SAGE GROUSE
MONTANA LOCAL WORKING GROUPS

SPRING 2004

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

Apr 2004
3rd round of meetings
(See page 3 for dates and locations)

June 2004
4th round of meetings
(See page 3 for dates and locations)

Late Summer/Fall 2004
5th and 6th round of meetings

Winter/Spring 2005
7th and 8th round of meetings

March 2005
Local Working Group action plans completed

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

For details about the LWG project, go to:
http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/groups.asp

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS?

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

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First Three LWGs Underway

Local working groups (LWGs) on sage grouse and sagebrush conservation have started in Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow, the first three Montana communities to begin local efforts using the state sage grouse plan. The state plan identifies eight other communities that will also eventually begin LWGs. The first two rounds of meetings in Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow averaged 40 to 50 participants, who brought to the table a wide range of interests.

The first meetings took place in late December 2003 and early January 2004. Participants were given information on petitions to protect the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act and the process used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make listing decisions. The groups discussed the development of the Montana state plan and the role of the local working groups.

Some of the points and questions raised by participants were these:

- Sage grouse are affected by many different factors, and there is no general agreement on what's causing their decline in any given location.

LWG's continued on pg 2

Q/A About the Sage Grouse Working Groups

Why do sage grouse need attention?

Once found in 13 western states and three Canadian provinces, sage grouse are found today in 11 states and two provinces. The bird's remaining strongholds are in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon.

How did the Montana sage grouse conservation effort get started?

The effort began several years ago when Montana, along with 10 other western states with sage grouse habitat, agreed to work on sage grouse conservation plans in their respective states in order to avoid endangered species listing for sage grouse. Several parties have petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to protect the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act, because of concerns about declining numbers of sage grouse and sagebrush habitat on western rangelands. See separate article "About Endangered Species Listing."

If Montana is a stronghold for sage grouse, why do we need to do anything?

First, while the loss of sagebrush habitat is not as severe in Montana as elsewhere, the loss is significant enough, at least in parts of the state, to influence sage grouse numbers and population trends. Second, in considering the petitions for endangered species listing, FWS will take into account actions by the individual states to conserve sage grouse and sagebrush habitat. Third, if range-wide endangered species listing takes place, it will have effects throughout the range of the sage grouse, including Montana.

Q/A continued on pg 2

The State Plan's Guiding Principles for Local Working Groups

1. Conservation actions implemented for sage grouse will contribute to the overall health of sagebrush communities across the landscape.
2. Conservation strategies will integrate local, regional, and national needs for conservation planning.
3. Wildlife professionals, land managers, private landowners, and all others who have a stake in sagebrush communities will be tolerant, understanding, and respectful of other perspectives and focus on areas of common interest.
4. This plan is not intended to exclude any uses or activities or infringe on legally defined private property rights; rather, it serves to provide solutions to problems and address issues that negatively affect sage grouse and degrade sagebrush community health.

LWG's continued from pg 1

- Some factors that greatly affect sage grouse are out of our control, such as weather and natural population cycles.
- How will grazing permittees, recreationists, and others who use public lands be affected by the state sage grouse effort?
- Since Montana sage grouse populations are relatively strong, will the grouse still be listed as endangered? Why should Montanans have to make conservation efforts when the grouse are doing well in many areas of our state?

The first round of meetings brought to light many questions about the lifecycle and reproductive needs of the sage grouse. In response to these questions, the second round of meetings, in late February and early March, included a presentation on sage grouse biology by Charlie Eustace, a wildlife biologist with more than 30 years of experience with game birds in Montana.

Also at each meeting, a wildlife biologist from the region presented what is known about sage grouse populations in that location and highlighted information gaps. Participants at all three locations had many questions about what sage grouse need for successful breeding and chick productivity and asked about the impact of hunting and predation.

The first two meetings at each local working group focused on basic information about the state plan effort and on sage grouse habitat and biology. Beginning with the next round of meetings, the LWGs will move into the "meat" of the project, exploring what types of strategies and actions may be relevant to their locations and starting to consider on-the-ground conservation projects.

Q/A continued from pg 1

What exactly is the Montana plan?

The Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana is the result of more than two years of research and deliberation by state and federal agencies, livestock producers, sportsmen, biologists, and other interested parties throughout the state. The plan:

- describes the status of, and the threats to, Montana's sage grouse population and sagebrush habitat
- offers a "toolbox" of information and conservation actions, designed for tailoring to community conditions and concerns
- provides a framework for establishing voluntary local working groups to tailor the plan to their local situation.

The overall goal of the state plan

The long-term conservation and enhancement of the sagebrush steppe/mixed-grass prairie complex within Montana in a manner that supports sage grouse and a healthy diversity and abundance of wildlife species and human uses.

Objectives of the plan include:

- Maintaining the distribution and integrity of sagebrush steppe communities
- Maintaining the distribution of sage grouse populations within sagebrush ecotypes

What are the Montana Local Working Groups?

These are groups of people who volunteer to work locally on activities to benefit sage grouse and sagebrush habitat, using the state plan as a reference and guide. The first three groups are underway for the areas surrounding Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow. Eventually, 11 local groups will be established around the state. Because the state plan recommends action strategies that will be considered and implemented at the local level, Local Working Groups are essential to making the state plan a reality, with actions on the ground, not just words in a document. The FWS will take such actions into consideration in their evaluation of petitions to list sage grouse.

What is the time frame for the first three groups?

Establishing the first three groups is an 18-month project, which began in November 2003 and will conclude in March 2005. See timeline on front page.

Photo © Montana FWP

Local Working Groups Begin Next Phase

Starting with the next meetings in April, Local Working Groups (LWG) will begin identifying local actions to address sage grouse conservation and habitat. The section in the state plan entitled "Conservation Actions" will serve as the template for LWG discussion. It identifies 12 different issues affecting sage grouse and provides a range of options for addressing each issue:

- Fire Management
- Sage Grouse Harvest Management
- Livestock Grazing Management
- Mining and Energy Development
- Noxious Weed Management
- Outreach, Education, and Implementation
- Power Lines and Generation Facilities
- Predation
- Recreational Disturbance
- Roads and Motorized Vehicles
- Vegetation
- Other Wildlife

By March 2005, each LWG will have considered the relevance of each of these issues in their area. Each LWG will develop an action plan that identifies specific actions to be taken, the timeline for such actions, provisions for monitoring action progress and outcomes, and means for evaluating success and making adaptive changes as necessary. In addition, LWGs will identify existing actions that are making a positive difference for sage grouse. It is anticipted that LWGs will have at least one project initiated before the end of March 2005.

Upcoming meetings will also address programs and incentives to improve sagebrush habitat that can be used by landowners as well as updates on the FWS listing process.There will also be a field trip, anticipated to coincide with the June meetings, to discuss desired habitat conditions and how to obtain them.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

DILLON

April 29, Thursday, Search and Rescue Hall
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting
Topics: Local actions for Noxious Weeds and Power Lines

June 23, Wednesday, Search and Rescue Hall
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting

GLASGOW

April 19, Monday, Cottonwood Inn, Glasgow
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting
Topics: Local actions for Noxious Weeds and Fire Management

June 16, Wednesday, Cottonwood Inn, Glasgow
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting

MILES CITY

April 26, Monday, Miles Community College
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting
Topics: Local actions for Noxious Weeds and Power Lines

June 14, Monday, Miles Community College
2:30 pm ..... Time for people who've missed passed meetings to ask questions, obtain handouts, etc.
3:00-6:00 ..... Local Working Group Meeting

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

- Please take the 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 (Dillon: Noxious Weeds and Power Lines, Glasgow: Noxious Weeds and Fire Management, Miles City: Noxious Weeds and Power Lines).
- To access the plan through the Internet, go to this website: http://www.fwp.state.mt.us/wildthings/sagegrouse/projects.asp. From that page, you can access a "pdf" file of the 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 pm for updates and questions and answers on what's already been discussed.

About Endangered Species Listing

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is processing several petitions to list the entire population of sage grouse as endangered across its range. FWS follows these procedures in processing the petitions:

The Endangered Species Act directs that to the maximum extent practicable, within 90 days after receiving a petition, FWS is to make a finding as to whether the petition contains sufficient biological information to indicate that listing may be warranted.If the petition does not provide sufficient information, the 90-day finding is negative and that ends the process. If the 90-day finding is positive, it does not mean FWS has decided it is appropriate to list the species. Rather, a positive finding triggers a more thorough review of the status of the species — including a request for input from the public — which must be completed within 12 months of receiving the petition.

That 12-month finding may conclude that such a listing either is "not warranted," "warranted but precluded" by higher priority listing actions, or "warranted." If, after the initial 12-month review, FWS believes the species is threatened or endangered (and listing is not precluded by higher priority species), FWS would propose to list the species. Public comment would be sought and considered, and the proposal would be peer reviewed by independent scientists before a final decision would be made

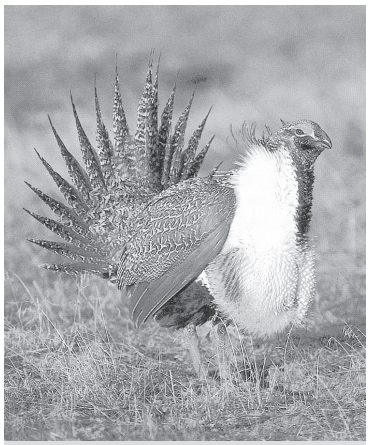

Photo © Montana FWP

Montana is among 11 states working on sage grouse conservation in response to possible endangered species listing.

For updates on activities pertaining to sage grouse listing and information on the listing process, go to this website: http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/. (If you want this information and you don't have Internet access, please call Anne Cossitt, Cossitt Consulting, Park City, Montana, 406-633-2213.)

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