restoration and recovery of sage-grouse and their habitats
Provide venue for information sharing and discussion

## Wednesday May 28, 2014

### 1. Welcome, introductions and review agenda

Don Kemner with Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) welcomed everyone to the meeting. Alison Squier, the facilitator reviewed the agenda and asked if there were any suggested changes or additions; there were none.

### 2. Update on BLM/FS Sage-grouse EIS Process

Brent Ralston (BLM) provided an update on the Idaho and Southwestern Montana Greater Sage-grouse Draft Land Use Plan Amendment and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

He explained that they are currently in the step between the Draft and Final EIS and reviewed the schedule for the next steps:

- November 2013 – Release Draft Environmental Impact Statement
- November 2013 to January 2014 – Public Comment Period

- January 2014 – Public Comment Meetings
- February to June 2014 – Analyze Public Comments and Response
- March to June 2014 – Develop Administrative Draft Proposed Plan
- July to September 2014 – Internal Review
- September to December 2014 – Release Final Environmental Impact Statement

Over 15,000 individual comments were received on the draft EIS. Those 15,000 comments included form letters from four different groups. There were approximately 300 unique and substantive submissions. Multiple comments were categorized into 33 separate categories. Sub-regional interdisciplinary teams have developed initial responses. Regional teams are currently reviewing and refining those for consistency.

Brent said that at this time he couldn't go into detail regarding the plan right now because it is not releasable to the public. But he did review the basic plan components, which include:

- Delineation of Sage-Grouse Conservation Areas and Management Zones
- Incorporation of Sage-Grouse Vegetation/Habitat Objectives
- Required Design Features
- Seasonal and Timing Restrictions and Buffers
- Adaptive Management Strategy and Anthropogenic Disturbance Cap
- Mitigation Board and Strategy
- Wildfire and Invasive Species Assessments by Field Office
- Program Direction
- Monitoring

The EIS includes conservation areas and management zones. The conservation areas include definition of the scope and scale for adaptive management and disturbance measurements. Three management zones are identified: core, important and general. Management zones identify areas of application for program management actions.

Best management practices are required not optional and are now called required design features. These are common and consistent among all alternatives. All projects conducted in sage-grouse management zones would incorporate: habitat (vegetation) management objectives, have required design features, incorporate seasonal and timing restrictions, and include appropriate lek buffers.

The proposed plan will incorporate an Adaptive Management Strategy with specific habitat and population triggers. The proposed plan will include an anthropogenic disturbance cap to inform development activities and function as an adaptive management trigger. Both are applied and measured within a conservation area – not the whole state. The Adaptive Management Strategy says that if you loose some habitat or birds in core areas, what we want to do is further protect those by making management action more restrictive.

Mitigation for projects would be required in all sage-grouse habitat. The mitigation hierarchy is to 1) avoid, 2) minimize, and 3) compensate. The proposed plan will include delineation of a State Interagency Mitigation Board. The Board's first task will be to develop a mitigation strategy for the WAFWA region.

The details for the wildfire and invasive species assessments are still under development by the fire and invasives assessment team. After the ROD each field office will develop a wildfire and invasive species assessment. The Wildfire and Invasive Species Habitat Assessments are interdisciplinary evaluations of the threats posed by wildfire and invasive species, as well as identification of priority areas/treatment

opportunities for fuels management, fire management, and restoration. These assessments identify priority areas and describe strategies for fuels management, suppression and restoration activities. This brings it down to the ground level.

The proposed plan will include a monitoring strategy that incorporates indicators and approaches to inform broad, mid and fine scale assessment.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Dave E. – One of the concerns from our area where we have a lot of high quality sage-grouse habitat, and there may be higher restrictions, is are we going to end up in situation where resource users in those core areas would be so highly restricted that we're almost being penalized for actions we've taken in the past to manage that habitat and take care of it?
    - Brent R. – I've heard that concern that we've got good habitat in our area and we've taken care if it, we don't want impacts from what's happened in other areas to affect us. That's why we've got the conservation area approach so that we can localize responses as appropriate, so that if something happens in the south, that doesn't affect folks in the north.
- Dave E. – Yes, that was part of the concern. But it is more the concern that we've got so much high quality habitat up there; so are we going to be held to such high standards that we can't operate at all. We want to acknowledge that we've taken good care of our habitat and not be punished for that.
    - Brent R. – The delineation of management zones will mean that if you're in a core area the bar will be higher. It's through that approach of managing that core area that we keep the bird off the list. But when we start looking at activities, there are some narrow exemptions. That's where some of the other management applications dovetail to give you some flexibility.
- Wendy P. – Can you clarify the level at which 3% disturbance applies? Is that a management zone or conservation area?
    - Brent R. – It would be within the conservation area, but would focus more within the habitat. It wouldn't be the general areas.
- Steve G. – When I read the plan and am looking at the difference of size of the 3 different areas I see that there was tremendous variation of the size depending on which alternative you looked at. Not only is there a huge difference in size, but also a drastic difference between restrictions that apply in those different areas. What's been done to deal with those conflicts?
    - Brent R. – When you're doing an interdisciplinary team process with biologists, etc. we're always taught there's one answer. But as a planner to go through process you have to consider multiple answers. I made the case across the great basin sub-region that we need to look at variations of what that map really is. When you look at our draft, we have a very broad range of mapping allocations among the alternatives. We wanted to describe that there are differences of effects depending on where you draw the lines regardless of the management applications. Also, we've developed a range within the map too. We've had lots of discussions about what's in and what's out, and why, on the final map. The map that we have has been vetted a lot more than it would have other ways. We have the rationale in the record for why what is there is there.

- Steve G. – You didn't address why there are different management applications and different triggers. What's been done with review to resolve those differences?
    - Brent R. – It is a similar answer to the map, I have to be a little vague at this point because we can't release it to the public yet. We've had a lot of robust discussions around the adaptive management strategy. The adaptive management strategy and map are part and parcel of the decision. We've talked a lot about what are the triggers, what are the triggers based on, and what is the rationale for those triggers.
- John P. – What happens to designation of core, general etc. when a fire comes and burns through a designated area?
    - Brent R. – We've wrestled with that question. You are all familiar with the key habitat map. The key habitat map is where we track all that information about fire, etc. We tried to marry those up with the core habitat map. We want to be able to adjust that annually, but once we do that it becomes a plan amendment decision to change that map. That's kicks you into a two-year process. That's not where we want to be. So what we did is set up the core management zones as fixed map for 5 years, then every 5 years we would look at the key habitat map and link them up. The key habitat map will still be updated annually, which helps prioritize fuels treatments, etc. We set up process where we have management application areas, e.g., core, etc. But within the core are we have a key habitat map that's behind that. So when you decide you're going to do a fuel treatment in a core area, you would go to the key habitat map. That will help guide where you go to maximize you funds application. We'll change the map if there are enough changes in five years on the key habitat map.
- Lynn B. – A concern I have is that we're seeing leks depredated by wolves. You said you have biologists sitting in the room talking about what would happen, but you didn't have ranchers in same room talking about what they see happening, and also talking about economics. I'm concerned about that. Now we've got a voracious predator like the wolf on top of the raven. Is there going to be any mitigation for the new super predator that's been introduced? How do you address that in this framework? Will there be someone on the mitigation board that represents ranchers?
    - Brent R. – That's a good question for the mitigation board to think about how that plays into the strategy and framework. I don't have a good answer to that that right now. That's something that will be looked at by the mitigation boards.
- Lynn B. – You talked about lek buffers, on one ranch we have IDFG put a two-mile buffer zone around known leks, so I couldn't use my ranch at all. Then they overlaid the brood area and I couldn't use my ranch during that season. I've never seen leks there. I'm concerned about leks and lek buffers. You could end up having a situation where you never see birds.
    - Brent R. – The lek buffers we've looked at are trying to tease out anthropogenic effects e.g., wind farm, power lines, etc.
- Jared B. – With fire being #1 threat I'm glad to see fuel treatments identified, but I have questions about what fuel treatments include. In our area we've seen a lot of improper livestock grazing e.g., 5 to 10% grazing instead of 20% or more to do fuel reduction. It a knee jerk reaction to just restrict grazing altogether not taking into account that it is one of our best protections against fire. If we continue the cycle of restrictions instead of proper management, and we have nothing left to protect for our livelihoods, there's no reason for us to stay out

there. I'm using the term proper livestock grazing intentionally. If you don't graze that fuel it builds up and builds up. That's the concern I have with core habitat and disturbance levels. It isn't just one thing that's going to save the birds; it is many things.

- Brent R. – We've kept grazing as a tool in the toolbox.

## 3. Livestock Grazing and Sage-grouse

Karen Launchbauch (University of Idaho) gave an update on research being conducted to look at potential influences of livestock grazing on sage-grouse populations.

Karen noted that grazing is really interested because it is tied to so many things. She provided a handout titled, Livestock Grazing and Sage-grouse Habitat: Impacts and Opportunities, from the *Journal of Rangeland Applications* (Volume 1, 2014; authors Chad S. Boyd, Jeffery L. Beck, and John A. Tanaka). (See Attachment A for abstract.)

She talked about the fact that historically grazing has always been part of sagebrush ecosystems, including buffalo 10,000 years BP, deer, elk, antelope, jackrabbits, etcetera, and cattle in the last 200 years or so. It is a natural thing in these ecosystems; it is a natural disturbance. In the last 200 years we added a different critters – cattle and sheep. In this presentation and in the study they are mostly looking at cattle since they are the most abundant livestock animals in Idaho.

In the modern grazing regime there are two types of livestock grazing. Beginning in the early 1900s there was heavy unregulated livestock grazing. The modern regime has the potential for more extensive management.

Modern grazing is managed and controlled. It incorporates grazing systems, deferment and rest, reduced stocking rates, and ways to assess grazing effects. Today the rangeland is in better condition than it was 50 or 100 years ago as a result of modern grazing practices. We are generally making progress except for invasive plants.

Karen explained that both the article she distributed and the research efforts they are doing look at both direct and indirect effects of livestock, but the primary focus is on indirect effects. Direct effects can include trampling of nests and eggs, or nest disturbance. Cows are big and they might cause birds to flush, although this generally isn't a big problem unless maybe there's a raven there at the time. The four major indirect effects are reduction of hiding cover, changes to vegetation mix, reduction of fuels, and alteration of the insect community.

<u>Reduction of Hiding Cover</u>

Perennial grass provides both cover and forage. It also provides fuel for fires Looking at high, amount and where that grass is. To look at this the approach often is to throw down hoops and measure the grass, but that doesn't include looking at where that grass is. In this study they are looking at that question more directly. Cows it grass in open areas before they eat grass that is under cover. What they see is that it levels off at about 90% before you start to see use of perennial grass under shrubs. Many times livestock would be moved as part of a rotation plan before or at that point. In the study they wanted to specifically see how those levels play out in Idaho and how that might affect management.

<u>Change in Vegetation Mix</u>

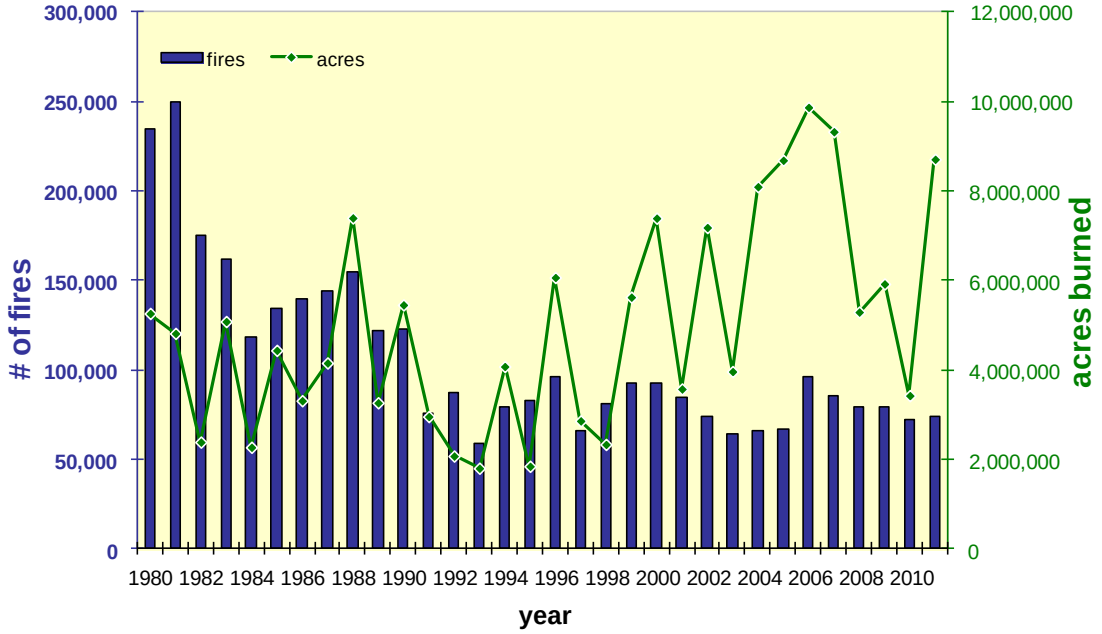
Cows can increase or decrease grass, shrubs or forbs. The only way to increase grass is to decrease shrubs or forbs. There's only so much nitrogen or water in the system. If you need to reduce shrubs, sheep and goats are good at that. Forbs are really important to sage-grouse. And forbs really are more

abundant in grazed systems. Most of the competition in a healthy sagebrush shrub is grasses. The problem is all of these things are pieces in the puzzle; we need to know how this plays out at a landscape scale. So towards that end the question is, does everyday grazing reduce forbs or grass?

Fuel Reduction

We know grazing has an affect in fuel reduction. We see it often, but not always. The question is, can we use grazing to reduce fuels? Managed grazing can change the perimeter or extent of fuels, or change the intensity, patchiness and flame length. Karen said she had also heard of another study that said grazed pastures have a shorter fire season. There are a lot of other effects of grazing and fuels that haven't been identified yet. They are proposing another study to be funded with NRCS Sage-grouse Initiative funds looking at use of grazing to reduce fuels.

Karen noted that if we stopped fire altogether on the Idaho landscape, no one would want to live there because it would be a moonscape. But we can manage the length and intensity of fire (see graph below from the National Interagency Fire Center data).



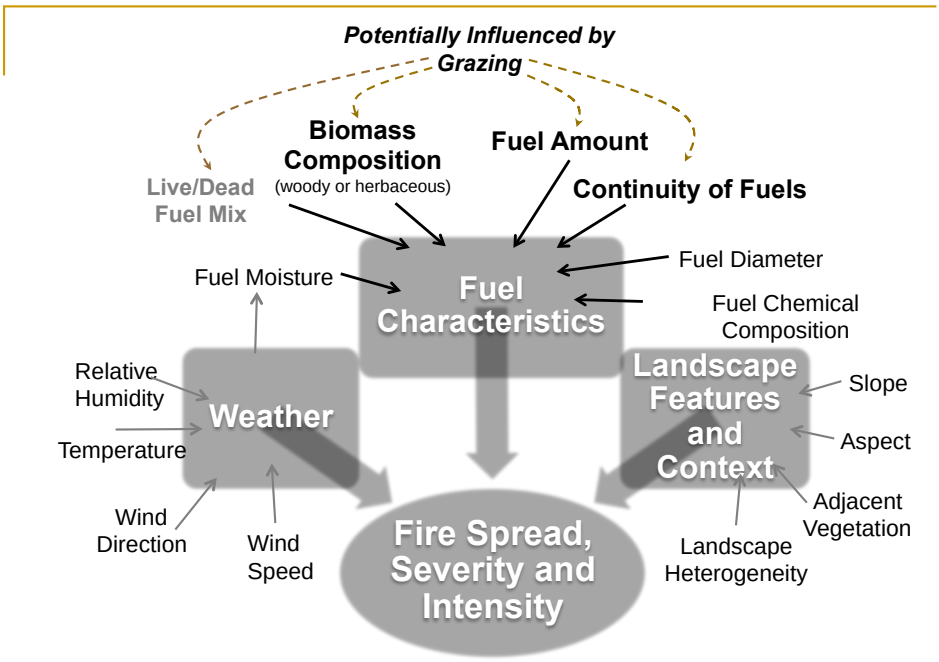

Historical Patterns

Karen noted that we have less cows on the landscape than we did historically. However, cheatgrass and other annual grasses are increasing. Human development is increasing and there are also more human caused fires. In addition, we are having longer, hotter drier summers and longer fire seasons. So, where does grazing fit in? They are looking at grazing on fuels with Ava Strand. She's looking at how grazing patterns are influencing fuels and how annual grazing influences annual grasses.

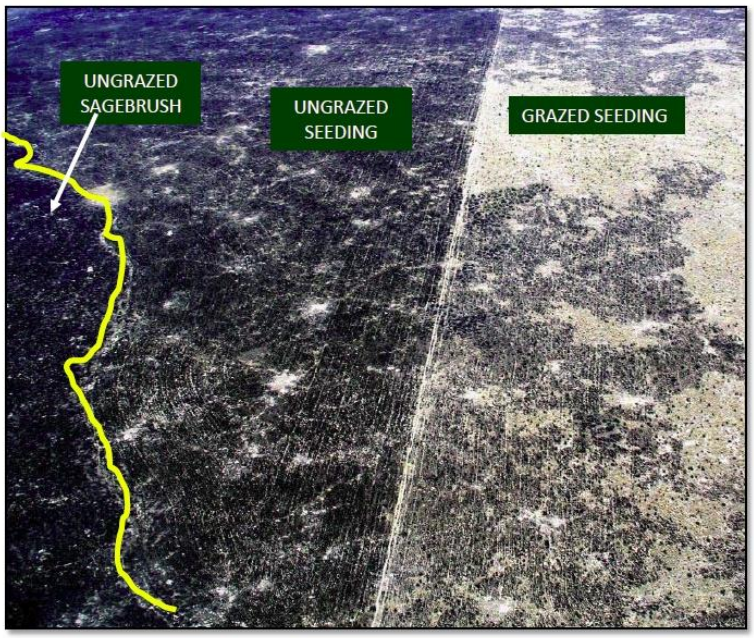
Where Does Grazing Fit In?

There are lots of factors that influence fire. Only a few of those can be addressed with grazing. Characteristics that could be potentially influenced by grazing include the live/dead fuel mix, biomass composition (e.g., woody or herbaceous), fuel amount, and continuity of fuels (see first image next

page). Everyone has historically been fixated on the amount of fuel, but continuity of fuel is really important too. Grazing can also affect fuel loads (see second below).




## Grazing affects Fuel Loads



Annual grasses including cheatgrass, medusahead and red brome, were introduced in the 1800s. They are fine-textured and easy to ignite. Because they are early maturing they extend the fire year. They also increase the ignition risk and decrease the fire return interval, which affects sagebrush survival and recovery.

An 8-year grazing study in northern Arizona (Loeser et al. 2007) showed that areas with moderate grazing had less cheatgrass than areas with no grazing, areas with moderate grazing also had less cheatgrass than areas with heavy high impact grazing, and areas with high impact grazing caused a great increase in cheatgrass after a drought year. Karen said that study is needed to see what it looks like here in Idaho.

The key is to figure out how do we turn that crank to get less cheatgrass. It is not IF to graze; it is HOW to graze. Based on studies to date, in the absence of livestock grazing, cheatgrass will likely increase to its ecological potential for the site. Early spring grazing can suppress cheatgrass and promote perennial grasses. If grazing occurs as perennial grasses begin to flower, cheatgrass will likely increase. Grazing during the dormant season does not affect cover of perennial grass but can reduce fuel loads and the density of cheatgrass. New studies looking at winter grazing on cheatgrass suggest that when grazing occurs in the winter it removes dead biomass, which makes it harder to new seedings to establish.

Fuels and biomass interact with each other. Without grazing there is an accumulation of biomass and litter including a distribution of litter around perennial grass crowns. In a study by Davies et al. (2009) they looked at four treatments: 1) ungrazed unburned, 2) ungrazed burned, 3) grazed unburned, and 4) grazed burned. The site had been grazed at moderate levels (approximately 30-40% utilization) since 1936. Litter and biomass was almost two-fold higher in the exclosures, which wasn't a big surprise. What was surprising was that when fire went through the ungrazed areas in the exclosure, the amount of cheatgrass skyrocketed after the fire. The explanation is that the fire burned hotter through the ungrazed areas killing off the perennial grasses. Conventional wisdom is that if you didn't graze the perennial grasses they would be stronger and healthier; however, that's not what happened.

Other indirect effects from grazing include changes in the insect community. Primary insects that are fed upon by sage-grouse include ants, June/dung beetles, and darkling beetles. Grazing could change the type of insects, distribution and abundance. Grazing effects on insects are not well understood. We do know that insects are important to sage-grouse in their diets. It may be that some day we have a grazing system where the goal is to modify insect communities.

Grazing also comes with ranching and there are a lot of other things that come with ranching that may have impacts to sage-grouse including fences, water tanks, roads, fragmentation and general activity.

## 4. Effects of Spring Livestock Grazing on Sage-grouse Demographic Traits

Courtney Conway (University of Idaho) gave a presentation on the study to look at the effects of spring grazing on sage-grouse demographic traits. He said that Karen talked about how grazing can influence vegetation, and also commented that there's been research showing how vegetation effects sage-grouse. But there have not really been any well-designed studies done looking at direct or indirect effects of grazing on sage-grouse parameters. There have been some studies done, but any one of those studies can be criticized. He explained that the team that is working on this study wanted to fill that void by implementing an independent, replicated study on direct effects of spring grazing on sage-grouse demographic traits.

This will include looking at: nesting propensity (i.e., the probability that a female will initiate a nest), nest initiation date, clutch size, daily nest survival (i.e., the probability that a nest survives), re-nesting rate

(i.e., the probability that if nest fails the hen will reinitiate another nest), brood size (i.e., number of chicks), brood survival, post-fledging movements (i.e., how far they have to go to find brood habitat), natal recruitment (i.e., probability the a chick will return to that site as to nest), hen survival, inter-annual nest-site fidelity, and site occupancy (i.e., where females nest relative to grazing activities).

Study Design

The study design is a 10-year replicated study. They will put radio transmitters on female sage-grouse at nine study plots in Idaho. At each of the nine study sites, they will set up three grazing treatments per plot. They will be able to see where the sage-grouse place their nest. They will base the location of the study sites based on where females go. There will be three pairs of grazing intensities at each site. The study area will include areas with greater than 40% grazing, 20-40% grazing, and no use. They plan to work with local permittees to change grazing intensities.

Study Areas

They identified a list of criteria to decide where to place the study sites. They will be using primarily BLM managed areas and focusing on spring grazing, since that's one of the most contentious areas. They also need to have known sage-grouse nesting at the study sites. They set an arbitrary threshold that the site has to have at least 1 lek with 25 or more males. They selected the arbitrary number of males so that they would have enough females to collar. In addition, the sites have to have at least 15% sagebrush cover, and specifically, Wyoming big sagebrush. They also want sites that have had predominantly native understory. Sites selected will be at 1,300 to 2,300 meters in elevation. They also wanted at least 1 or 2 cooperative permittees who would be willing to work with them over a one-year period. Additionally, they will need to be able to get vehicles to the sites as early as late February so they have to have road access in the spring. Finally, they also wanted sites with limited amounts of infrastructure and for the sites to be pretty consistent with each other in the amount of existing infrastructure.

They reviewed a map of sage-grouse leks that are potentially suitable and to date have identified four sites; they still need to get five more lined up. The four selected sites include Browns Bench, one at Jim Sage, Table Butte, and Sheep's Creek.

This year will be the first year of work on the ground. They began collaring sage-grouse on March 1. So far they have put out 49 transmitters at Browns Bench (29 nests) and 51 transmitters at Jim Sage (19 nests). They hoped to put out transmitters at all four sites this spring but had setbacks. They will get the rest out in the spring of 2015. They will be following the females to their nest and, depending on where they nest, they will manipulate grazing per the study design. They will measure vegetation, insect abundance, and forage quality. At each site they will be monitoring parameters for two years before they begin changing the grazing intensity.

A multi-disciplinary planning team has been working for two-years to get the study up and running and work through the details. The team meets regularly approximately every two weeks for about an hour. Tem members include: Jack Connelly and Don Kemner with IDFG; Paul Makela with BLM; Courtney Conway, Karen Launchbaugh, Eva Strand and Dave Gotsch with University of Idaho; Jericho Whiting with Gonzales-Stoller-INL; John Robison with Idaho Conservation League; Chris Black a livestock operator and member of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission; and Wendy Pratt with Pratt Livestock an the East Idaho Grazing Association.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Lynn B. – What are you using for transmitters?

- Courtney C. – We're using regular VHF transmitters that require antenna. We're also putting out a view satellite and transmitter and GPS transmitter. The satellite transmitters cost about $4,000 each and you can't walk out to find individual nests. The satellite data will allow us to find clusters. We're also experimenting with GPS transmitters, which give you locations via cell towers. They are heavier and require that the birds are periodically close enough to a cell tower to download the data. Most of the transmitters are VHS transmitters.

- Dave E. – You said you're gathering data for the first two years. When you get to the grazing treatments, do you have any idea of how long those grazing periods will be to get that type of utilization? How many days? Two months or a week?
    - Karen L. – For research it would be best to do it in short period of time, but it will probably be two to two and a half months.
- Dave E. – It would be great if you could get BLM to throw open the door and see what would happen in a really short time.
    - Karen L. – We have to work within BLM permits.
    - Courtney C. – There are so many variable that we could assess. We have always viewed this as potentially being able to add more treatments and nuances. We want to evaluate one set of affects really well and then depending on that, we hope people will keep coming to the table to allow us to look at other sites if they realize that we're impartial and are doing this in a transparent way.
- Brent D. – It seems like some variables might be quick to respond while others might take a long time.
    - Courtney C. – We just don't know. We have an ambitious study plan that we keep revising. From the outset we have to work with INL and other areas that haven't had cattle grazing for a long time so that we can have a bit of a baseline. That will allow us to compare an area that's resting to an area that's never been grazed. We're currently at about 40-50% of desired funding level to implement the whole study plan. INL is on the team from the outset because we want to add that non-grazed area. We wrestled with how many years to rest. How many years are we going to keep this experimental grazing system in place? From a scientific study perspective the more the better, but we don't want to drive people away either. We've asked for at least three years.

## 5. Update on Sagebrush Nutrition Research

Jennifer Forbey (Boise State University) gave an update on nutrition research that she is working on. The work was initially funded by the SAC and was then expanded to include a National Science Foundation Grant. Jennifer is working with a graduate student, Marcella Fremgen as well as Jack Connelly with IDFG and Gail Patricelli at UC Davis.

Jennifer explained that not all food is created equal and animals very selective in what they consume. Wild animals are trying to get as much protein as possible and avoid toxins. Sage-grouse are no different and not all sagebrush is created equal. One hundred percent of the food that sage-grouse consume in winter and spring is sagebrush. Not all sagebrush is tasty and palatable to sage-grouse. Selection of sagebrush occurs at a variety of spatial scales and is driven by the amount of toxins in the

sagebrush. There are 30 or more volatile compounds found in sagebrush. Both sage-grouse and pygmy rabbis care a lot about the compounds that are found in sagebrush.

Study Objectives and Predictions

Objective 1 deals with selective foraging. The prediction is that grouse will select for high protein content, low toxin content and moderate canopy cover and height.

Objective 2 deals with diet quality impacts to movement. The prediction is that sage-grouse will move farther away from leks to find higher quality food.

Objective 3 addresses diet quality impacts to reproductive effort. The prediction is that males foraging at the highest quality patches will have the highest display effort. Basically both objective 2 and 3 are about – if you eat better, you can reproduce and do things better.

Jennifer reviewed the previous and new research focus and sites, which include: within a site within winter at Browns Bench (previous), between sites within winter at Raft River versus Craters (new), within a site among seasons at Raft River (new), and between sites within spring at Raft River and a Wyoming site (new).

What is new in this study is that they will compare across a season, they will look at selection within diverse patches, and selection within three-tip sagebrush. In the past they looked at Browns Bench, now they will be looking at a site with multiple types of sagebrush. Also, Jennifer noted that she has been told anecdotally that sage-grouse don't eat three-tip sagebrush, but they are seeing lost of birds eating three-tip. For field methods they will look for pellets, if there's snow on the ground they will look for tracks, and they will look for bite marks on the plants. Jennifer said that relative to random sites, they have seen sage-grouse using black sagebrush more, and not using Wyoming sagebrush sites for foraging. The proposed explanation is that Wyoming sagebrush has fewer monoterpenes.

Field Methods (Selective Foraging)

Field methods consist of: approaching and flushing sage-grouse or using GPS data to find foraging sites, sampling browsed and un-browsed plants, measuring structural characteristics of the site, and sampling randomly selected points.

Sage-grouse avoid toxins at multiple spatial scales. To study this they used hierarchical information – theoretical approach to model selection (Burnham & Anderson 2002, Doherty et al. 2008). They completed two 30-meter perpendicular transects centered on the estimated center of the used (or random) patch. The center was estimated on the basis of browsed plant distribution at used sites and on the randomly generated coordinates at random sites. They were randomly oriented transects. They used a plumb bob along a taut string to identify where any branches/foliage intercepted the transect, then they subtracted gaps in the "continuous" foliage of five centimeters or greater.

At the habitat scale, sage-grouse selected habitats with black sagebrush to avoid toxins. There is evidence for selective foraging by sage-grouse at Browns Bench in winter. Sage-grouse select plants with both higher crude protein and lower concentrations of toxins.

They have a backpack style tag on the sage-grouse. Information gets uploaded to receivers at the lek. They can differentiate between flying, running, walking and pecking with the tags.

Raft River Results

At Raft River they observed a diversity of morphotypes (i.e., large A. t. *wyomingensis*, medium A. *arbuscula* and A. t. *wyomingensis*, and small A. *arbuscula*. Patch selection was influenced by species and patch diversity. Patch use depended on the presence of A. *arbuscula* (50 of 50 used patches had A.

*arbuscula*; 25 or 49 available patches had A. *arbuscula*). Every time they found small *arbuscula* they were the thing being browsed. Path use depends on morphotype diversity within the patch (44 of 50 used patches had more than one morphotype; 25 or 49 available patches had more than one morphotype). They probably used sites with more diversity because you have good cover there plus other types that were good eating.

They also wanted to measure how far they are going for food. Sagebrush responds to browsing by inducing its chemical defenses. So the more sage-grouse browse on sagebrush, the more toxic it becomes and the farther they have to go from the lek. The birds seem to be spreading out; they don't go to the same places every day. At most of the roost sites they couldn't find browsed plants. They measured diet quality close to and far from the lek. And they measured diet quality at foraging sites and reproductive efforts and success, and body condition. They found that males foraging at the highest quality patches had the highest display effort.

Sage-grouse have an energetically expensive breeding season immediately following winter, when they consume a diet of 100% sagebrush. The energy used to display is up to four times greater than the basal metabolic rate. Therefore, grouse must obtain highly nutritious food before and during the display season in order to maintain body condition. Additionally, grouse are ideal to study both forage and reproduction because their foraging is evident on sagebrush leaves (making their plant selection obvious), and their reproductive displays are easily viewed because of their leking habits. Males gather on open grounds to display for females, who select the best male based on his display effort and quality. This is partly why they will be examining male reproductive effort rather than female reproductive effort. Additionally, female reproductive effort is related to spring diet (with more forbs) rather than winter diet only. They will also evaluate male reproductive effort using display effort (time spent on lek, strut rate, copulations) rather than fitness because fitness is difficult to measure in long-lived, free-ranging species. It is important to understand what makes males successful on the lek because only a small number of males actually breed, so knowing what makes those individuals successful is important for management.

To look a reproductive effort they began in mid-March and observed collared males attending the lek. They conducted a time budge analysis, which looked at the time spent on the lek, copulations, and display (strut) rate. They also followed the birds to off-lek foraging sites and collected plant samples there. Birds usually flush naturally within an hour after sunrise and move to daily off-lek foraging sites.

Next Steps

The next steps are to process the samples they have collected to date and begin the chemical analysis of those samples (monoterpenes, courmarins, protein); conduct habitat transects; analyze behavioral videos from the leks; and begin the data analysis.

Management Implications

Jennifer identified a number of management implications. She noted that winter habitat is limited and there are high energetic costs during the winter. In thinking about diet, what is good for the cock is good for the hen in terms of diet quality and success. The information generated through the study will help to assess the impacts of habitat management and climate change (juniper removal, mowing, fire and drought). Additionally, this research will help managers to identify the most palatable plants for conservation and restoration.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Dave E. – What were the nutritional differences between Wyoming sagebrush and three-tip?

- Jennifer F. – We haven't analyzed that yet. We'll also look at biomass effect.

- Brett D. – Have you looked at how individual plants vary from year to year? Is it genetic quality, age, or other?
    - Jennifer F. – We have three years of data at a pygmy rabbit site. There's more between season variance, but if you look on average between years at the site it doesn't change much. The browsing effect is really variable. That induced response is supposed to occur within 30 minutes, but those studies only done with insects.
- John R. – A question about the diversity of sagebrush; is there a way to tease out the importance of cover?
    - Jennifer F. – This is the first site we went to where it wasn't dominated by Wyoming sagebrush. We'll be able to get at that. We have the height of every plant. We have the volume of each plant and at patch scale we can look at diversity. The Jim Sage area is really interesting; we had a flock of 100 birds there.
- Dallan N. – Do they feed on the seeds or just the leaves?
    - Jennifer F. – I don't think so. We got about 11 grouse carcasses from falconers and in them it was all leaves. As we got to the later in the spring we started seeing the Wyoming being browsed. The ephemeral leaves have more nitrogen and protein. When those start arriving then the birds can have a greater selection. When they are leking, that's when the cover might be more important. They are feeding in the shade.

## 6. Seasonal Habitat Mapping in the Challis LWG Area

Chris Gaughan (IDFG) and Vince Guyer (BLM) gave a presentation on seasonal habitat mapping work in the Challis Local Working Group area. Chris explained that Challis is different from other LWG areas and doesn't have the same types of threats. To help better understand the area and its threats they've done some different mapping than other areas.

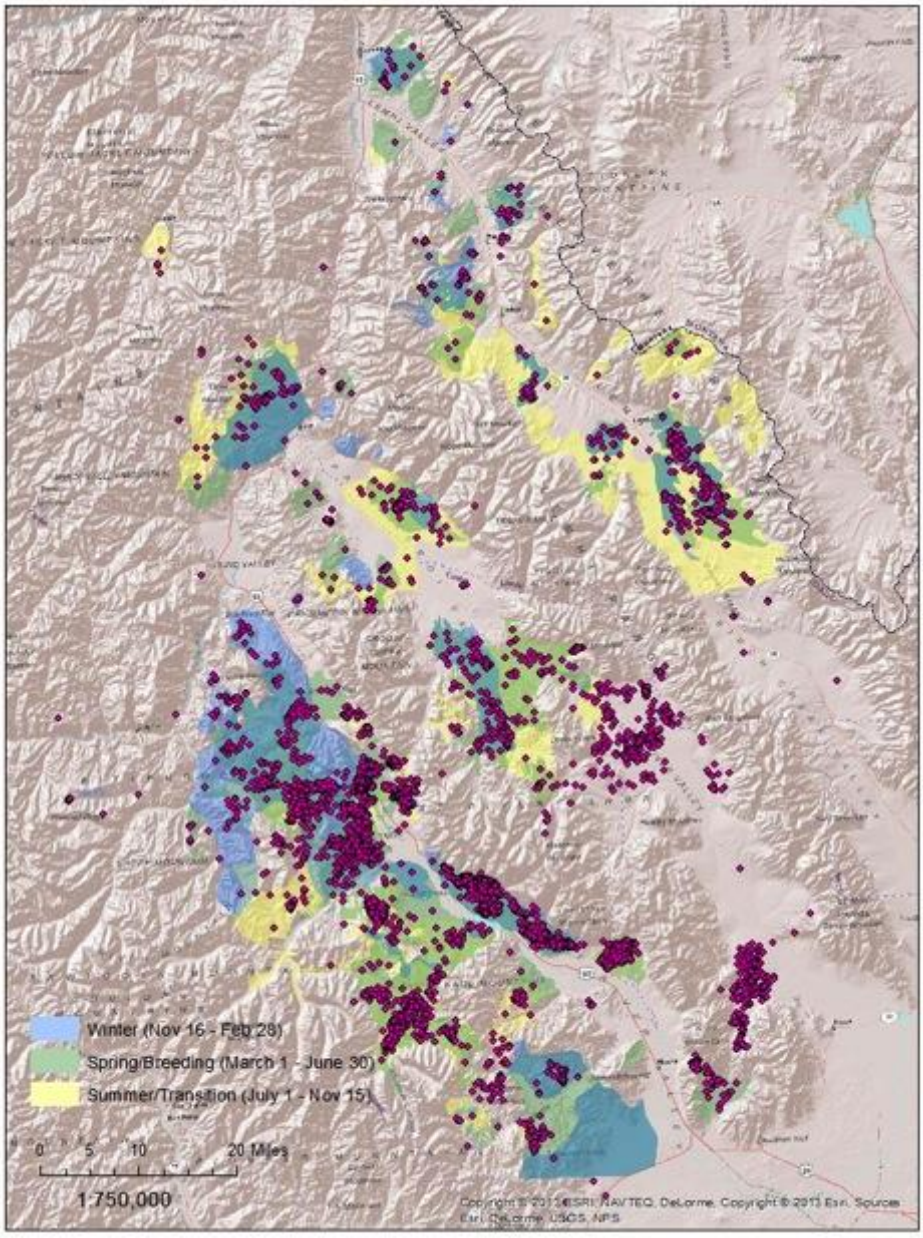
In 1997 the sage-grouse task force completed a plan. The Challis LWG area was originally part of the Upper Snake LWG but separated out because of the differences in habitat. In 2002 the Challis LWG met for the first time and they hired a consulting group to compile data about what was known about the area.

They began by compiling lek data and identified 129 different lek locations with 53 active leks. Because they only had information on leks, they did some buffering of nesting habitat (i.e., 3.2 km buffer and clipped by 40% slope). However, they realized that what they were seeing wasn't the whole picture. That was the rationale to go and do more mapping. The initial brood rearing model also had a number of errors. It was based on seeps and springs and other things that people thought were tied to brood rearing.

The Challis LWG decided to move away from models and buffers because of their different conditions. They decided that the best method was to make use of SSURGO digital soil maps plus reliable observation data and a radio-collaring program.

This new approach resulted in identification of over 6,000 telemetry locations, collaring of more than 200 birds, aerial locations identified during flights for other species, and ground based observations. This new information was shared at annual update meetings where everyone gets together and reviews the data and thinks through what to include or not, and also loops in the key habitat map information.

The result was a new Salmon regional seasonal use area map with 6,000 data points (see below).




The LWG decided to just start with a clean slate and add data as they collected it. If you have a map of a soil unit, you are able to pretty well represent vegetation on the ground. They had an order three soil survey to start from.

In the last couple years they are really starting to see the connectivity in the mid valley all the way up. They already knew they had some connectivity with INL. But now they are starting to get a better idea of how the different birds are related; that's something you can't do with buffers.

Chris noted that the process has been long and tedious, but the benefit is really there. In the Salmon they've actually been expanding their key habitat as they've found birds are using more areas.

Next steps include: an on-going radio-collaring project with BLM and USFS, monitoring historical leks for renewed activity (Badger and Park Creek), and searching for new leks (IR flights). Management applications include providing information to inform the key habitat map, information for NEPA required for grazing allotments, and project prioritization.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Paul M. – So this is probably a pretty conservative estimate of nesting habitat since you don't have a radio on every bird? Are you accounting for potential nesting habitat?
    - Vince G. – Yes, this is conservative. There's this and the other areas that we've identified as potential nesting areas. The LWG wanted this to be areas that we know are actual nesting habitat. That was a key distinction. Any observation data that people bring that we can confirm goes into this; it isn't just telemetry data. We recognize that there are other areas that potentially have sage-grouse use.
- John R. – Have you located any key areas where all the birds congregate, like the Freeman Airport that turned out to be really important for a short period of time e.g., hot spots?
    - Vince G. – There are some, but most of them we already knew about. For instance, there's an area right below Lemhi. That's our biggest wintering area.

## 7. Update on Raven Management Activities in Idaho

Ann Moser (IDFG) gave an update on raven management activities in Idaho. She explained that the State Legislature directed the Department of Agriculture and IDFG to conduct a study and associated monitoring. Specifically, the language regarding the intent of the legislation read:

> *It is the intent of the Legislature that the Department of Agriculture work together with the Department of Fish and Game to fund up to $100,000 for a project to evaluate and monitor the impacts of raven control on sage grouse survival.*

The rationale was that sage-grouse are a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), with a final decision expect in September 2014. Sage-grouse populations have declined for a number of reasons including infrastructure development, fire, habitat loss and fragmentation, etcetera. The USFWS has also noted a lack of regulatory mechanisms.

Breeding bird survey data indicate that raven numbers in Idaho have increased 3.4% per year since 1966. Raven numbers have also increased throughout the west. Ravens have increased because of a variety of subsidies e.g., landfills, road kill, power lines that give them places to nest where they didn't have places to nest before, water sources, etcetera.

There is direct evidence that ravens predate on sage-grouse eggs. For an example, Ann showed a video of nest predation taken by Zack Lockyear.

In terms of indirect evidence, IDFG has wing data going back to 1961. This is probably better data than lek date because it has a really good sample size. Looking at the number of juveniles per hen there is a clear decline over time. This indicates a problem with productivity, not adult birds. The three worst years in terms of productivity were 2007, 2012 and 2013. It is not clear what the cause of this decline is.

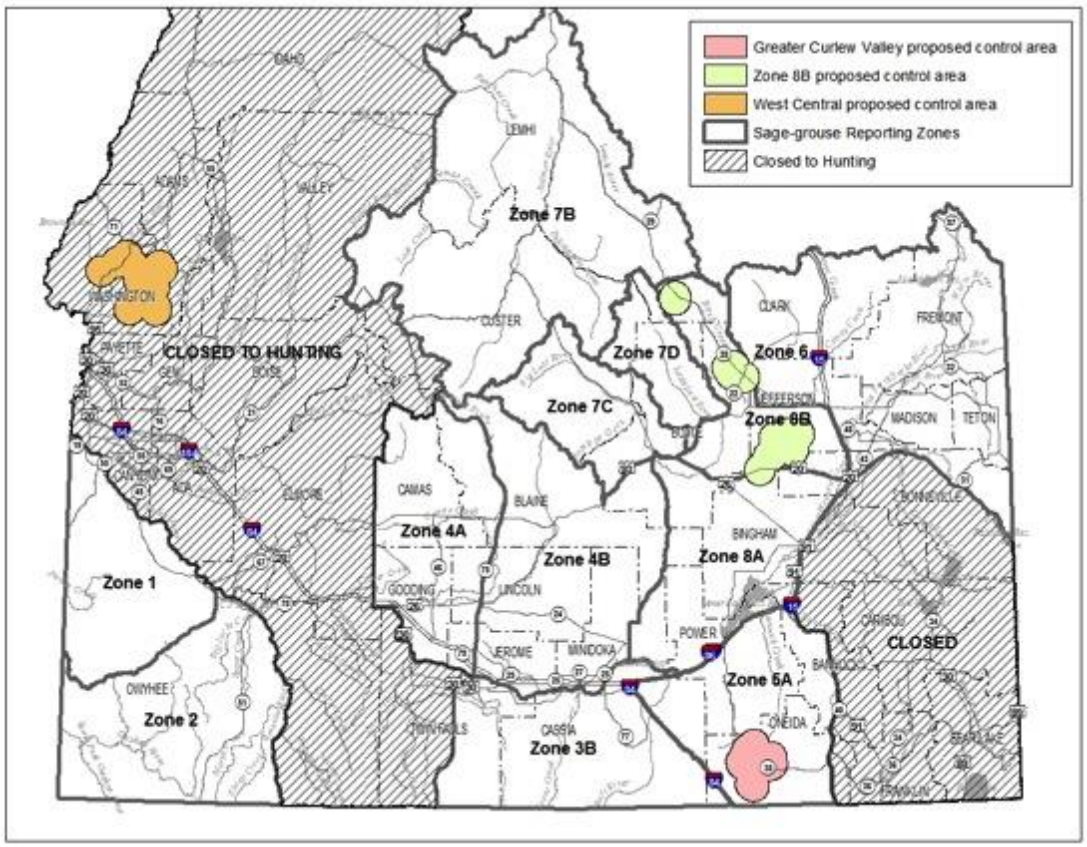
Raven Control

Ravens are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. In order to take ravens in Idaho a permit is required. When they first received this direction from the Legislature, IDFG asked Wildlife Services to

help. Wildlife Services thought they could take ravens under their current permit with USFWS, which is primarily designed to benefit livestock operations. However, the USFWS said that was not acceptable and that IDFG needed to be the permit holder. Therefore, IDFG had to apply for a scientific collecting permit to do the study. While IDFG can apply for and hold the permit, Wildlife Services is the only entity in the U.S. that can use the chemical that would be used to kill the ravens. To do that, Wildlife Services had to complete a Supplemental Environmental Assessment (EA) to the current EA they are working under.

Ann noted an additional challenge associated with the Legislature's direction to fund up to $100,000 to evaluate and monitor the impacts of raven control. It will cost approximately $50,000 to pay for the poison and for Wildlife Services work. The remaining $50,000 is not sufficient to conduct monitoring that would be able to provide an informative answer regarding the impacts of raven control. So a challenge is figuring out what can actually be accomplished with that amount of funding that would have informative value. Additionally, just so everyone understands, the $100,000 is not funding that was added to IDFG's budget, it is funding that will come out of the existing IDFG funding and would have otherwise been directed to other activities.

Given the limited funding, they are trying to figure out how to most effectively achieve the Legislature's intent. They looked at raven populations around the state and at congruent sage-grouse populations. They are proposing to do raven control in a very small area. A few years ago the SAC agreed to fund a project in the Curlew LWG looking at raven densities and the relationship to resources. That is one possible site. Five other possible study areas were identified. INL has the highest raven density, and the Curlew LWG area is the third highest.



Ann noted that we know that when a predator is removed from an occupied area, other predators will move in. So in order to have an impact the number of ravens removed is going to have to be high. To determine an estimated number of ravens to remove for the study they looked at raven densities in the Curlew (0.70 ravens/$km^2$), INL (0.85 ravens/$km^2$), and West Central (no date so they used an average). They extrapolated those numbers out to get an estimated number of ravens to remove.

Given the limited budget for monitoring they have determined that what they can do is continue to monitor lek route trends statewide, conduct raven surveys statewide, and record anthropogenic subsidies. In the past on almost all of the lek routes throughout the state they did the lek routes, and after that on the way home they did raven surveys. That is providing IDFG with some baseline data statewide. In addition, on the data sheet the people doing the surveys are recording what's on the landscape (e.g., landfill, power lines, etcetera).

Status Update

IDFG received the scientific collecting permit to take 1,750 adult ravens and 250 eggs each year for two years. Under that permit ravens may be shot or poisoned with DRC-1339. Wildlife Serviced did not complete the Supplemental EA. IDFG Conservation Officers are assisting with the raven removal to the extent possible. So far, 11 adult ravens have been killed, 15 nests were removed and 59 eggs destroyed in the Curlew LWG area. The permit expires on June 1, 2014 so at that point actions will end. Almost all the ravens were shot off nests; none were shot off bait. They didn't find any nests in INL or West Central. In the Curlew the nests were mostly in Russian olive trees. The Conservation Officers have found that it is very, very difficult to kill ravens.

Ann posed the question to the SAC, what can we do to help with this issue? How can we manage ravens in the future?

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Richard S. – I suggest in the Upper Snake area you need to move east to the Interstate 15 area where the road kill is. If you're going to kill them the fall might be the best time when they start flocking up. We also notice that there's a raven's nest on all the water tanks. Our group thought there might be value in helping educate ranchers to eliminate places for ravens to nest near water tanks. For instance, the old 10,000-gallon tanks – maybe putting something on them to prevent them nesting.
- John R. – You're instructed to monitor impacts of raven control on sage-grouse survival – subsidies for ravens, infrastructure, perching areas are a legitimate threat. You can get credit from USFWS for doing something that addresses a threat. Instead of looking at individual critters, look at the underlying subsidies. Look at ways to address subsidies that have broader support from everyone. For instance targeting Phase 1 and Phase 2 junipers is a pretty good way to address this. Subsidized water, better ways to manage road kills, siting power lines so they're not going through sage-grouse habitat. Clean things up. Removing junipers are a way of raven control that is arguably more effective in the long-term. Is there a way to redirect this towards other projects that have a lot of momentum? Maybe other ways that are more efficient than targeting one raven at a time.
- Lynn B. – I used to run cattle in Wyoming. The Game and Fish officers in Wyoming said all they use is poisoned eggs and they do it all the time. Wondering if there's a way to not reinvent that wheel and as a state have that going on. If you treat one area, it is like a vacuum and they're just going to drop back into that area. I understand that they are doing that in Montana as well.

- Ann – We haven't quite figured out all the rules that APHIS Wildlife Services operates under. They have different permits in Wyoming and Nevada than they have in Idaho. There are various ways that raven control is being done in other states that may not be possible in Idaho due to permitting issues.
- Don K. – We're basically contracting Wildlife Services to do the poisoned egg work. As far as what they need to do to go through NEPA requirements to do it in Idaho, that's their permitting process that they have to do through. We don't understand why they can do it in Wyoming, Nevada, and Utah but can't to it in Idaho. Their permit in Idaho allows them to take a couple hundred a year for livestock protection or human safety, it does not allow them to do control for sage-grouse. In Wyoming it includes poisoning them for sage-grouse. Only Wildlife Services staff can use the poison.

- Brett D. – Seems like the best management practices would be to reduce subsidies and educate people. Clearly ravens are using power lines to encroach into areas they otherwise wouldn't. Nesting birds have more of an impact than transitory birds. We're beginning to understand what ravens are selecting for nesting structures. They need a double cross arm structure. All the old wood structures have that double arm. The new steel structures don't seem to have nests on them. Idaho Power went and surveyed three power lines that have been recently built with this new steel structure. Over four to five miles there was only one nest and it was in a place where we put up a perch disouraager. So in sage-grouse country if we're putting up an H frame we're pushing to use this new structure. We're also looking at whether there's a way to put a cover on the redistribution lines. The challenge is that sometimes the cost is passed on to the customer.
- Steve G. – One thing that concerns me about this is that when I've driven through Owyhee County, in parts of county where there are sage-grouse you see very few ravens except along the roads or near the ranches.
    - Ann M. – They're nesting in the Bruneau Canyon.
- Steve G. – We counted a lek near the Nevada border. We drove 70 or 80 miles back and counted ravens and in that time we only counted five. Where we saw them was when we dropped down to the Bruneau valley. You said you were looking at getting a good picture of ravens statewide. I don't think that's a good plan, you need to see where they are relative to sage-grouse.
    - Ann M. – Where we are looking is where the lek surveys are. There are fall and winter concentrations.
    - Don K. – They are using poison bait on landfills in the winter when ravens are concentrated.
- Dallan N. – We brought up our proposal about five years ago. I agree that we need to start earlier and start baiting. We have an issue in the Curlew with ravens. Recently I saw a dead rabbit and there were about seven ravens on it. Six years ago we had ravens kill a calf. The day they put the bait out there were 16 ravens flying over the farm. After that there were three. We do have a problem with ravens on our farm. We need to start in control efforts in January and February, that's when they are congregate over everyone's ranches and farm buildings.
    - Ann M. – Wildlife Services has a permit for approximately 380 ravens to protect livestock and human health. I understand they don't actually meet that number every year.

- Jared B. – I see a lot of ravens. Every spring they show up at the sage-grouse lek. I don't think killing ravens is going to solve all our problems. We need to get rid of subsidies. We need to bury dead piles, educate the public, and we have to continuously do things. Poisoning ravens will save 20 sage-grouse over the years and that adds up. My wife has turkeys; it took three ravens a day and a half to kill all of those baby turkeys. They are incredibly smart birds. As far as the livestock carcasses, that's a drop in the bucket compared to the gut piles that are left after every hunting season. Road kill is a huge one too. If we're looking big picture, lets go true big picture.
    - Ann M. – On a related note, our Conservation Officers have recently observed that there is less road kill out there after the road kill salvage law passed.
- Paul M. – So did APHIS just table that Supplemental EA?
    - Ann M. – They're still working on it.
- Lynn B. – For our local landfill it cost $25 million to line the landfill. Fortunately we had clay that we could line it with. In Mud Lake you bury the trash every day. One thing IDFG could do is find out which landfills can't bury their trash and maybe target ravens in those areas.

In conclusion Don Kemner noted that some of the things that LWGs could do to help are to identify subsidies, use local knowledge to identify other subsidies, have them help map these things so that IDFG could knit that together.

## 8. 2014 Lek Counts

Ann Moser (IDFG) explained that the 2014 surveys are done but the data it not all entered into the database yet; IDFG staff is working on that. They have until June 1 to get it done and then Ann has about a week to get the summaries of the data pulled together and out to everyone.

There are 78 normal lek routes that are counted every year. This year they got a little extra money through OSC to visit more leks. Using that they visited leks that hadn't been visited in more than five years; leks that were determined to be unoccupied at some point. Also, they incorporated some of the management triggers that Brent Ralston described in the morning presentation. One of those is how is the lek count is changing year to year. So they wanted to make sure that any leks that were visited last year were visited again this year so that they could see the change from one year to the next. Ann said they probably got maybe an extra thousand leks that were visited this year. They had some leks in the Sand Creek desert that hadn't been visited since the late 1980s. Some of those were still active and were pretty big (i.e., 50-60 birds).

Anecdotally, people are saying that lek numbers appear to be the same or maybe a little better this year. Ann thought this was a little surprising given the earlier discussion about declining productivity trends. A presentation a few years ago at WAFWA that suggested that more males show up to the lek when productivity is lower. It is kind of like when bunch of coyotes are killed, they will subsequently put more energy into reproducing.

Don Kemner (IDFG) added that in terms of doing the extra lek counts; OSC made a supplemental funding request for fiscal year 2014 and received an additional 50,000 to do the additional counts. Also in fiscal year 2015 an additional request was made for up to $75,000 to do more lek counts. IDFG will be working with the regional offices to determine if it would be possible to actually get out and count leks if there was some additional funding. They are getting to the point in Salmon where they've counted all the leks that they can from the ground and now have to check from the air.

## 9. Hunting Season Setting

Ann Moser (IDFG) reminded the group that the Local Working Groups have been following a process to make recommendations for the upcoming hunting season every year since 2008. The process follows the framework and guidelines that were included in the 2006 state plan.

When regional staff gets lek data entered, Ann sends that information to the regional biologist. The IDFG representatives then compare the current data (the three year running average) to the hunting season and bag limit guidelines in the state plan to make an initial recommendation. The LWG members also review this recommendation and factor in additional local considerations. This process also allows for input at the local level. Even if the trend graphs show that we still have a huntable population, there might be things on the ground that you want to make sure are considered such as fire or other conditions. Or for another example, West Nile Virus doesn't usually hit until July or August; if people were to start seeing dead birds in that time frame we need to make sure the IDFG regional biologists know so that they could close the season. The IDFG regions make recommendations to the Wildlife Bureau the first week of July. These recommendations incorporate input from the LWG members. Once the regional recommendations are in, Ann M. and Don K. brief the IDFG Commission and put the recommendation on the IDFG web site as a proposal. At that point public comments are also taken. The public comment period usually extends through the end of July. Then IDFG staff develops the final recommendations for the Commissioners for their August meeting. The Commission sets the hunting season at their August meeting.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Lynn B. – Eventually the bird either will or won't be listed. I keep thinking we're dropping the ball because we haven't set a population guideline for each of those areas that we determine is a healthy population. So that when the Service decides whether or not to list they can take that into consideration.
    - Don K. – As far as the sage-grouse hunting season setting guidelines, the USFWS has indicated that they're good with the guidelines we're using. But in terms of the point you're making, there is work being done in Colorado trying to develop the techniques that would potentially allow for doing surveys that would give you a population estimate rather than doing a lek trend count. In the future there may be a methodology that could be applied that would come up with population estimates for sage-grouse. As far as hunting seasons, a couple years ago when we were developing the habitat and population triggers for the Governor's alternative we sketched out if that actually did get adapted and implemented in the land use plans how could we use that same protocol in determining hunting seasons. It ties how we set hunting seasons into the same way of determining other multiple uses of the land.
- Brett D. – I took the annual report that Ann sent out with the numbers and looked at where we're at with the Governor's plan. Right now the Upper Snake, Magic Valley, Curlew, etc. have already hit the trigger. Looking at this regulatory environment we're in, we're harvesting a lot of birds. Is this really worth it where we're at right now that we're going to continue hunting birds and we have a listing decision coming up? Hitting these triggers is going to impact our industry, the livestock industry and our state. I think from a SAC perspective maybe there's something we can do.

- Don K. – I think that is a decision for the LWGs not the SAC. In the past the SAC has always wanted to let the LWGs take the lead in their own areas and not dictate decisions at a statewide scale.
- Sam C. – We've talked about this before and a number of people on the SAC have said no to hunting.
- Rochelle O. – Right now in most of the LWGs, the members are mostly agency people. It may be important for the SAC to have more of a voice in this.
- Don K. – We've closed seasons in some areas in the past and we've kept seasons really low too.
- Steve G. – Would like Ann to let us know if areas with closed seasons have experienced a jump in the leks?
    - Ann M. – West Central has conflicting conditions. Jarbidge closed due to fire but has stabilized with maybe some increase. The Curlew closed for many years and then reopened because numbers improved. East Idaho Uplands is closed.

Alison S. noted that the issue of whether to close hunting altogether in Idaho has come up multiple times over the years in the SAC and that there are a range of views on the topic. She noted that the SAC membership has changed a great deal over the last three years and asked the SAC members if they would like to just record everyone's current thinking on the matter, given the current composition of the SAC. Alison suggested it might be valuable for IDFG to hear the current SAC participant's thoughts on the issue and participants agreed that they would like to have a chance to state each of their views at this time.

Following are the results of the poll of current member's and SAC technical advisor's views of the hunting issue. This was not a vote or a change in current policy, but was intended to record member's current thinking on the hunting issue:

- Jared B. (Jarbidge) – Jarbidge elected to close their local season. I support closing more
- John P. (North Magic Valley) – We have a LWG that's pretty well agency dominated. Last year we had a real fight in the committee about whether to close the season because of fire. We got our lek counts last night, the lek counts look pretty good in the North Magic Valley. We started with the 2005 peak, then the West Nile Virus hit. But every lek but one is showing an increase. We voted last night to support a one bird two-bag limit. But I hadn't seen Ann's productivity information at that point.
- Rochelle O. (IWG) – Personally, have hard time getting my head around hunting not affecting population levels. I don't understand that argument. With a listing decision coming out I think we should close hunting statewide.
- Sam C. (Big Desert). I think it is at the point of being listed, I think you should close it until after the listing decision. Big Desert is one of the better areas in the state right now. We could go to a longer season, but I think we need to close it.
- Diane F. (IDL) – On personal level I agree with Rochelle. I'm a hunter but this close to a possible listing, I'm not sure that hunting makes sense.
- Paul M. – Think the low productivity figures that we're seeing are disconcerting. It is hard to pass the red face test to defend hunting but then we take all these other measures. I get that

the wing data gives us our productivity data. Without that it's hard to get that data. But I keep coming back to that red face test.

- Kabel S. (Shoshone Basin). – Our group is agency dominated right now, but I'd like to see the season closed.
- Wendy P. (East Idaho Uplands) – East Idaho Uplands is closed. I would like to see it kept on a case-by-case LWG decision. If it is a way to get producers there to make that decision, that would be good. It is hard to for agency folks to run over ranchers.
- Dallan N. (Curlew) – The Curlew closed for a few years and recently opened on a restricted basis. If you don't have enough birds that they should be listed is one argument, but you need to know how many birds you have. You're kind of behind a rock and a hard place. I don't think they're getting enough wings out of the wing barrels.
- Dave E. (Challis) – This information that Ann just showed us about productivity isn't new. When we ask the IDFG about how to go about this differently they says that we need this data that comes from hunters. But the red face test is more of an issue. We're hitting the trigger in the Challis. I think it is time to find some other way to gather this information. Don't know if we're even getting enough anymore. I personally think we're going to get a listing anyway.
    - Ann M. – At the statewide level its okay, at the local level it is not enough.
- Richard S. (ICA) – It's a hard discussion. Politically the pressure is there to have a season. People have talked about the reason why that's necessary. But at the same time, we've had regulatory triggers in place for quite a while. It seems like there was some wisdom when that mechanism to guide the decision was put in the state plan. There may be wisdom in continuing that system. But as Brett pointed out its pretty limited where that hunt is justified at this point.
- Lynn B. (Upper Snake) – Would like to see it closed. Think we've got an adequate population to justify having a hunting season, but I don't know what the Service thinks. I'd like to be able to say, if the Service says list it, to be able to say we have this much population. But this close to a listing, I don't think we should have hunting.
- Wendy G. (West Central) – West Central hasn't had a season in 25 years, and it hasn't saved our population. But we have had this discussion. A lot of the landowners and producers in our LWG ask why am I putting all this time and energy into protecting the bird when they're hunted somewhere else in the state. But I think there would be reluctance to dictate what other LWGs will do.
- John R. (ICL) – There's no one thing that's gotten us into this and no one thing that will get us out. This should be on the table. It does confound judgment to have a hunting season on the table in the face of listing. Everyone has given something else up.
- Steve G. (IWF, Mountain Home) – I feel very strongly, and think Service has spoken, that listing will not be based on whether or not the bird is hunted. The Service has already said that hunting as currently regulated does not pose a threat. People talked about the lack of productivity but I don't think that's related to hunting. That's related to the quality of the habitat, the environmental situation we face at a time the chicks are most vulnerable. Drought has a bigger effect. Look at the list of threats. Hunting is listed as number 14 as a factor. We have data on the number of birds lost to fence strikes. We said we'd follow the state plan, it hasn't been amended, and to this point we've consistently gone with what the plan says. My

position would drastically change if there were anything that said hunting was having a significant impact and that banning hunting would cause the population to increase.

- Don K. (IDFG) – The Department's position is to follow the plan. Also, LWG input and local knowledge and recommendations are taken into account. We've gone outside of the guidelines at times based on local input. From my perspective we should continue following the plan. This group developed it. The Service has said that from their perspective this operates as a regulatory mechanism. Our neighbor, Montana is going to propose closing the season statewide. That will be a big topic at the grouse workshop in a couple weeks.
- Brett D. (Idaho Power) – I want to say I agree with everything Steve said. The thing that scares me is the trigger mechanism. We've established a trigger mechanism that we're close to hitting in some areas. In a triage situation, hunting is something that we should seriously consider.
    - Don K. – We did talk about if this whole trigger mechanism does get incorporated into the land use plans we're looking at considering if we need to change the hunting season guidelines to incorporate other changes.
- Kathleen H. (USFWS) – It wasn't identified as a primary threat range wide in some local areas. Thinking about the Montana decision, hunting is a cultural tradition. Hunting is an important outreach tool. I am also concerned about some trigger that might have been tripped. But from the Service's perspective there are very strong regulatory mechanisms there right now. From a listing perspective if hunting was taken away that wouldn't affect the listing decision.
- Dustin M. (OSC) – It's a double-edged sword. If you're doing all this great work for grouse on the ground it makes you ask why are we doing this great work and hunting the bird. But like Kathleen said, are we going to alienate the hunter and sportsman? When will you be able to open up areas again, once you shut them down?

### 10. Local Working Group and Agency Updates

Local Working Group members and other SAC participants gave the following updates:

- Kathleen H. (USFWS) – We continue to work with the state, BLM and Forest Service to put forth a plan. The biggest hurdle is to sell it to headquarters. We have to sell that it is consistent across the range of the species. We're letting them know the plan is good, and in some cases exceeds it, we're far ahead of the other states. Also, USFWS just hired nine new people to get out on the ground and start working with landowners. Kate just took on new position doing that. We've learned a lot of lessons through the West Central CCAA and are looking to try to use this tool throughout the state. We are trying to get out to the LWGs.
    - Don K. – We can let the LWG's know about opportunity and for those that are meeting.
    - Brett D. – Is there enough time to get a CCAA in place?
    - Kathleen H. – There's a template that's been developed if the species were proposed for listing in the next year. Carney County, OR just signed a CCAA last week. For those landowners who wish to sign up, they would sign up with a letter of intent, which would put them in the cue. Then the Service will prioritize those by core habitat, etc. If you've signed a letter of intent you'd still get assurances. But you'll have to have a site-specific agreement on your lands.

- Brett D. (Idaho Power) – A couple projects of interest, we have a new line going up in the Wood River Valley. Were working on the EA right now. The Hailey/Ketchum area only has two lines going into it and we are proposing to build new line structure by structure. The other project is Gateway West. The majority of that line has been approved and the sage-grouse mitigation plan is still being finalized. The Gateway West decision through the Birds of Prey land is an ongoing discussion.
- Jack D. (DOE) – No new projects to report on. Within next month or so we will sign a CCA. That agreement basically includes conservation measures, triggers, etc. similar to what is in the EIS. We modified the CCA pretty extensively to be more consistent with how everyone else is going to manage the species.
- Dustin M. (OSC) – OSC and IDFG have been at the table for the last few months as cooperators hammering out the proposed final EIS. We're in a unique situation having the state alternative as a co-preferred alternative. A lot of that is to the credit of the Sage-grouse Task Force, LWG members, etc. USFWS has been providing feedback to us all along. We're getting close to meshing the alternatives together. Higher-level Federal bureaucrats are calling for consistency across the range now. A document came down from DC that's intended to provide guidance across the range. If we can show that our plan is consistent with the objectives, etc. we should be able to deviate from the national guidance. We'll be meeting soon to advocate for our state effort. Up until this national guidance came out, we've been moving cohesively with the state and Federal effort.
- Scott S. (NRCS) – Our farm bill passed which is good news. In includes a lot of new programs but follows the same lines of the old programs. The old programs are wrapped into one act. The payment limitation has been increased. For all of the producers that may have been capped under the 2008 farm bill, they can now get up to $450,000 under the new bill. I am located in the Burley office and will be presenting on a project tomorrow.
- Sam C. (Big Desert) – The Big Desert LWG hasn't met this year. We had a tour last year to look at the range and reseeding from 10-15 years ago. They're starting to really see some of the fire strips now. Our leks are a little better than last year.
- Rochelle O. (IWG) – *[Alison was interrupted during Rochelle's update and wasn't able to get notes.]*
- John P. (North Magic Valley) – We met last night. There has been a lot of fence marking going on in our LWG. People are feeling pretty good about things.
- Jared B. (Jarbidge) – Jarbidge LWG is struggling a little with lack of funding for things to do. Our idea is to try to review and submit meaningful comments on the annual grazing permits for BLM. We have most of the fence marking done. We had a good tour with Shoshone Basin.
- Ann M. (Mountain Home, IDFG) – We were going along pretty well until the Pony Complex Fire burned up most of our sage-grouse habitat. Within our planning area only about one quarter to one third had sage-grouse, and most of that burnt last year. We only have four active leks, and two of those burned. Our group kind of stalled on that emotionally, it affected the grazers, permittees, and everyone.
- Don K. (IDFG) – Dustin summed up things in terms of the EIS. The grazing study is another big piece of IDFG's direction on sage-grouse. Jared mentioned a lack of funding. I'd like everyone to think about if you had funding what kind of habitat projects could you do right now and bring

that to the table tomorrow. Jack Connolly and Ann Moser were very involved in developing task for recommendations, etc. Also, regarding possible additional project funding. Like happened last year, we're coming to end of fiscal year and there is possibly a little pot of money that we might be able to get out on the ground quickly. Last year we got some funds out for cheatgrass control. Right now I don't know for sure if there's money left. But if we had some ideas in hand we might be able to access it if there is money there.

- Steve G. (IWF) – The Mountain Home group is trying to collar more birds. We found they do move quite a bit. One lek is lot bigger than last year.
- John R. – Kudos to Don and Dustin and BLM, and Service on working together on the RMP revision process. It is a really a good effort.
- Wendy G. (West Central) – West Central hasn't met since last summer. A few landowners will be very encouraged to hear that the CCAA process is alive. The lek counts in West Central are discouraging. What is encouraging has been working with Jason Pyron on field trips with school kids and fence marking. Also, landowners continuing to do projects through the NRCS funds.
- Lynn B. (Upper Snake) – Not much to report on in the Upper Snake. They got together in January but I wasn't able to be there. They are getting pretty much finished up on the fence marking. They will want to have a meeting on the hunting season. It is tough to meet and do reporting and then meet and do the hunting. Terry has been really good.
- Richard S. (ICA) – Our group believes that we're going to have regulation; it's a matter of who is going to do it. The closer to the ground that occurs the better off we'll be. We continue to engage with OSC, the Governor's office, and IDFG to develop a management plan that sees the need of the bird is met and meets the multiple use mandates that we have on public lands. We continue to work hard on that. Also, in 2012 ICA recognized that some decisions coming from agencies weren't science based. We've been working in the appeals process to make sure the best thing on the ground happens.
- Dave E. (Challis) – The Challis LWG met in January, Dave didn't attend but got an update from Vince Guyer. We have the LWG plan done and want to make sure that it gets implemented wherever it can. We want to keep things are local as we can. We plan to update the seasonal map every year and use that to update our plan. We think the more good information we have about where the birds are, that will give us more leverage. We hardly have anyone show up to the meetings any more.
- Dallan N. (Curlew) – We met during the winter. There were three or four of us. Not much going on in the Curlew. We're starting to see a bug invading, the black grass bug. Maybe someone should start looking at it, it could have an effect on habitat.
- Wendy P. (East Idaho Uplands) – You do the plan, you make these goals, and then nothing happens. Now we're just focusing on what do we know about the bird. There's just a little bit of life in the group. We had a tour of brush control projects that a few ranchers attended. Jack Connolly still does the survey with his hunting dog. It is basically IDFG, Wendy and one or two other agency people who come to the meetings. We need more communication between the state, IDFG, Governor's Task Force, etc. I feel like we were left out of the Governor's plan in terms of mapping.
- Kabel S. (Shoshone Basin) – Our group hasn't met this year. Agency folks are working on nesting habitat.

- Paul M. – We've spent the last several months working closely with the state, Forest Service, and IDFG on the final proposed plan. That's taken a lot of time. We're all pretty much on the same page now. Back in December we visited at the field office with folks to talk about edge boundaries. We are trying to tie features on the land to boundaries. We're going to continue that work over the next few months. This past winter we completed an update to the key habitat map. That's been posted on the Inside Idaho website and is available to the public. That's the vegetation side of the sage-grouse habitat map. It reflects fires, and other things too. For the last few weeks I've been working on fire organization for the Sage-grouse Fire Resource Advisors resource tool kit. Basically it is a set of geo-spatial tools that is available to the fire resource advisors. It allows them to bring up lek data, winter habitat data and other layer available when they are making fire fighting decisions in the field.
- Diane F. (IDL) – IDL continues to work with lessees and private landowner through the NRCS program. That includes the Owyhee juniper project and fence marking. We are also working with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and IDFG on some rehabilitation and juniper removal projects. On a landscape scale we're looking at juniper utilization in Owyhee County and how we can use some of the juniper that' s out there in the name of sage-grouse habitat. Also we are working on monitoring and getting lessees more engaged in monitoring. Maybe developing a sage-grouse component. We would like to help permittees and lessees do more standardized monitoring.

## Thursday May 29, 2014

### 11. Conservation Working Landscapes: The Pioneer Alliance Story

Bas Hargrove (TNC) gave an update on the Pioneer Alliance. He stated that he was a small player in the overall story and that the main players included landowners like John Peavey, dedicated agency staff, community leaders and other people working on the ground. He said that the Pioneer Alliance story is one of the big success stories in the West in the last decade. The effort is about ensuring that sage-grouse habitat and a way of life are maintained for future generations. In a period of seven years, the partners in the Pioneers Alliance have safeguarded the environment, the economy, and culture of a 2.4 million acre area of Idaho. They've also hopefully contributed to preventing ESA listing of sage grouse.

Bas reviewed the Peaks to Craters landscape. He noted that there is a matrix of private and public lands; the public lands are the linchpins to the effort. The private land is the most productive land for people and for sage-grouse. It holds the landscape together. Un-fragmented sage-grouse habitat in the area includes breeding, nesting and brood rearing habitat.

This area also represents the largest protected working landscape in Idaho with 80,000 acres of working farms and ranches that are protected or in the process of being protected. In seven years, since 2007, four to five times the amount of conservation and land protection has occurred compared to what occurred in the previous 30 years. The NRCS has also helped implement projects t under the auspices of the Sage-grouse Initiative. Those are mostly grassland reserve projects.

<u>History of Area</u>

Bas reviewed the history of the area explaining that that is key to understanding what it is that people are working together to protect. In the 1860s Goodale's Cut-off was heavily travelled. Tens of thousands of pioneers came through the area. Settlement began in the 1870s after mining played out.

Sheep ranchers and farmers moved in. Ketchum was once the busiest sheep shipping train port in the US and the second largest in world (the largest was in Sidney, Australia). Sun Valley Resort was established in 1936 and set the stage for the recreation economy in the Wood River Valley. The area to the east centered around Carey maintained more of its agricultural heritage. The area also features one of the most intact long-distance migratory sheep ranching cultures in the West.

Environment

Elevations range from 4,000 to 12,000 feet and precipitation is about 15 inches a year. The area hosts a number of species including sage-grouse, pronghorn, mule deer and elk. There is a 150-mile pronghorn migration route through the pioneers. The topographical diversity supports seasonal migrations of both wildlife and livestock.

The agricultural and ranching community and culture are pretty much intact in the area. But with the greater Sun Valley metro-recreational area just over the hill, it is not hard to imagine a future of subdivision and development. Because of the elevations the area is a little bit cooler, a little bit wetter, and a little bit higher than a lot of sagebrush country. Therefore it is somewhat less vulnerable to cheatgrass and less vulnerable to fire. The great recession also helped keep Sun Valley expansion in control for a little while, it bought some time.

Bas reviewed a map showing the lek locations where one or more males were observed. It is hard to monitor in the area because of the winter conditions. From 2002-2007 there were just 11 leks documented north of Highway 20 but local knew that there were more birds there. After increasing the number of surveys, partners have documented 28 leks north of the Highway. Many of them are on private lands protected through the Sage-grouse Initiative and Pioneer Alliance.

Ingredients of Success

The project happened in a very short period of time but built on longer-term relationships within the community. Leadership from NRCS, local leaders and landowners was critical. There was also continuity in terms of the source of funding. The partnership got started in response to the proposed transmission line going through area. They got the route of the line changed.

The values for the Pioneers-Craters landscape that were embraced by the alliance include: working farms and ranches, wildlife habitat, water resources, recreational values and cultural heritage.

Next Steps

Next steps include continuing to protect critical lands, addressing resource concerns including water resources (Fish Creek, Little Wood River), fence modifications for pronghorn, the Craters Resource Management Plan amendment, and recreational opportunities.

A major challenge is continuing to find non-federal match money. Under the old Farm Bill the project was possible because under the grassland reserve program there wasn't a match requirement. Under new farm bill there's a one-to-one match requirement. It is hard to get to the scale of the investment that the NRCS is required to make.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Don K. – Does that have to be a cash match? Are their in-kind opportunities?
    - Bas H. – For the Agricultural Lands Easement program, it is more like old program with 50% non-federal, up to 25% cash and up to 25% land.
- Wendy P. – Is the grassland reserve is a permanent easement?

- Bas H. – Yes.

- John P. – We had a ranch that was heavily indebted, there's no debt now. There are problems working in Blaine County related to a non-lethal requirement that one of the commissioners wants to attach. This is perpetual and stuff like that shouldn't appear in a conservation agreement, it should be in a management plan that is revisited every 5 years or 10 years.
    - Don K. – I want to clarify that this business on the non-lethal control is because Blaine County has put some money into this. That isn't something related to NRCS or TNC.
- Donna B. – What other restrictions are there?
    - John P. – There are some oversight management regulations that you have to accept. It's been a great relationship with TNC.
    - Bas H. – Different land trusts or entities differ on the philosophy on the easements. We like to make the easements less prescription but ask for a management plans so there's flexibility to deal with a changing environment.
- Sam C. – On the easements, don't you sign away your water rights to the government?
    - Bas H. – No. The wetland reserve program is different, because they don't consider it a working lands program. With the new agricultural lands easement program you can by and large keep doing what you've been doing. The main thing is keeping these places from being subdivided. It's a big commitment.
    - Brett D. – We have a wetland reserve easement on some of our lands and haven't had to give up water rights.
- Jared B. – Did you say 78,000 acres is what you've reserved? With the increased conservation, what have you seen as an increase of sage-grouse in those areas?
    - Bas H. – It is too short a time to say. We've found more grouse because we're looked harder.
- Rochelle O. – I saw you had a fence modification for pronghorn, what does that involve? Who pays for it?
    - Bas H. – NRCS has a standard program.
- Dave E. – These are really good programs. It is nice to see it's got this far. They can be hard to get into sometimes. In our area we're trying to do some conservation work and we've explored everything we can. Maybe under this new farm bill we can figure something out. The grassland stuff hasn't fit in the Lemhi area. This easement thing is a good tool. You have to have some responsibility going in to it. You have to take responsibility as a landowner for how you want it to play out.
    - Bas H. – This was special case because NRCS identified this as a priority. But I think there will be more opportunities under new farm bill because the Columbia River Basin is critical habitat.
    - Don K. – When you say the NRCS decided to focus in this area, besides the SGI, wasn't one of the other important reasons the landowner interest?

    - Bas H. – There was support from the chief of the NRCS on down. He was enthusiastic about the project but because the Pioneer Alliance was in place he was able to make the investment in this.

- John P. – We run sheep and cattle and the three-wire fence isn't going to turn sheep. If we want to put a net wire fence up what happens?
    - Scott S. – We can't do that with a wildlife friendly fence.
- Jared B. – Think there's a lot of potential here. From a ranching standpoint as a private landowner if we do a conservation easement that's only part of the picture. For this to work good on a landscape scale you have to find a way to tie the conservation easement to BLM or Forest Service lands. You'll need to have assurances about future grazing. If that happens you'll have considerable buy in from ranchers.
- John P. – That was one of the draws from our side. TNC was on our side if we get sued. That's why I emphasize the importance of those federal lands and being able to work into more fall and winter grazing and put infrastructure in place like pipelines and troughs, etc. There's a lot of stuff that needs to happen. We were confident that TNC would be with us supporting good conservation and well managed rest rotations.
    - Bas H. – Getting buy-off from federal agencies is a long-term project.
- Jared B. – If we're serious about conservation that should be written into the conservation agreement. If you've got 5,000 AUMs on your permit it needs to be written in there that those AUMs will be maintained, or you release what you've tied up on the private lands.
- Lynn B. – What has to happen is you have to rebuild the trust. Most of the ranchers in our area had agreements in place. In our case agreement was with the Forest Service and BLM and we put these water troughs I place. We got one year into a seven-year project and they backed out. My concern is the ability to make the Federal agencies stand by our agreements.
- Dave E. – Jared needed to be here about four or five years ago. We had the same conversation about the CCAAs. The failing was that they would not tie federal lands to those entities. That is critical that this group can have some input to that. It is critical to tie those together.
- Bas H. – From a TNC perspective we're happy to work with you. But we also don't have control over what the feds do.
- Donna B. – Coming from a rancher's perspective, we've been there on the land sometimes for many generations. The Federal and state people are in there until they retire or move somewhere else. We have to have more than someone signing on the dotted line. That's the trust we've talking.

## 12. Update on Range-wide Local Working Group Conference, November 2014

Don Kemner (IDFG) said that Dr. Terry Mesmer at Utah State University is pulling together a conference in November that they are calling a LWG conference. There was one similar to this in Nevada in the mid 2000s. It was an invitation to representatives from all LWG across the range of sage-grouse to come together. Don wanted to make sure folks are aware of that conference. They have a committee that's working on putting together the conference agenda.

Don extended an invitation to anyone here who would like to join that planning committee. If you want to be on this committee there would be a couple of meetings. They are going to have some kind of stipend that would help offset the cost of LWG representatives attending the conference. The conference will be in Utah on November 11 and 12, 2014.

## 13. Burley Landscape Project: A Model Partnership for Getting the Job Done

Scott Scroggie (NRCS, Pheasants Forever) gave a presentation on a project in the Burley area that is part of the Sage-grouse Initiative. Scott was hired by NRCS specifically to work on Sage-grouse Initiative projects.

The project that Scott described initially started at the LWG level in 2010. There were lots of agency folks and lots of ranchers working together and they found common ground around the need for en EA, a project location on Forest Service lands, shared resources concerns, and practices. BLM had just completed an EA at the same time period to remove Junipers. Then the group hit the wall with funding limitations. In 2010 the NRCS policy changed to allow work to be done on public lands with more ease. This allowed for the possibility of partnering again. With the help of Scott Sayer, a BLM range Con, a partnership was formed that included: IDFG, Pheasants Forever, NRCS, the landowners, and BLM. They developed agreements and MOUs. They had some allotments with 22 permittees working in-kind on allotments. They had to get all 22 of those on board.

The project location is near Burley and Twin Falls. Last fall they completed a project at Jim Sage, and this fall they will be moving on to South Cottrell.

Juniper Treatments

All of the details for the juniper treatments were outlined in the 2010 BLM EA. Cutting treatments generally begin September 1 and go through the end of February depending on fire restrictions and access. Methods are also determined by the EA and consist of lop and scatter, cut and pile, and mastication. These treatments are based on tree densities and slope of the project area.

When they start in September moved fast. The contractors are given maps and GIS shape files are loaded to their GPS units for boundary delineation. Cultural sites are flagged so that they can easily be avoided. Fire season and bird nesting are important sideboards. Phase 1 and 2 are designed to push back encroachment and keep the understory viable. The made maps using aerial photography.

The payment process is different from the typical EQUP program. Permittees use Farm Bill funds to do the work. They set up a stewardship agreement with Pheasants Forever, the contractor that did the work. Pheasants Forever pays that contractor. Any remaining deficit is paid for by BLM funds set aside in a stewardship agreement.

Completed, Planned and In Progress

The goal outline in the EA is 32,000 acres of treatment. Of that, 7,000 acres burned in wildfires, 11,000 acres are completed or in progress and 16,000 acres are slated for completion by March of 2017. The project includes 34 miles of fence marking and perch deterrents. In addition, four adjacent private parcels have been identified for addition to the project to add connectivity. Scott said he also just learned that IDL would be working with them to get state parcels on board as well.

They completed the juniper treatments and two weeks after treatment they flushed 100 plus birds in two separate events. They left some trees for shade including pinion pine and old growth trees.

Challenge and Opportunities

Having a definite goal helped a lot. They will complete as much work as possible before 2015. Partnerships are key to strengthen the success and effectiveness of the project. Everyone needs to be on board with the project for success.

This is a model for western land management. More areas at a landscape level are getting treated. We have to work at a local level, but at the same time the bird is across 11 states. All 11 are meeting and discussing ways of getting work done on the ground. Without those coordinated efforts our work wouldn't go as far.

Scott said that he just found out that NRCS has about $1 million left for sage-grouse work. If you're a permittee holder or private landowner and have ideas please let NRCS know as soon as possible. Just get in and fill in an application, it is on a rolling basis and that will get things started.

*Questions and Discussion:*

- Dallan N. – You said it burned, but you didn't treat it? Is there part of the program to remove the dead trees?
    - Scott S. – Yes, we're trying to work on that this fall. We're working on doing multiple treatments on that private space. On private land it's a little different. With BLM your grazing plan is already determined. On private land we require a grazing plan, we just want to see improvement.
- Diane F. – There are three people with NRCS who are in the position that Scott is in.
    - Scott S. – Josh White was out of Mountain Home, Ed has taken over his potion He covered Elmore and Owyhee. Scott covers Cassia, Minidoka and _____. Laura who is in Rexburg covers the Big Desert. NRCS is working with TNC to try to understand the new easement programs. NRCS gets this sage-grouse money and then finds out it needs to be spent in a really short time. So, don't wait until the money is there to sign up for an application; even if its on BLM land or Forest Service land and you have to wait for an EA – you should still sign up if you're interested.
- Donna B. – Juniper eradication has been the main focal point for our LWG. Art Talsma with TNC has been really helping us. Yesterday was the third tour we've had. It is amazing the difference once you get rid of those trees in terms of what's coming back. We treated some trees around the reservoir. Art flushed so many sage-grouse there that he had to hold his horse down from bucking. Also the water comes back once you take the trees off. The only problem is that we're about 50 years too late.
- Scott S. – That's what we're hoping to show the Service; that some of these treatments like juniper, can make results overnight. But the NRCS has also been working with the Service this whole time to let them know that what we're doing may not yield immediate results.
- Dave E. – You said Pheasants Forever contracted for that work. Were you able to find enough local contractors to do that work?
    - Scott S. – Pheasants Forever puts out a bid process, their national office is in Minnesota. The contractors came out of Oregon. If there are people who are interested in that I can direct you're to my boss.
- Dave E. – We have fir encroachment. That specialized training sometimes limits our ability to find people. BLM has fire crews but that money is being spent chasing fires, etc.

- Scott S. – This approach has worked out great, it has freed up a lot of BLMs time. When we certify those treatments, they have to meet BLM and NRCS specs. The BLM fuels crew was drastically reduced in our area. We'll do cut and pile and the fuels crew will come back and do those piles.

- Lynn B. – Do they grind the stumps too?
  - Scott S. – Yes, right down to the ground. You can come out and visit in September; we'll have people out there.
  - Donna B. – Our guy has two different kinds. One is on a skid and the other spins.
- Jared B. – What' cost per acre?
  - Scott S. – It varies, mastication varies from $400 to $600. It's tricky because the cost share varies.
- Wendy G. – We need to get ahead of the game because the cost later on has to be massive. We need to be able to go in where there are just a few.
  - Scott S. – Phase 1 is that very scattered tree here or there situation. Phase 2 is thicker but your understory is still intact. In Phase 3 the understory is really depleted so you have thick trees and have to go back in and reseed. We're pushing to do every acre with the Phase 1 encroachment.
- Donna B. – We were amazed at how fast the understory comes back, it holds the moisture in there so new plants can get started. Even a Phase 3 comes back.

## 14. Update on Sage-grouse Funding

Jon Beals (OSC) said he works for Dustin M. at OSC as is the project manager for the sage-grouse funding. The initial sage-grouse funds that the SAC had historically allocated for projects came from a $1 million congressional earmark. Jon provided a spreadsheet summarizing the allocation of those funds (see Attachment B).

Dustin Miller noted that the state legislature provided some additional funding last year, a total of $50,000 for additional lek monitoring. The legislature is keying in on this now and recognizes that there may be more opportunity for OSC to work in the future for funding for this group.

Don K. explained that there is approximately $35,000 that is still unassigned. Dustin Miller also indicated that there might be some additional unassigned funds that were in the OSC pool that could supplement the $35,000, maybe as much as $50,000 total for the combined money. March 2015 is deadline to finish it out; but it is possible to extend that. Don recommended that later in the meeting SAC members make a recommendation regarding what to do with those funds.

## 15. Potential Projects for Funding if Funds Come Available

On the first day of the SAC meeting Don K. asked for ideas for projects if there was funding available. SAC meeting participants suggested the following:

- Jared B. – Dixie Harrowing sections. If we had funding there's probably at least two or three sections that we could get permittees to sign up for in short order. The LWG owns part of a Dixie Harrow so we'd just need money for a seed source. They'd provide the tractor and Dixie

Harrow. It works well to breaks up dead brush, then put seeds in. When you break open the canopy in areas that are 40% canopy the seeds really take off the following year. You can vary how much manipulation you do. Seeding happens as harrow goes.

- Jared B. – Another project is that there are always people who want to do pipeline spring developments. Those are harder because it will take a BLM permit because you'll need an easement or an EA to do some of that. You'll have to go across BLM land. They're in the permit renewal process in the Jarbidge so they could maybe do this while they're in the renewal process.
- Sam C. – BLM has been cutting the Big Dessert up into little parcels for fire. They've been rotovating along the roads. That's an ongoing project with the BLM and something we could do. They already have the assessments done.
- Richard S. – Thinking about what Brett brought up about Upper Snake. If you're familiar with the Upper Snake, Kilgore and the Red Road area is very productive sage-grouse country. I went up there on the Sage-grouse Days tour recently and that sage canopy has gotten up to about 40%. The sheepherder is saying that they move in and get disoriented. If the Idaho plan was in place and being used right now, that trigger would be tripped and we'd be forced to do something to manage that level of sagebrush. That might be an example of where we actually have too much sagebrush. Think the resources would be there if managers would come together.
- Ann M. – BLM has funding to start a sage-grouse telemetry project in that area. BLM has a good history of where they've done brush treatments in the past. We could really see with telemetry on those birds at what age are they coming back to that area or are stopping using the area because it is too thick.
- Dave E. – I'd have to talk to others in the Challis group for ideas, but right now, Scott's presentation gives me some ideas about fir encroachment. But we would need an EA. Another potential project is an allotment in the northern part of the valley with lots of birds. We are already in the process of partnering with the National Riparian Team to look at different management. It is a small allotment, about 15,000 acres with 15 permittees. It would be hard to get everyone together but there are some different outcomes that are necessary. There is an opportunity to change management there.
- Dave E. – Another idea, BLM pamphlets include nothing about ongoing efforts or potential efforts to change actual land use practices to benefit sage-grouse. We could put together something that informs people that could be put out in the public areas.
- Lynn B. – One of biggest losses in our area is the Birch Creek range. They diverted Birch Creek and put it into a pipeline and with that 15-20 miles of habitat was lost. If they would go down the old creek beds, run pipeline down, and put bubblers every 0.5 and 0.25 miles up there that would make a big difference. Think the IDFG and BLM could get together on putting a pipeline down through there. Don't think the people who own the water would object to a 2-inch line diverting the water. When I was a kid that's where you'd find the birds along the creek there. You'll never be able to recruit until there's water there. Another area is up by Howe where there's a lot of Phase 1 juniper encroachment going on.
- Donna B. – For us our goals are juniper treatments and more of that berm work. Also there's lots of state land that we could do work on.

- Diane F. – We've got Annie Valley in the works with TNC. We're trying to work closely with BLM as they finish the EA on the allotment up there. On the juniper biomass tour we were trying to figure out a project with private landowner, BLM allotment, and state land. We have grant funding that we could use. Finding the right property and partnerships is what we're looking for.

## 16. Future of the SAC, What's Next?

Don Kemner asked the SAC to consider what they would like to see happen next in terms of the SAC. Alison reviewed the notes and recommendations from the previous SAC meeting (see December 2012 meeting summary). The major near-term recommendation was to have a meeting in 2013 (it shifted to 2014) to review progress on the EIS and share information.

He suggested that there's a lot of value that comes from getting together and it is a good opportunity for discussion and information exchange. Don is still trying to figure out how to best get information out to the LWGs, that's why we're videotaping some of the presentations. Other options include video conferencing from the regional offices, teleconferences or webinars. He asked if the SAC members wanted to get together again in 2014 or 2015 and how, or other?

Alison noted that another topic that has come up repeatedly is how (or if) to get more interest going in the LWGs. Some of the topics that have been discussed in the past include: the need for funds to do something on the ground as a way to engage LWG members, the need for professional facilitation, general apathy, questions about the appropriate role of the LWGs now that the Task Force has provided their recommendations.

Alison noted that one of the challenges of the ESA is the single species focus of the Act. As such it tends to not support larger scale ecosystem thinking about how to recovery and conserve species. She noted that there may be

*Discussion:*

- Wendy P. – What happened with implementation plan?
    - Don K. – People were working on the implementation plan, then the 2010 decision happened and all efforts got diverted to assisting with the Governor's Task Force. That took over everything for the last two or three years.
- Wendy P. – Does that process include the state plan and implementation plan?
    - Don K. – Yes, the 2006 plan was used as a foundation to build on. There's lots of new information since 2006 that was not in state plan that was also taken into consideration in development of the state's alternative.
    - Paul M. – A lot of it was rolled into the sub regional Alternative D.
- Dustin M. – Keep in mind that the EIS process and the state having a seat at the table was an effort to address the regulatory processes on federal lands.
- Don K. – The concern with 2006 plan was that it did not have a regulatory mechanism. We're in waiting mode to see what the outcome of the Federal land management agency EIS will be. Waiting to see if the Idaho EIS is something that the state ends up supporting or if it is changed to the degree that we can't support it.

- John R. – Suggest that the LWGs get together once a year and the SAC gets together once a year. This is a great mechanism for learning.
- Brett D. – Going back a long way the split between the LWGs and agencies, state, etc. was so far apart that everything had to happen in the LWGs. Through time the SAC has been the mechanism to bridge that gap. Whatever the decision, there will be some type of group needed to bridge on the ground stuff with these big landscape plans. This group could help suggest agendas for LWG meetings, e.g., here are things you could meet on, here are materials we could provide. We can help do that. I think a minimum meeting frequency for the SAC is once a year.
- John R. – LWG and SAC communication needs to go both ways. It is really important for information to flow in two directions. I like the idea of having presentations available online.
- Donna B. – When we started IDFG, BLM and others didn't know what each other was doing. It has gotten a lot better.
- Steve G. – Agree with people that these meetings are essential, the membership has changed and a lot of the new members need to come up to speed. That's a big plus. We do now know a lot. It is important to develop mechanisms to talk around the state and talk to LWGs. If you don't have information sharing you don't know how you're going to maintain momentum.
- Sam C. – Most of the non-agency LWG members that are active; those people are here at this meeting. Most of the LWGs are primarily agency people.
- Rochelle O. – Don't know how you deal with the apathy.
- Lynn B. – I would like if it is possible, to meet when the lek counts are done.
- Donna B. – We may need a meeting after the EIS is complete.
- Dave E. – Think these meetings are important. It is one of the things I get most out. If we continue following this path of all these regulatory mechanisms, every time we do that we go this single species path and then something else comes along that doesn't work. This group is where I get ideas for how we can do things across the board. We're not going to get more participation in the LWG groups.
- Paul M. – I second what Donna said about the value of rallying around a common cause. In the Mountain Home group, it didn't come together until we started doing things on the ground.
- Wendy P. – Is there any more talk about a LWG facilitator? The IDFG guys they don't even do introductions. Would like money just to hire Wendy back.
- Brett D. – Maybe we also need to look at expanding the SAC to think more broadly. How can we go out to weed meetings? My staff goes to Washington County every month; they don't talk about sage grouse. We could at least expose them to what's going on.
- Wendy G. – The Washington County WMA is a great example. Washington County has a banquet every year. Key partners engaged in CMA are also in the sage-grouse group. But people get burned out on just planning they need to do something. In the West Central it is harder to find a single issues.
- Brett D. – We could figure out a way to leverage what is going on in Washington County. Rather than thinking about our own project, what can we do to help them too? What they all have in common is the RACs. Maybe there's an opportunity to parlay that into something.

- John P. – That's an opportunity to address other broad scale problems. Last night Jeff Sidoway was in the restaurant and we chatted. The Forest Service is going to come up Tuesday and tell the leadership of the woolgrowers that they are going to eliminate 60% of the grazing allotments in southern Idaho. We need the right people to tell the stories and also the right people to implement them.
- Dave E. – As a way to end this meeting and give us something to do I would like to take home this message of more inclusion. It would be good to have some presentations or ideas that we could share with people.
- Don K. – If you're in an area with fire you might want to create a fire organization. You could promote that to whomever you need to. It would also be good to identify agenda items that we could provide to LWGs.
- Wendy – How many LWGs submitted and annual report?
    - Ann M. – All 11 did. Most of what was reported on was reported by BLM, NRCS, and IDFG staff.
- Brett D. – If OSC and other believe that LWGs are the key ingredient to making this work, we need to do something different. In that case someone needs to be out there building LWGs.

The group brainstormed the following list of potential LWG and/or other groups to share information with:

- Groups to share information with or coordinate with
    - Rangeland Fire Protection Associations
    - Weed Management Areas
    - Grazing Associations
    - University of Idaho Extension
    - Washington County CMA
- Agenda topics/presentations for LWGs and/or other groups
    - Update on the EIS status and what's next.
    - Sage-grouse Initiative funding opportunities. Note have web site that connects all 11 states and projects that they are working on www.sagegrouseinitiative.com
    - Presentations around getting CCAAs going. USFWS has staffed up to help with this. Possible presentation on how the Harney County CCAA works and is able to cross private and federal borders.

*SAC recommendation on next SAC meeting:*

- Participants recommended that the next SAC meeting in 2014 or 2015 after the EIS is done, or if there is some other major trigger. Depending on the need for the meeting a teleconference followed by a meeting at a latter point would also be acceptable.

## 17. Funding Recommendations

Don Kemner requested at the end of the meeting that the SAC members return to the topic of what to do with the funds that are left unspent and unassigned at this time.

The group discussed the possibility of doing another solicitation and agreed that that didn't make sense given the small amount of funding. After brief discussion the SAC members agreed that the grazing research project should be funded with the unassigned funds.

Don also asked the group what to do if additional IDFG funds did come available, e.g., how to select projects. Participants recommended that Don let everyone know and make a recommendation for how those funds should be spent based on the amount of funds and discussion with potential sponsors to determine what is ready to go.

*SAC Agreements*

- SAC members present unanimously recommended providing the remaining unassigned sage-grouse (OSC funds) to the grazing research project (Karen Launchbaugh and Cortney Conway, etc.)
- SAC members agreed that if additional IDFG funds become available, Don will suggest what to fund from the list of potential projects (based on amount of funds, and ease of getting project going) and send an email to the SAC members requesting that they let him know if anyone has any objections. If there are objections an "emergency SAC teleconference will be convened."

## Attachment A

**Livestock Grazing and Sage-Grouse Habitat: Impacts and Opportunities**
Chad S. Boyd, Jeffrey L. Beck, and John A. Tanaka

***Journal of Rangeland Applications***
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**Abstract**

Sage-grouse obtain resources for breeding, summer, and winter life stages from sagebrush communities. Grazing can change the productivity, composition, and structure of herbaceous plants in sagebrush communities, thus directly influencing the productivity of nesting and early brood-rearing habitat. Indirect influences of livestock grazing and ranching on sage-grouse habitat include fencing, watering facilities, treatments to increase livestock forage, and targeted grazing to reduce fine fuels. To illustrate the relative value of sagebrush habitats to sage-grouse on year-round and seasonal bases, we developed state and transition models to conceptualize the interactions between wildfire and grazing in mountain and Wyoming big sagebrush communities. In some sage-grouse habitats, targeted livestock grazing may be useful for reducing fine fuels produced by annual grasses. We provide economic scenarios for ranches that delay spring turnout on public lands to increase herbaceous cover for nesting sage-grouse. Proper rangeland management is critical to reduce potential negative effects of livestock grazing to sage-grouse habitats.

## Attachment B

### State of Idaho Office of Species Conservation Sage Grouse Grant Balance

| Title | Amount | Start | End | Grant# | FY11 | FY12 | FY13 | FY14 | Total | Balance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sage Grouse Conservation Fed. Grant ID #13320-A-G016-A | $1,000,000.00 | 4/19/10 | 3/31/15 | SAGEGR-11 | $490,275.24 | $227,262.33 | $125,642.42 | $30,753.62 | $873,933.61 | $126,066.39 |

| Title | Amount | Start | End | Project # | FY11 | FY12 | FY13 | FY14 | Total | Balance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Illustrated SG Guide | $5,627.00 | 5/15/08 | 5/30/10 | SG004 | 5,627.08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5,627.08 | (0.08) |
| SG CCAA Development | $63,373.00 | 6/1/09 | 3/15/11 | SG007 | 33,971.16 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 33,971.16 | 29,401.84 |
| IDFG SG Conservation | $750,000.00 | 1/1/10 | 12/31/15 | SG1001 | 362,340.85 | 181,249.97 | 119,448.85 | 19,252.15 | 682,291.82 | 67,708.18 |
| Sage Grouse Coordination | $60,000.00 | 4/19/10 | 3/31/15 | SG1002 | 11,725.52 | 44,124.46 | 4,630.76 | 0 | 60,480.74 | (480.74) |
| U of I Habitat Studies | $76,000.00 | 5/3/10 | 12/30/10 | SG1004 | 75,997.72 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75,997.72 | 2.28 |
| Miscellaneous | $45,000.00 | 4/19/10 | 3/31/15 | N/A | 612.91 | 1,887.90 | 1,562.81 | 11,501.47 | 15,565.09 | 29,434.91 |
| **TOTALS** | **$1,000,000.00** | | | | **$490,275.24** | **$227,262.33** | **$125,642.42** | **$30,753.62** | **$873,933.61** | **$126,066.39** |