

North Vale – Sage-grouse Local Implementation Team

Meeting Minutes – 23 October 2019

Participants: Julie Unfried (Pheasants Forever), Lee Foster (ODFW), Scott Torland (ODFW), Jon Westfall (BLM), Mike Schmeiske (DSL), Jake Ferguson (BLM), Megan McGuire (BLM), Linda Rowe (Malheur SWCD), Catie Kershner (NRCS), Lynn Larsen (NRCS), Calla Hagel (Burns-Paiute Tribe), Jon Dinkins (OSU), Kelly Weideman (Malheur Watershed Council), Jackie Cupples (USFWS), Eric Evans (Malheur County), Don Hodge (Malheur County), Dave Bunker (Branch Enterprises), Sergio Arispe (OSU Extension Service), Curtis Martin (Private Rancher), Dan Joyce (Malheur County), Jason Pyron (USFWS – Idaho), Josh White (USFWS – Idaho), Alexander Webb (BLM – Idaho), *others?*

Meeting Objectives

- Introduction to LITs – discuss history and purpose
- Use examples from existing collaboratives to learn about options and opportunities moving forward
- Begin discussion about group structure and building a charter

History and Purpose of LITs - Presentation

2005 – Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy (The Strategy) published. The document outlines how ODFW manages for sage-grouse and actions land administrators/landowners can take to maintain/enhance conditions for sage-grouse. 5 LITs were first identified and ODFW began convening meetings. LITs are similar to local working groups developed in other states. Group structure was largely unidentified and no funding allocated to LITs; therefore, the majority of the LITs' time was spent developing core area maps and identifying sage-grouse action areas in an attempt to prioritize implementation.

2012 – 4 of 5 LITs stopped meeting because of high turn-over in Lee's position – ODFW did not have the staff capacity to convene meetings and LITs fizzled out.

2015 – USFWS determination that protection for greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act is no longer warranted – decision was made in large part because unprecedented conservation partnerships across the western US. Additionally, the Oregon Sage-grouse Action Plan was published. This document builds upon The Strategy with an emphasis on applying local collaboratives to identify and implement actions across jurisdictional boundaries. The Action Plan identifies the LITs are responsible for implementing approximately 2/3rds of the more than 300 actions identified to enhance or maintain conditions for sage-grouse – i.e., the LITs are the primary catalyst to maintain and/or restore sage-grouse populations and habitat conditions in OR.

2019 – In response to ODFW's limited capacity compounded by the level of significance put on the LITs by the state of Oregon to restore sage-grouse habitat and population levels to 2003 conditions, Julie Unfried was hired through a partnership agreement between BLM, ODFW, Intermountain West Joint Venture, and Pheasants Forever to re-convene the Vale and Prineville LITs. In 2012, when most LITs stopped meeting, funding to implement sage-grouse oriented projects was limited – now more funding opportunities exist.

The Purpose of LITs was identified – *LITs are named in the 2015 Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan (Action Plan) as the primary catalyst for the implementation of the Action Plan at the local level. Furthermore, LITs should serve to identify priority areas for habitat conservation within their respective areas of concern, and promote coordinated actions, across jurisdictional boundaries to address threats to sage-grouse habitat and populations within those priority areas.* Furthermore, lots of ongoing work is already being done for sage-grouse in Oregon. Use LITs as a forum to align interest groups' and organizations' actions.

History and Purpose of LITs – Discussion

A group discussion revolved around tracking project location data. Lee commented that we currently do not have a method to track that, but SageCon is working to input project data into an interactive tool (Conservation Efforts Database - CED). Lynn noted that NRCS has privacy agreements that prevent them from sharing landowner information. Lee responded that the CED will show project accomplishments at a scale small enough to be biologically relevant to grouse without revealing landowner data/information. <https://conservationefforts.org/sgce/grsgmap/>

Megan asked why the State of Oregon does not provide funding through the legislature for LITs like in many other states. Lee noted the reason is unclear but the LITs should focus on utilizing existing state funding such as OWEB over the short-term with a long-term goal of securing funding through the state legislature.

Example of Successful Collaborations - Presentations

Julie and Lee each gave presentations about existing successful local collaborative efforts focused on improving conditions for sage-grouse populations and their habitat. The intent of the presentations was to give the participants ideas and tools to begin developing a similar plan, customized to address the local interests and issues. The examples included, 1) Wyoming Sage-grouse Local Working Groups; 2) Oregon Baker LIT Threats Reduction Plan.

Example of Successful Collaborations – Discussion

Jackie asked about funding structure for WY Local Working Groups (LWG)

- LWGs are granting entities that release RFPs
- The state gives \$150,000 to each LWG/biennium
- Colorado has a similar structure (but allocates less money)
- In the past, Idaho had \$1 million allocated toward LWG
- The above states also seek out external funding opportunities

Jackie noted that, when developing the Baker LIT Threats Reduction Plan, the process of sorting through and categorizing historical project data in the Baker area was tedious but extremely valuable.

Curtis noted that private landowner and county involvement was key to the Baker LIT's success.

Group Structure - Discussion

Julie outlined the difference between bounded and un-bounded collaboratives to provide context for the structure of the LIT. All Oregon LITs are un-bounded groups meaning membership is not restricted and the LITs develop recommendations based on local knowledge and interests but are non-regulatory.

Julie and Lee suggested developing a “steering committee” to help guide forward mobility of the LIT. A steering committee would consist of 6-10 local individuals. Members of the steering committee would be fixed and would assist Julie in the development of meeting agendas, recording meeting minutes, providing outreach and generating interest at the local level. Interests of steering committee members would not be prioritized over other LIT participants, rather, they would help guide LIT direction with the use of the local knowledge-base. To generate local buy-in, the group at the Jordan Valley meeting on October 17, 2019, suggested the make-up of the steering committee consist of several ranchers/landowners and a few additional local representatives (e.g., SWCD, County Commissioner, BLM).

The following interest groups were recommended for inclusion on the steering committee, private landowners, county government, SWCDs, tribes, DSL, BLM, NRCS*, OSU Extension Service* (*steering committee and/or advisory council members).

Other topics discussed,

- building charter and steering committee with flexibility built-in, in the event that the LITs evolve from an un-bounded to a bounded collaborative structure.
- Need to bring more NGO groups (e.g., Trout Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Mule Deer Foundation) to the table.
- How to make meetings more accessible to folks who cover both north and south part of the county? Remote participation? – software available at all OSU Extension Service offices

Group Charter – Discussion

Tabled this discussion topic for a later meeting, as it became clear that more ground work is necessary to reach out to local landowner/ranchers.

Round Table Up-dates

ODFW – Lee Foster (Statewide Status of Sage-Grouse)

24.9% decline from 2018. Current estimate is 13,827 (53% below 2003 baseline).

Vale District 2019 population estimate – 17% decline from 2019, estimated population = 5,906

For context, Prineville District down 19%, Burns District down 35%, Lakeview District down 33% and Baker Resource Area up 25%. Typical for sage-grouse populations to fluctuate on a 5-year cycle; however, there has been a downward trend since 1981. If the population doesn't start trending upward next year, there will be cause for concern.

Group discussion about predation (raven) control: several participants wanted to know why we aren't focused on lethal control and treating eggs. ODFW is seeking authority to lethally control ravens or deploy treated eggs for the sake of sage-grouse in Baker County, as part of a rigorous study design. However currently it is uncertain whether ODFW will be able to gain authority to conduct this lethal control. Jon D. commented that lethal control is only one short-term method to manage raven predation. We need to find alternatives that minimize cost and that are suitable to all interest groups. The cause for increased raven populations is likely related to human subsidies. Additionally, it was noted that the Burns Paiute Tribe recognizes sage-grouse as culturally important, which likely reflects healthy populations prior to European settlement.

BLM – Megan McGuire

- Overview of soft and hard triggers in Vale District. See handout provided by Megan McGuire.

NRCS – Lynn Larsen

- 100,000 acres of juniper removed in high priority area of Malheur County.
- SGI funding opened the doors to working with a lot of folks who were previously not interested in NRCS programs or unable to qualify for NRCS funding.
- The Ontario Field office is now transitioning it's focus toward wet meadow restoration, particularly because most of the water in Malheur County is on private land.
- LIT will benefit NRCS by acting as a source for new information to more effectively address local issues – key to success for the LIT is a local led process.

OSU Extensions – Sergio Arispe

- CCAA involvement - hope to conduct research to help address outcomes.
- Reviewed the threats-based land management tool and how it can help communicate eco-states across landscapes/jurisdictions.
- Working with LITs (i.e., formal groups that are broad in nature) will allow OSU Extensions access to resources and funding to address action items identified in the Oregon Sage-grouse Action Plan.

SWCD - provided by Lynn Larsen on behalf of SWCD

- Sponsor the CCAA – SWCD staff actively working on site specific plans.
- Currently have 2 full time staff.

Action Items Prior to Next Meeting (Date TBD)

- Julie – outreach to local landowners/ranchers – help local representatives understand the LIT purpose and generate local buy-in to ensure LIT success. Work with Curtis Martin to get tied in with landowners.
- Julie – outreach to county commissioner. Work with Jerry Hoagland to help with outreach efforts.
- Julie – contact local tribes. Work with Calla Hagel to help with outreach efforts.

Preliminary Topics for Next Meeting (Date TBD)

- Development of LIT steering committee.
- Discuss group charter.