



WINTER 2004-2005/SPRING 2005

UPDATE

LOCAL WORKING GROUP TIMELINE

Dillon, Miles City, Glasgow

Dec 2003 - Jan 2004

LWGs launched with first round of meetings

Feb-March 2004

2nd round of meetings,
biologists' presentations

April 2004

3rd round of meetings

June 2004

4th round of meetings, field trips

Late Summer/Fall 2004

5th and 6th round of meetings

Winter-Spring 2005

7th and 8th round of meetings
(See page 2 for dates and locations)

March 2005

Local Working Groups
continue with local leadership

Anyone interested is welcome
to join this effort at any time.

Local Working Groups Will Continue Under Local Leadership

Montana's first three Local Working Groups on sage grouse will reach a turning point in March, when local volunteer co-chairs assume leadership of the groups in each of the three current locations (Miles City, Glasgow, Dillon). At that time, the Cossitt Consulting team will reach the end of its contract as facilitators for the Local Working Groups. Rick Northrup will continue as primary contact for statewide efforts (Rick Northrup, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701, 406-444-5633, rnorthrup@state.mt.us).

Local working groups in Dillon, Glasgow, and Miles City met six times in 2004, focusing on the conservation actions identified in the Montana state plan and discussing their implementation from the local perspective. Participants at each location agreed at the October meetings that the groups should continue, with membership to be informal and leadership provided by volunteer co-chairs. At least one

co-chair of each group will be non-governmental, and co-chairs will work together to set agendas, run meetings, and provide leadership to group projects.

Ron Devlin (Terry) and Doug Campbell (Miles City) were elected co-chairs at the Miles City meeting in January. Co-chairs for the Dillon group, also identified at their January meeting, are George Trischman (Twin Bridges) and Craig Fager (MT FWP-Dillon). Because the January meeting in Glasgow was postponed, there has been no co-chair election. If you are interested in serving as a co-chair for Glasgow, please contact Anne Cossitt at 633-2213 or cossitt@usadig.com.

Participants at each location are looking at a variety of conservation projects that could be supported by the local working groups, and these projects will be discussed in more detail at upcoming meetings. Groups will be able to allocate some funding from this first phase to use for specific projects.

For details about the LWG project, go to:
<http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/default.html>

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS?

If you have any questions or comments about the LWGs or this newsletter, please contact Anne Cossitt, Cossitt Consulting

503 Fifth Ave NW

Park City, Montana, 59063

406-633-2213

cossitt@usadig.com

BLM Announces Conservation Strategy

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has adopted an interim national strategy outlining steps that it will take to maintain, enhance, and restore sage-grouse habitat on the public lands that it manages. This strategy will guide BLM field offices until state- and local-level conservation plans developed with state wildlife experts are completed and made part of BLM land-use plans. BLM manages half of the sage grouse habitat remaining in the U.S., about 57 million acres. For complete details about BLM activities related to sage grouse, visit http://www.blm.gov/nhp/spotlight/sage_grouse/.

Presentations Highlighted Livestock, Predation, and Hunting

Local working group meetings held during fall and winter covered conservation actions related to livestock grazing, predation, and hunting. In October, San Stiver, biologist for the multi-state Sage Grouse Planning Framework Team, gave presentations at all three locations on predation and hunting. The Team prepared a 600-page status report reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of their decision-making process on listing sage grouse as endangered. Jeff Mosley, Professor of Range Science-MSU, presented on livestock grazing and sage grouse habitat at the September meeting in Glasgow and the January meeting in Dillon.

Stiver, who has been working on sage grouse issues for nearly two decades, primarily with the Nevada Department of Wildlife, reminded the groups that it is important to focus on specific areas where it is known that the



Photo © MT FWP

sage grouse populations are in trouble. He said this included areas with isolated or nearly isolated populations, especially when those populations are small (a few hundred birds or less), and areas with proposed future activities that could pose harm to the sage grouse.

Other key points from Stiver's presentation included:

- Hunting doesn't appear to affect sage grouse populations if the

"Livestock grazing can be negative, benign, or positive for sage grouse depending on how grazing is managed."

Jeff Mosley

Professor Range Science, MSU-Bozeman

harvest is 10% or less of the total population.

- Predation is part of the natural cycle for sage grouse—without predation, the species may have evolved totally differently.
- Predator control can have unanticipated negative effects on sage grouse. Studies in Nevada showed that reducing the coyote population increased numbers of red fox, which are very effective predators on setting hens.

Jeff Mosley stated that livestock grazing can have negative, benign, or positive effects depending on how grazing is managed. Mosley presented some general guidelines on timing of grazing, intensity of grazing, and fences and water development. His presentation included many practical examples, such as how small adaptations to livestock watering arrangements can benefit sage grouse.

More detailed information on San Stiver's presentation is provided in the October meeting summaries for each location. The Glasgow area September meeting summary provides more detail on Jeff Mosley's presentation.

San Stiver's PowerPoint presentations on predation and harvest management are available by clicking on "Project Library" at the sage grouse website at <http://fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/default.html>. Copies of Jeff Mosley's presentation are available upon request to Anne Cossitt (406-633-2213, cossitt@usadig.com).

If you plan to attend the next sage grouse LWG meeting:

- Please take time to read the portions of Section VI (Conservation Actions) of the Montana state plan that relate to the topics for the next meeting in your area.
- To access the plan through the Internet, go to: <http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/default.html> and click on "Download: Final Management Plan." If you do not have Internet access, you can request a copy of the plan from your nearest Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks office.
- If you've missed a meeting or meetings, plan on coming to the meeting at 2:30 p.m. for updates and questions-answers on what's already been discussed.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

DILLON

Wednesday, March 23, Search and Rescue Building

2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.

3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topic: Fire management

GLASGOW

Wednesday, March 16, location to be announced

2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.

3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topics: Energy development and power lines

MILES CITY

Monday, March 21, Miles Community College, Room 106

2:30 p.m. Time for people who've missed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.

3-6 p.m. Local Working Group Meeting. Topic: Fire management

What Good Is Sagebrush?

By Charlie Eustace, bird biologist, Cossitt Consulting Team

What good is sagebrush, aside from launching Zane Grey's literary career with the 1912 classic *Riders of the Purple Sage* or inspiring one of those timeless western ballads by the Sons of the Pioneers, *Will There Be Sagebrush in Heaven?* To many range plants, sagebrush is a benefactor that improves conditions for life and survival. Let's look at a few aspects of sagebrush, roots, canopy, and litter, and how they improve the environment for other plants.

Sagebrush is one of 27 plant species known to use the root system to move water from deep moist soil to dryer surface soil by a process called hydraulic lift. At night, stomates on the leaf surface close, reducing the loss of water vapor and intake of carbon dioxide. When this occurs, hydraulic lift causes sagebrush roots near the surface to release water into the soil, where it is used by sagebrush and other

plants during the day to meet a portion of their water requirements. For sagebrush, it amounts to as much as 1/3 of the moisture needed during the day.

Plant nutrients and plant roots are more plentiful near the soil surface, and this additional water aids in the absorption of nutrients by plants whose roots are intertwined with sagebrush roots. Moisture is also essential for decomposition of organic matter and release of nitrogen. Since sagebrush has a deeper root system than many plants, this additional surface moisture extends the growth period for many plants whose root system can't reach the deeper moist soils. In many respects, sagebrush can be thought of as nature's prairie windmill.

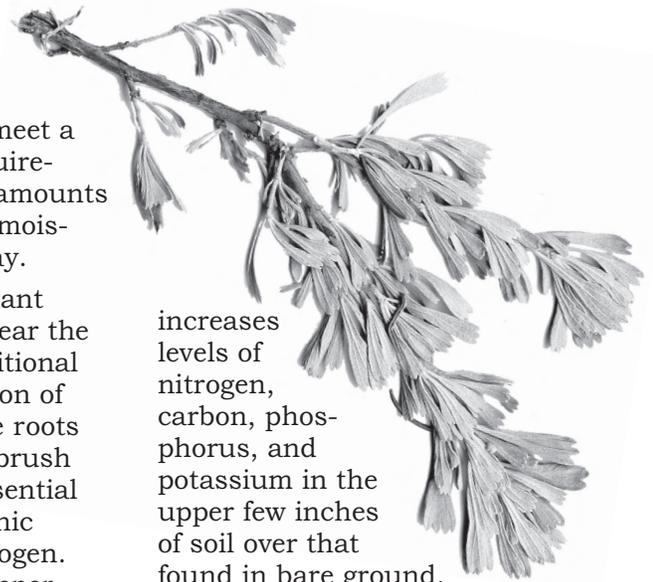
Sagebrush canopies can improve the success of plant germination. Shade and accumulated litter under sagebrush can reduce near-surface soil temperatures significantly. This extends the time that water occurs near the soil surface by as much as two weeks when compared to areas between sagebrush plants. Not only are daytime temperatures reduced but nighttime temperatures are warmer because heat loss is less under the sage canopy and ground litter.

Soil chemistry under the sagebrush canopy differs from that of the bare spaces between sagebrush plants. Litter from sagebrush canopies tends to be larger and does not decompose as quickly. Decomposing litter

increases levels of nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, and potassium in the upper few inches of soil over that found in bare ground.

Besides reducing the rate of moisture evaporation and increasing important plant nutrients, sagebrush litter improves soil stability by reducing erosion potential. The abundant decomposing litter produces a soil under sagebrush that allows for better infiltration of water and less runoff. Because of this, the upper 2-3 inches of soil under sagebrush will often contain more water after a rain than it will under bare ground.

In short, the upper few inches of soil under sagebrush are moister, higher in plant nutrients, cooler during the day, warmer during the night, and have higher water infiltration, lower runoff, and higher soil stability than spaces between sagebrush. This results in a more stable environment, which can allow a greater diversity of understory plants to become established. Maybe the Sons of the Pioneers aren't off base when they sing, *Will There Be Sagebrush in Heaven?*



Please complete and return the enclosed survey by 2/17/05!!

All participants in the sage grouse Local Working Groups are urged to complete the enclosed survey. You do not need to give your name. Please complete the survey and send it by February 17, 2005, to:

Rick Northrup
Bird Coordinator
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
P.O. Box 200701
Helena MT 59620-0701

The statewide sage grouse working group will consider the survey responses at their February 22 meeting in Lewistown, where they will discuss future state activities. If you are interested in attending this meeting, contact Rick Northrup at 444-5633 or rnorthrup@mt.gov.

Blizzard Blasts Out January Meeting

The January 12 meeting of the Glasgow sage grouse local working group was cancelled when extreme weather conditions advanced across northern Montana. The meeting is rescheduled for Wednesday, March 16, location to be announced, from 3 to 6 p.m., with a pre-meeting at 2:30 for questions and answers.

Greater Sage Grouse Not Warranted for Listing

Biologists within the Department of Interior recommended in early December 2004 against adding sage grouse to the endangered species list. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams decided on January 7, 2005 to follow the recommendation in determining that sage grouse do not warrant listing as threatened or endangered.

Three outcomes had been possible: that listing was “not warranted,” that listing was “warranted,” or that listing was “warranted but precluded” by higher priorities. In making their recommendation to Williams, scientists considered independent experts’ views and available scientific and commercial information. Williams reviewed the recommendation of the scientists and concurred.

Decisions to list or not to list a species are based on these criteria:

- 1) Present or threatened destruction, modification of the species’ habitat or range,
- 2) Over-utilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes,
- 3) Disease or predation,
- 4) Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms, and
- 5) Other natural or manmade factors.

The decision not to list sage grouse as threatened or endan-

The decision not to list sage grouse as threatened or endangered does not mean the end of conservation work...

gered does not mean the end of conservation work, said Williams. “The status review clearly illustrates the need for continued efforts to conserve sage-grouse and

sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis.” Local Working Groups in the western states where sage grouse are present—Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, South Dakota, and Wyoming—will continue to have an opportunity to positively affect the long-term survival of sage grouse.



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