GLASGOW AREA LOCAL WORKING GROUP

SAGE GROUSE ACTION PLAN

Sept. 2014 – Sept. 2015

BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Glasgow area working group is one of 4 working groups identified in the "Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana." The Glasgow working group is the first working group established in northern Montana.

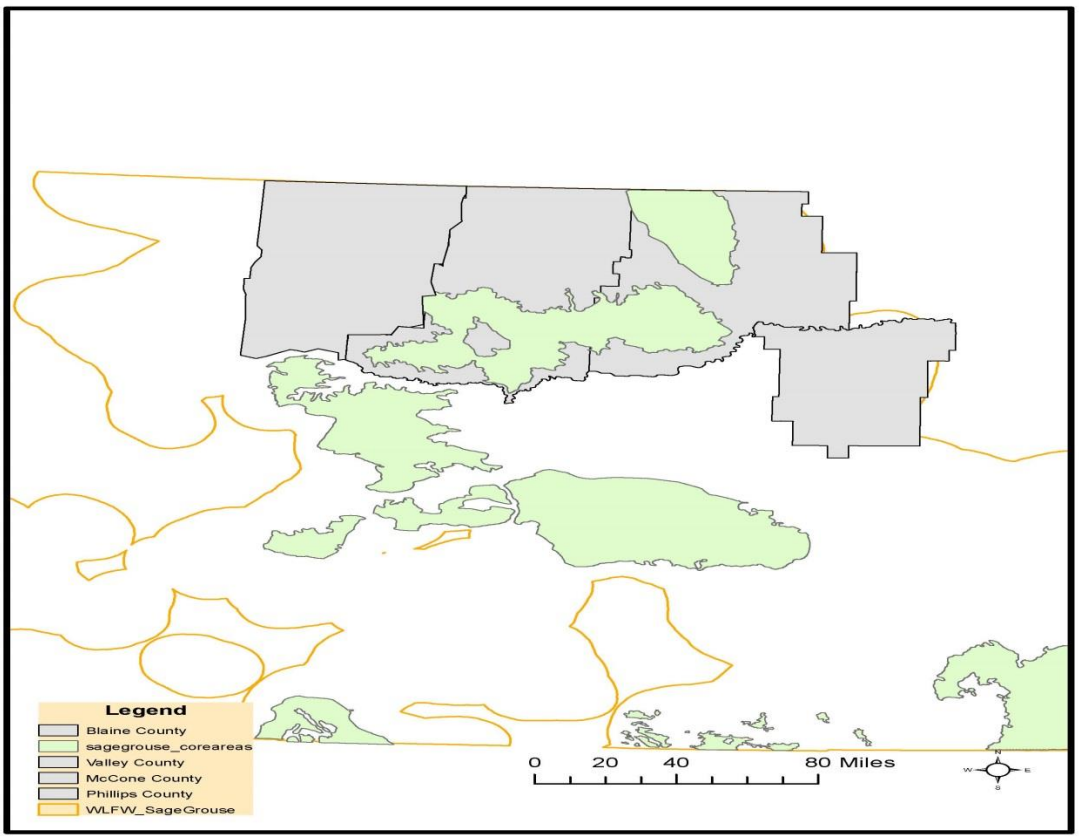
The role of the local work groups is to adapt the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana to specific local areas to develop and implement strategies that will improve or maintain the sagebrush steppe and reduce or mitigate factors that may further reduce sage grouse habitats or populations.

The Montana Sage Grouse local working group (SG-LWG) boundaries were determined at an Executive Committee meeting of the Montana State Sage-grouse Working group Committee in October of 2007.

The Glasgow Local Working Group began meeting in January of 2004, and continued to meet twice a year through 2012. Meetings were open to all and participants included agricultural interests, sportsmen, and representatives of state, federal, and tribal agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Participants to the meetings have included persons from Phillips and Valley Counties and from the Fort Peck Reservation (which lies in portions of Valley and Roosevelt Counties). The current co-chairs of the Glasgow LWG are Vicki Olson and Tracy Cumber.

The local working group is an autonomous body. The Sage Grouse Management Plan will serve as the guiding document for the work of the Local Working Group, however; under that umbrella, the Local Working Group is free to develop and prioritize local actions. The Local Working Group has the potential to influence practices on private lands and agency policy, but cannot change agencies' policies nor mandate management strategies on private land.

Collaborative efforts from the beginning have displayed a truly passionate goal to maintain the local historic lifestyle, culture and belief in sustainability values. In 2009, local land owners and their partners implemented actions for long-term conservation of the sage-grouse and the critical habitat within the sage steppe. This action plan is updated to reflect the efforts put on the ground by landowners and partners, to show appreciation and special thanks to all and to set forth the plan for 2015.



Geographic Area

The area covered by the Glasgow Local Working Group is in the northeastern portion of the sage grouse range in Montana. Blaine, Phillips and Valley are bordered by the Missouri River to the south and Canada to the north. McCone is south of the Missouri River. A total area of over 6 million acres and contains Core Areas 1 and 2.

The major watersheds in this area are the Missouri and Milk River Watersheds. Major tributaries include Larb Creek, Beaver Creek, Whitewater Creek, Frenchman Creek, and Porcupine Creek (all of which flow into the Milk River).

Landownership and public land management in the Counties include:

- Private landownership (predominate land ownership)
- Land managed by the Bureau of Land Management
- Land managed under the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge
- Lands of the Fort Belknap Reservation (western Phillips county)
- Lands of the Fort Peck Reservation (eastern Valley county)

Description of Habitat

Short-grass prairie upland dominates the landscape with a predominantly native understory of western wheatgrass (*Pasopyrum smithii*), needle and thread grass (*Hesperostipa comata*), and blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*).

Natural vegetation consists of sagebrush-dominated grasslands and short-grass prairie interspersed with limited stands of conifers. Sagebrush grasslands south of the Milk River are dominated by Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentate wyomingensis*) with an understory of native and nonnative grasses and forbs. North of the Milk River silver sagebrush (*A. cana cana*) replaces Wyoming big sagebrush. Silver sagebrush is resilient to fire and typically exhibits lower canopy coverage than the more dense but fire-intolerant Wyoming big sagebrush. Land ownership is a diverse mixture of public and private lands.

The elevations range from 1900 to 3500 and slopes range from 0-45%. The plains are nearly level to steeply sloping and outcroppings of shale often occur. In places steep drainage-ways and cobbled ridges dissect the landscape. Mean annual precipitation varies from month to month but usually ranges from 10 to 14 inches with over ½ occurring in April to June. The growing season ranges from 105 to 125 days.

The breaks are dominated by gently sloping to steep, and mostly very deep, well drained, loamy and clayey textured soils. In the recent geologic past, a sheet of glacial ice covered portions of the counties and extended south beyond the present course of the Missouri River. This ice sheet, estimated to have been over 1000 feet thick, left a mantle of till as it retreated northward. Throughout most of the area, the mantle of glacial till now averages 20 to 25 feet in thickness.

Some of the soils are located on steep uplands, terraces and outwash plains. These soils are shallow to deep and are well drained and excessively drained. They formed in glacial till, outwash, consolidated shale, and weakly consolidated sedimentary beds.

Land use in this region is a diverse mixture of cattle grazing and farming.

Over the past 20 years the area has alternated between periods of extreme heat and lack of moisture in the summer and cool temperatures and heavy rains and moisture in the summer; mild winters, and winters with extreme cold and heavy snowfall.

General Description of Sage Grouse Population

Greater sage-grouse populations have been declining throughout the west for decades and currently the bird occupies only 56 percent of its' historic range. Because of this, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that the sage-grouse warranted federal protection under the Endangered Species Act but was precluded from being listed due to the backlog of other species at more imminent risk of extinction. This "warranted but precluded" status is scheduled to be reevaluated by fall of 2015.

Based on available data and anecdotal information, sage-grouse populations in these counties experienced declines in the latter half of the 20th century, but more recently appear to have stabilized based on lek counts. In fact, compared to the general outlook for sage grouse across

the multi-state habitat in the U.S. and Canada, the sage-grouse populations here are a bright spot. The one potential exception to this generally good status in this area is the sage-grouse population north of the Milk River. FWP has closed the area north of Milk River to sage-grouse hunting for the 2014 season.

There is also the discovery of a unique migratory pattern observed in sage-grouse. UM graduate Rebecca Smith spoke at a LWG meeting in reference to her sage-grouse tracking study in Glasgow area. Rebecca noted that Jason Tack also a UM graduate first discovered that his telemetry marked birds were not where they were marked and had moved south of Hinsdale, MT., 60-80 miles south. Rebecca's study focused on migratory pathways and habitat use of a population of sage-grouse in Valley County, MT., and Grasslands National Park (GNP), Saskatchewan. This population is known to migrate around 120 km from winter range south of the Milk River to breeding and summer range north of the Milk River and in GNP.

Key Issues for Sage Grouse in the West

Ecologists now consider sage-grouse a 'landscape' species that view their environment at spatial scales that encompass whole landscapes. As a result, sage-grouse are often used as an indicator of the overall health of the sagebrush ecosystem. Key issues are focused on the objectives of the state plan—sage-grouse populations and sage grouse habitat.

Per the Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report, Valley County is within Management Zone 1: Great Plains; and includes two Priority Areas of Concern (PAC), one north of the Milk River which is silver sagebrush habitat of relatively low density and the second south of the Milk River with primarily big sagebrush habitat. The northern Valley County PAC supports a local population and also provides a conduit for spring and fall migration of the Saskatchewan population to winter habitats in southern Valley County.

While the populations have declined from historical levels, they are considered to be at "low risk" according to the COT report. As stated in the COT page 64, "in general, habitat in this (southern) PAC is expansive and intact and faces few, if any significant threats, particularly on public lands." Per the COT report, the northern Valley County PAC "is relatively stable and lacks significant threats".

Issues Identified by Glasgow Sage-grouse Local Working Group

- Consider populations at risk
- Identify future actions or situations that could create new risk factors for population viability (i.e. increased energy development and related infrastructure, West Nile Virus)
- Actions that reduce or minimize sage brush habitat (conversion)
- Adequate seasonal habitat (forb, insects, sage brush, soil armor, water)

Action Plan

1. The Local Working Group will meet at least once during the year. Purpose of the meeting will be to:
   a. Provide updates on conservation efforts and effectiveness of ongoing projects
   b. Identify actions of the Local Working Group

c. Provide written information to agencies on local working group consensus items of relevance to agency actions (e.g., supporting specific agency projects, ESA predictability and Working Lands for Wildlife).

Actions Taken To-Date

Practice	Extent
Escape Ramps	38
Fence Flagging	378,463 ft.
Fence Removal	109,392 ft.
Woven Wire Replacement; Rebuild Wildlife-friendly fence	48,880 ft.
Fence Retrofit	66,058 ft.
Range planting and crop to native	162 acres
Prescribed Grazing	17,052 acres
Prescribed Burning	1,714 acres
Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	22,599 acres
Inventoried Resource Management Systems	167,000 acres
SGI Conservation Plans within core areas drafted	8

The Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and Montana Association of Conservation Districts along with other partners established two range conservationist positions at Malta and Glasgow. These personnel have inventoried 11 ranches in the Core Areas and drafted eight conservation plans.

Design has been completed for six livestock pipelines to support the rotational grazing plans of the above conservation plans.

Fence marking needs per the Collision Model were identified for all leks in Valley County and the information was provided to BLM and private landowners. Six landowners agreed to install the markers on their private lands at no cost, two miles have been completed to date.

Volunteers together with the USDA-NRCS, FWP and BLM have evaluated a 4 mile radius around all known leks located in Valley County.

Easements within the core areas under the Farm and Ranch, Grasslands of Special Significance and Grassland Reserve now total 61,000 acres.

4H has flagged over 2 miles of fence.

The Hinsdale FFA has been approved for a grant to improve sage-grouse habitat on a landowner's sagebrush property by establishing native forbs.

The BLM has implemented rest-rotation or deferred rotation Allotment Management Plans (AMPs) on 850,000 acres in Valley County.

The Nature Conservancy has created a "grass bank" for Phillips County ranchers in which conservations efforts are rewarded with reduced grazing fees on TNC property.

The Nature Conservancy has also replaced many miles of woven fence with wildlife friendly and provided exceptional information on antelope, their needs and their migration, one of the largest migrations in North America.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife has provided support and funding which has been much appreciated.

Bruce Waage has acted as LWG coordinator, educator, support and mentor.

Without a doubt the citizens, ranchers, farmers, Moms, Dads, and kids deserve the most gratitude because it is each one of them that has developed and protected the very resources that have become the major emphasis for our way of life, sustainability, this galliform species and the steppe we all depend on. **Thank you**.

Additional resources:

Conference Report for the Natural Resources Conservation Service Sage Grouse Initiative,

Greater Sage Grouse Conservation Objectives: Final Report (COT Report),

Greater Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy:

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/mt/home/?cid=nrcs144p2_056600

And, Working Lands for Wildlife program see: "WRM WLFW Partnership Implementation Plan Final".