

Western Bird Conservation Committee
1 - 5 PM
July 14, 2008
Rapid City, South Dakota

1. Welcome – Ken Mayer opened the meeting at 1:03 PM.
 - 1.1. Announcements – Director Mayer would like to have more dialogue during the course of the year and asked everyone to sign-in.
 - 1.2. Introductions – approximately 25 folks at the beginning of the meeting 35 at peak. San Stiver (WAFWA), Dave Smith (IWJV), Craig McLaughlin (UT), Rex Sallabanks (ID), Tom Nesler (CO), Jeff Gould (ID), Kirk Nelson (NE), John Emmerich (WY), Jay Lawson (WY), Bob Hernbrode (AZ), Ken Taylor (AK), George Vandel (SD), Tom McCabe (USFWS), Geoff Walsh (BLM), Terry Mansfield (IWJV), Terry Riley (TRCP), Russ Mason (NV), Colin Gillin (OR), George Buckner (BLM), Cal Baca (NM), Emily Jo Williams (USFWS), Ken Sambor (NGPJV), Gene DeGayner (USFS), Melanie Woolever (USFS), Ken Mayer (NV).
2. Agenda Review and Additions
 - 2.1. Prescribed Fire as a management tool in the sagebrush ecosystem - Position paper, Russ Mason
 - 2.2. Clarification letter of “Core Sage-grouse Habitats” letter. Modify draft for the directors. (New draft—more friendly)
 - 2.3. WGA adoption of the NASECA strategy – How do we run with these legs?
 - 2.4. Coordinated research industry government.

3. Intermountain West Joint Venture Update – Dave Smith

Smith opened with a discussion of the potential IWJV opportunities with the new farm bill. The IWJV is focused on the implementation and delivery of conservation efforts. The Bill provides significant potential through EQIP, WHIP etc. Smith indicated that not all of the needs of the Conservation Community were met in the current Bill, but there are still significant opportunities in the Conservation Title of the Bill.

IWJV has picked up Randy Gray (NRCS retired) to coordinate Farm Bill and Terry Mansfield (Idaho and California retired) to work as a liaison between the state wildlife agencies and IWJV.

4. Interagency Sage-grouse Implementation MOU – San Stiver

Stiver introduced the Interagency Sage-grouse Implementation MOU. The MOU has been signed by all Federal member agencies and WAFWA, with the exception of the Farm Service Agency. Stiver will continue to work on getting the FSA commitment.

The MOU directs its parties to form a Range-wide Interagency Sage-grouse Conservation Team (RISCT) and an Executive Oversight Committee (EOC). The WAFWA RISCT and EOC members are established by the MOU, but the Federal agencies need to appoint members to each team. Stiver suggests that WAFWA draft a letter inviting the Federal agencies to assign appropriate staff and executives to these teams. The group concurred and passed the motion

5. Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Workshop – San Stiver

The Sage- and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee held its 26th biennial workshop in Mammoth Lakes California on June 23-26, 2008. The Technical Committee held an all day business meeting on the 23rd where states, federal agencies and universities collaborated on a number of topics. (Minutes of the Business Meeting are attached).

A total of 115 people attended the workshop which had 36 technical presentations on greater sage-grouse, Gunnison sage-grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse. A one day field trip exposed participants to sage-grouse issues in the Mono Basin, Bodie Hills and Long Valley. Ten of 13 members' states and provinces were represented at the meeting.

The Committee has established an award for significant contributions in the field of sage- and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse conservation. The award is named after Robert L. Patterson, Wyoming Game and Fish biologist. The award honors Robert L. Patterson for his contributions to sage-grouse conservation and management. Dr. Clait Braun was presented the award this year for his significant contributions to sage-grouse conservation.

Steve Riley presented an overview of "Grassland Conservation Plan for Prairie Grouse". The plan was completed in 2007 and is a strategic plan. The plan was coordinated by the North American Grouse Partnership and was compiled by William Vodehnal, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and Jonathan Haufler, Ecosystem Management Research Institute. The group is now working on an implementation plan and prioritizing conservation focus areas. The conservation actions are mostly on private lands. Technical assistance rather than money is the limiting factor.

6. Western Working Group Action Plan – Rex Sallabanks

Sallabanks reported on the Western Working Group Action Plan. The plan is focused as an internal working document. The western group is the largest national working group, with a geographic area stretching from the Rockies to the Pacific Ocean. The group's mantra is "Keeping common birds common" but they do focus on birds with problems. The group meets twice a year. Their primary working plan is the Continental Landbird Conservation Plan. The group works to provide population estimates for all birds and provides a baseline to evaluate management.

Sallabanks felt there is significant common ground between the Western Bird Conservation Committee and the Western Working Group/Partners in Flight/Joint Ventures. He suggested that reports from his group be a standing item in front of the WBCC.

7. National Conservation Needs – Ken Mayer

The group discussed the Multi-state grants and the need to develop a National Conservation Need, if we had issues that rise to that level. Discussions focused on large-scale issues that meet those criteria.

The group indicated that impacts of energy (exploration, drilling, production, transmission, wind, geothermal, nuclear, and other activities) have significant interactions with avian species, particularly prairie grouse. Further, we have limited research dollars and several competing sets of research. We have a need make sure that energy development is responsive to impacts.

Bird monitoring, identified in the Partners in Flight presentation, needs resources for bird monitoring. Monitoring populations and habitat are essential to the evaluation of management practices identified in the states' wildlife action plans. Research and implementation of bird monitoring protocols are an important national conservation need.

Tom Nesler suggested that the massive die-off of forests, both coniferous and aspen, in the west will likely have significant impacts on an entire guild of birds. The area affected is enormous, potential impacts are unknown and the concern is hemisphere wide.

The group suggested that we draft one page NCNs by September 1st and determine which NCN has the highest priority.

8. Southern Wings Task Force Report and Recommendations – Kirk Nelson

Nelson provided a brief overview of the Southern Wings Program and the need to create a funding mechanism that will allow states to fully participate in the program. The task force is seeking an administrative solution to issue.

8.1. Possible WAFWA Role - Larry Kruckenberg, Stephen Barton

Kruckenberg reported that he and Barton evaluated the administrative needs of the Southern Wings Program and noted that WAFWA is better positioned to account, bill and disperse funds than any other Association or third party. Further, during the previous two summer conferences of the Association, member states reported on their involvement in the Southern Wings Program. Our member states are primary participants in the Program. WAFWA is a logical administrator.

Action: WBCC endorse the concept of WAFWA fully exploring the facilitation of administering the billing and disbursement of funds for the southern wings program. Passed.

9. FY 2010 Federal Budget Priorities – All
 - 9.1. Increase funding for state grant programs that place priority on implementation of Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies/Wildlife Action Plans, including use of funds for education/outreach;
 - 9.2. Increase funding within the Interior Department, NRCS, and US Forest Service budgets for multi-state conservation strategies to benefit at-risk species in the Western Grasslands, Shrub-Steppe, Hawaiian Islands, and Sierra Nevada Foothills;
 - 9.3. Consistent with the Greater Sage-grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy “short-term” funding strategy, provide sufficient funding within the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to support on-going conservation efforts in sagebrush country, including implementation in FY 10 of the Strategy for both Greater and Gunnison sage-grouse;
 - 9.4. Maintain funding for Interior and Agriculture agencies to implement plans directed at avian influenza surveillance, monitoring, and emergency response with provisions for state assistance;
 - 9.5. Provide sufficient funding in the FWS budget to carry-out near-term post-delisting monitoring and separate funding for long-term management and monitoring (gray wolves, bald eagles etc.);
 - 9.6. Support the Joint Ventures through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service;
 - 9.7. Support full funding of the Healthy Landscape Initiative in the FY 10 Budget;
 - 9.8. Support full funding of Farm Bill conservation title.

10. Open Forum

- 10.1. Avian Disease

The group was queried and no one had any particular comments

- 10.2. Prescribed Fire as a management tool in the sagebrush ecosystem Position paper – Russ Mason.

Mason brought forward a request from Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee to draft a “White Paper” entitled “Prescribed Fire as a Management Tool in Sagebrush Ecosystems: Is it Worth the Risk?”. Mason indicated that many of our sage-grouse biologists have considerable concern about the use of fire and would like to develop a draft position paper. They believe there is a need for a comprehensive review of the science regarding the appropriate role of prescribed fire in the management of big sagebrush habitats within the range of sage-grouse. The committee proposes to collaborate with members of the Society of Range Management, land management agencies and sage-grouse experts.

Action: Request that the directors allow the Sage- and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee develop the fire “white paper” for the Directors review.
Passed

10.3. Clarification letter of “Core Sage-grouse Habitats” letter.

Stiver introduced a draft of a letter to BLM Director Caswell from the Sage- and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee regarding the identification of “core areas” of sage-grouse distribution. The concern from the Technical Committee relates to state participation in the process, the need for appropriate vetting of the science, concern about a “static” map and potential conflict between this effort and efforts being undertaken by numerous states.

Action: The group suggested that we re-draft the letter with softer language. Passed

10.4. Coordinated research industry government – Emmerich

Emmerich discussed the need for the Research Advisory Board, identified in the Sage-grouse Strategy. He indicated that the Sage-grouse Technical Committee heard the need for the RAB but did not move forward with the establishment of a Board. He indicated that he has a significant need for a RAB and would like the WBCC to endorse the formation of a sanctioned RAB. The group discussed the potential pathways to accomplish this goal and determined that a RAB could be part of a NCN. Emmerich volunteered to draft an NCN.

10.5. Pending Legislation

10.5.1. By-laws of the sage-grouse committee. The Technical Committee submitted By-laws recently adopted by the Committee for WAFWA’s records.

10.5.2. NASECA

Stiver presented WGA’s resolution 08-12. This resolution urges Congress to pass NASECA. This endorsement is one phase of the Sage-grouse Strategy and Stiver would like to know where we go from here. How to we take the legislation and move it forward. Mayer suggested that we need a Governor advocate and the group suggested the Governor Freundenthal would make an ideal advocate. John Emmerich volunteered to discuss the issue with Freundenthal’s staff.

10.6. Other – no other business.

11. Action Items for the Business Meeting - All

Reported in #13 below.

12. Meeting Schedule – Ken Mayer

Director Mayer asked the group if they felt that we would need to meet at the mid-winter or during the interim. It was the general consensus of the group that we did not need to meet.

13. Follow-up Assignments and Wrap-up – Ken Mayer

The following assignments and actions were identified by the group.

Action:

1. Letter to Director Caswell regarding the “core area” mapping project. Re-draft the letter based upon group input.
2. Letter to our Federal partners requesting the identification of members of their respective agencies for the Sage-grouse MOU Range-wide Interagency Sage-grouse Conservation Team (RISCT) and the Executive Oversight Committee (EOC).
3. Endorse the concept of WAFWA providing the banking and billing system for the Southern Wings Program within Association guidelines.
4. Letter to the Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee to draft a “white paper” on Prescribed Fire as a Management Tool in Sagebrush Ecosystems: Is it worth the risk?

Assignments:

1. Follow-up with Governors Freudenthal, Gibbon, Huntsman and Otter’s staffs on support of WGA resolution 08-12 drafting and passage of the North American Sagebrush Ecosystem Conservation Act. – Emmerich, Mayer, Groen, and Karpowitz. – by August 1?
2. Proposed National Conservation Needs. A) Energy industry relationships to prairie grouse with coordinated and prioritized research – Emmerich. B) Bird monitoring protocols – Neel. C) Avian response to forest health – Sallabanks. Deliver a one page NCN to Mayer by September 1, 2008. WBCC will evaluate the proposed NCNs and deliver one NCN to WAFWA by December 1, 2008.

14. Adjourn – Ken Mayer

The meeting was adjourned by Chairman Mayer at 4:35 pm

Respectfully submitted,

San Stiver, July 15, 2008