

South Vale – Sage-grouse Local Implementation Team

Meeting Minutes – 17 October 2019

Participants

Julie Unfried (Pheasants Forever), Lee Foster (ODFW), Jake Ferguson (BLM), Philip Milburn (ODFW), Michele McDaniel (BLM), Monica Ketchum (BLM), Sergio Arispe (OSU), Bob Skinner (Rancher, OCA, National PLC), Scott Torland (ODFW), Randy Weist (DSL), Dave Bunker (Branch Enterprises), Eric Morrison (JVCWMA), Jeremy Austin (ONDA), Jerry Hoagland (Owyhee County Commission), Bob Narus (BLM), Lynn Larsen (NRCS), Megan McGuire (BLM), Bill Mulden (Rancher)

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.

2012 – 4 of 5 LITs stopped meeting because ODFW did not have the staff capacity to convene meetings.

2015 – Oregon Sage-grouse Action Plan 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 restore the 2003 sage-grouse population 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.

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.*

History and Purpose of LITs – Discussion

Several participants asked questions about the LIT purpose and wondered if this was an explicitly sage-grouse focused group. In response, Lee and Julie explained that, yes, LIT success will be measured by implementation of projects that enhance or maintain sage-grouse populations and habitat.

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

Jerry Hoagland told the group about the Owyhee County Local Working Group (LWG) just across the state line in Idaho. Summary of Jerry's outline,

- The LWG is a sub-group of Owyhee County Natural Resources Committee.
- The LWG applies for project level funding with a focus on expanding existing projects – the county serves as the fiscal agent.
- 15 – 30 people attend bi-monthly meetings.
- LWG developed a county plan focused on restoration project work.
- A wide list of members/interest groups are involved in the LWG (did not get comprehensive list).
- Landowner participation is critical – position of chairperson is held by a landowner.

Eric Morrison stated that landowner participation is critical to LIT success; furthermore, the group must be focused with existing grazing systems in mind. LIT approach should be non-regulatory.

Bob Skinner noted that historical range conditions were worse than today's conditions and commented on the impact to grouse populations by predators (particularly ravens). Bob noted that RPFAs have had a significant positive impact on the landscape and are responsible for minimizing the impact of wildfires over the last several years. Noted that landowner and USFWS involvement is critical.

Dave Bunker suggested the group shouldn't necessarily try and "do it all" but should be open to "consider everything" as the LIT develops goals and objectives for implementation.

Lee Foster noted that the OR Legislature has not appropriated funds toward LITs. The success of the Baker LIT is due in large part because of the drastic conditions facing sage-grouse in that area. However, the Baker model might be most suitable for the other LITs – Baker LIT took the BLM Causal Factor Analysis and extrapolated the results across all jurisdictions; identified projects the LIT could reasonably implement; and used all that information to develop the Threats Reduction Plan.

A group discussion regarding the necessary actions required of the LITs ensued,

- Identify parties responsible for each project.
- Identify funding sources.
- Funding should be used as an incentive to engage private landowners.
- Inventory existing and on-going actions to prioritize future implementation.
- Lynn suggested the need to generate interest among landowners prior to securing funding.
- Demonstrate follow-through and accomplishments early on.

The group discussed a strategy to generate landowner involvement. We may need to take a step back in the process of reviving the LITs to ensure landowners have had an opportunity to learn and are willing to contribute time to the development of the LIT. Follow-up actions required (see details below under list of action items). Philip recommended narrowing the scope of our focus to generate local buy-in.

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 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 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).

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.

Lynn Larsen asked why the population is declining given all the conservation work that's been done (e.g. juniper removals)? Lee responded that the effects of those efforts likely won't be seen for 5-7 years after treatment. Additionally, because we don't currently have a way of tracking where all conservation efforts are being made, we don't have a method to determine if the habitat we're restoring is keeping pace with the habitat lost. Lee also commented on the 2012 fire season and noted that despite large-scale fires, the Trout Creek Mountain population is trending upward and the Louse Canyon population has remained stable.

ODFW – Lee Foster (Baker LIT Raven Study)

- Control sites located in Malheur Co.
- ODFW is seeking authority to lethally control ravens or deploy treated eggs for the sake of sage-grouse, 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.

- Lethal control has short-term effects and won't be adequate to control raven numbers over the long-term – need to consider alternative methods (i.e., human subsidies).

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.

Owyhee Watershed Council – Eric Morrison

- Managing the Parsnip Peak Grasslands project – fall spray applications conducted for Medusahead management. Spraying over sage-brush is an effective method to control Medusahead.

USFWS – Jackie Cupples

- Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can provide up to \$25,000 per project – can be used to match other funds for larger projects.

Action Items Prior to Next Meeting (Date TBD)

- Julie – provide group with Actions Metric (list of 300 plus action items and associated responsible parties).
- Julie – outreach to local landowners/ranchers – help local representatives understand the LIT purpose and generate local buy-in to ensure LIT success. Work with Bob Skinner to get tied in with landowners.
- Julie – outreach to county commissioner. Work with Jerry Hoagland to help with outreach efforts.

Preliminary Topics for Next Meeting (Date TBD)

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