

Thunder Basin National Grassland Collaborative Learning Workshop

Sept 6, 2017

Eastern Wyoming College, Douglas

Presentations available on the Ruckelshaus Institute website:

<https://www.uwyo.edu/haub/ruckelshaus-institute/collaborative-solutions/thunder-basin/>

Updates and introductions

Presentation by Jessica Western (Ruckelshaus Institute)

- History of collaboration in the TBNG
- Review of interest statements
- Explanation of the purpose of the TBNG Cooperative Working Group
- Learning workshops intended to inform the CWG's TB Strategy Implementation Plan

Introductions and updates

- Chamois Andersen (Defenders of Wildlife)
 - Has been meeting with stakeholders to discuss non-lethal prairie dog management
 - Just attended legislative meeting
- Lindsey Sterling Krank (Prairie Dog Coalition)
 - Exploring areas for collaboration, primarily restoration projects
 - Studying on- and off-colony restoration efforts
- Willow Steen (Wyoming Game and Fish Department)
 - Trying to manage for big game populations in TBNG
 - Pursuing habitat restoration in riparian areas
- Shane Walker (USFS, Douglas District)
 - Been working with TBGPEA to monitor plague
 - Collaborating on stakeholder projects, particularly with grazing associations
- Tony Lehner (Converse County Commission)
- Justin Rogers (Senator Enzi's office)
- Dave Pellatz (Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association: TBGPEA)
- Carolyn Upton (USFS Deputy Forest Supervisor – Medicine Bow)
- Brad Rogers (US Fish and Wildlife Service)
- Jean Harshbarger (rancher)
 - Concerned about keeping prairie dog populations in check
- Cheryl Jacobson (RCows)
- Denise Langley (RCows)
- Gary Jacobson (former owner of Fiddleback)
- Marty Ertman (Weston County Commission)
 - Wants to find a different way forward, finding it hard to balance stakeholder needs with management actions
- Frank Eathorne (chairman of TB Grazing Association and TBGPEA boards)
 - Wants to work together to establish goals for prairie dog populations

- Bob Harshbarger (Association of National Grasslands)
 - Wants to see changes in management by USFS
 - Grazing allotments are devastated, impacting economic viability of ranchers
 - Wants to see rangeland renovation
- Jim Darlington (rancher, grazing association)
 - Been pursuing land exchanges
- Tammy Hooper (Liz Cheney's office)
- Ty Checklits (Fiddleback Ranch)
 - Just wrote(?) sustainability plan
 - Would like to see expediency in the decision-making process
- Bill Lambert (Weston County Commission, rancher)
 - Thinks that group's process is cumbersome, communications are poor
- Matt Avery (Campbell County Commission, rancher)
 - Been dealing with this same topic for 7 years
 - Purpose is to promote cattle industry on the grasslands
- Dru Bower (consulting for Campbell County)
- Hale Redding (Weston County Weed & Pest)
- Cheryl Schwartzkopf
 - Counties, conservation districts and Defenders, Prairie Dog Coalition have agreements in place to treat areas in October
 - 5-year grant from USFS to WY Dept of Ag (\$449K) for restoration, cactus control, cheatgrass treatments, etc.
- Michelle Huntington (Converse County Conservation District)
 - Been working with Prairie Ecosystem Assoc, grazing assocs, landowners
- Melanie Geiger (Converse County Conservation District)
- Jake Hogan (NRCS)
- Steve Lohr USFS
- Brian Ferebee (USFS)
 - Would like to decide what modifications are needed to plan
- Jason Kuiken (USFS, regional forester)
- Amanda Withroder (Wyoming Game and Fish Department)
 - Progress is slow, but there is forward motion
- Justin Proffer (BLM)

Update on TBGPEA efforts (Dave Pellatz)

- Discussions surrounding prairie dogs began in 1999
- 2000 – initial agreements with USFWS regarding species of concern
- Many years spent defining study area, settled on 5 counties in NE Wyoming, 77% private
- Many years spent defining study ecotypes (2: shortgrass, sagebrush) and species (8)
- 2013 – Conservation Strategy submitted to USFWS: science-based approach to landscape management (understand, protect, enhance)
- Issues in the grasslands are complex because TBNG is a blend of four distinct ecosystem types, creates variation in vegetation, influences types of wildlife that use those areas

- Current projects: sagebrush mapping, sage-grouse modeling, prairie dog mapping, grassland restoration,
- Prairie dog acreage before plague: 65,200 (max extent as of last colony expansion 2016-17)
- Current plague activity in peripheral colonies, some prairie dog core areas affected in western portion, some in FS “Category” areas, ~11,000 total acres impacted (areas of reduced or no prairie dog activity) as of August 31

Break-out groups: Identify options for Strategy projects to be implemented within the next year

Group 1 (consensus options)

- a. Create clear management goals and implementations of the current plan (consistency of management for the long-term, administration to administration)
- b. Continue monitoring prairie dog towns and plague
- c. Range condition – forage management and competition of livestock and wildlife
 - a. Leniency and flexibility for innovative approaches to vegetation treatments
 - b. Continued prairie dog control
 - c. Invasive species control
 - d. Use the plague situation to control prairie dog colonization and spread (buffer zones)
- d. Personal relationships – respect for all goals and viewpoints

Group 2 (not consensus)

- a. Goal: Prairie dog management to a level that supports landowners during drought, while supporting associated species
- b. Reduce 3.63 area
- c. *Manage 3.63 area’s boundaries
 - a. Eliminations of prairie dogs outside the boundary
 - b. Prevention
- d. 5,000 acres
- e. *Improved or more consistent communication and distribution between meetings

Group 3

- a. Need a definitive answer on ferret reintroduction (would like WGFD to say no)
 - a. Eliminate 3.63
- b. Range condition
 - a. Erosion
 - b. Multiple use sustained yield act 1960
 - c. Impairment productivity of the land Bankhead-Jones FTA 1937
- c. Commitment to follow through on management decisions
 - a. Follow USFS (your) plans
 - b. Any new plans must be fiscally responsible 2012 FS planning regulations
- d. Remove all prairie dogs within sage grouse core area
- e. Permanently drop no shooting ban (start this fall)
- f. 1500 – 2000 acres prairie dogs max (see Gary for more details)
 - a. \$20,000 treats 2,300 acres
- g. Reclamation/restoration
 - a. Remove cactus, three-awn, cheatgrass, and mounds
- h. Drop multiple year contracts for prairie dog control
- i. Comply with State Weed and Pest laws (i.e., prairie dog is a pest)
- j. LRMP revision is long overdue

Group 4

- a. Problem statement or window of opportunity: Under current conditions, antelope (and deer to a smaller extent) along with prairie dogs, are at a lower level. Thus, providing an opportunity for better control of prairie dogs and restoration. May not need to look at sagebrush restoration but should strive to keep the sagebrush we have. On the ground projects: cheatgrass control, keep pds from impacting sagebrush, capitalize on low-hanging fruit
- b. Are there missing pieces?
 - a. Infrastructure for grazing management (water, fencing, rotations)
 - b. Incentives
 - c. Long-term: grazing associations have been beneficial
 - d. Consistent funding (access to some funding is increasing, like NFWF)
- c. The long-term goals need to be examined. What path are we on? Is it correct? What can we do under current FS plan?

Next steps

- Work on improved updates and communications
- Where/how to get information on prairie dog densities (not just acreage)
- Discussion of implementation plan
- Inventory and results of work and research done in the fall
- USFS shares their vision
- Look at specific places to use tools
- Short-term/current opportunities

Questions and general discussion

- What has been holding up USFS implementation of projects?
 - Process, seasonality
- Is this information helpful to the USFS? What else does the USFS need from this group?
 - This meeting has been helpful to identify opportunities and challenges
 - Helpful to use this group for consistent communication and leveraging resources for implementation, look at specific places to use available management tools
 - USFS doesn't need more information; owes the group some decisions on plan
- How to combine CLW and CWG? What do "recommendations" mean given the USFS doesn't have to act on them? What is the purpose of the CWG if today's meeting was helpful?
 - Could have a non-federal agency convene the meetings in order to combine meetings and have all stakeholders at the table
 - USFS is willing to entertain other options for meeting/group approach
- What is the USFS's vision? How can we arrive at a collaborative agreement if we are aiming in different directions?
- One stakeholder feels that this process has yielded progress; Ruckelshaus Institute is interested in finding ways to improve the group's efficiency