

Thunder Basin National Grassland Cooperative Working Group

Sept 7, 2017

Converse County Library, Douglas

Presentations available on the Ruckelshaus Institute website:

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

Updates and introductions

CWG:

Joe Budd (Wyoming Dept. of Ag.), Willow Steen (WGFD), Michelle Huntington (Converse County Conservation District), Marty Ertman (Weston County Commission), Rick Miller (BLM), Raesha Sell, Slade Franklin (Wyoming Dept. of Ag.) – received grant from USFS for invasive species, Andrew Litzel (Crook County Weed and Pest), Hale Redding (Weston County Weed and Pest), Shane Walker (USFS), Zack Walker (WGFD) – did raptor surveys on TBNG; raised concern about lead poisoning of raptors, Brad Rogers (USFWS), Tony Lehner (Converse County Commission) – had informal meeting with other commissioners and landowners this morning, Will Rose (Wyoming State Lands), John Hartung (NRCS), John Midkiff (Niobrara County Commission), Lacey Sloan (Weston County Natural Resource District) – gathered information from landowners; had grants available for landowners but not much interest, Bill Lambert (Weston County Commission), Cheryl Schwartzkopf (Converse County Weed and Pest), Matt Avery (Campbell County Commission)

Public:

Jason Kuiken (USFS), Steve Lohr (USFS), Brian Ferebee (USFS), Tammy Hooper (Liz Cheney's office), Justin Binfet (WGFD), Bob and Jean Harshbarger (ranchers), Lindsey Sterling Krank (Prairie Dog Coalition) – have been working on barrier experiments, Dru Bower (consultant for Campbell County), Carolyn Upton (USFS), Dave Pellatz (TBGPEA), Chamois Andersen (Defenders of Wildlife) – working with Ag Econ at UW, Justin Rogers (Senator Enzi's office), Todd ? (WGFD), Aaron Voos (USFS)

Bob Harshbarger (rancher)

- 2013 ruling – federal law takes precedence over state laws, but state reserves right to make decisions on areas not explicitly covered in federal law (state retains sovereignty)
- Reviewed federal oath of office to uphold the Constitution
- “Grazing on federal lands is a lawful business to be protected”
- Grasslands are for the "economic stability of local ranchers”
- 1935: control erosion, produce more forage, ensure the economic stability of the remaining rural residents
- Land utilization projects/lands – in a category of special use
- 1937: executive order, some public lands were withdrawn from the public domain for grazing
- Bankhead-Jones Act calls for balanced rural-urban growth
- NEPA and National Forest Management Act are supplement to Bankhead-Jones

- USFS is obligated to monitor environmental degradation, manage for multiple use and sustained yield except when dedicated to specific uses
- Question: How do we see the changes Congress made to the Bankhead-Jones Act?
 - There have been amendments, but they did not change the focus on economic viability and production for landowners; the changes opened the Act up to multiple use

Update on TBGPEA efforts (Dave Pellatz) <https://www.tbgpea.org/>

- 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 (aeration study, cactus treatments, barrier study)
- Prairie dog acreage before plague: 65,200 or 4% of TBNG total area (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 prairie dog activity) as of August 31
- Many ongoing and planned research projects
- Question: Are there Ute’s lady tresses in this area?
 - No, not that we know of
- Questions: Why hasn’t TBGPEA been able to get these issues under control?
 - Partly a matter of scale, some areas are functioning and some not
 - We have learned a lot that has enabled us to make good decisions
 - These are not easy problems (funding, staff constraints etc.)

Breakout groups: Options for implementation

Group 1

- Improve range conditions to benefit wildlife, health and safety through reseeding, weed management with treatment, and collapsing prairie dog burrows. Start restoration in areas that have had high plague numbers and most beneficial to land and biggest bang. Treatment determined by Weed and Pest, USFS and lease as to where to target. Also consider topography (i.e., where restoration has a good chance of success).
- Density management: do strips throughout towns to keep numbers down, break up large complexes, continue to allow shooting (multiple benefits: active control, economy stimulator, allows multiple avenues for control, and recreation), add more rodenticide options
- Updates from one authorized point of contact (receive and share)

Group 2

- Long-term funding

- a. Clarification of prairie dog as pest or sensitive species
- b. Maintenance (“MOU with counties” or who?) of plan
- b. Range restoration
 - a. Depends upon if prairie dogs “plague out”
 - b. Or reduce density
 - c. And restore vegetation, especially in plagued areas
- c. Make a decision of acceptable density/acres
 - a. Set of protocols – same throughout standards
 - b. Use the same definition of “density/acre” across all lands
 - c. Associated species counts – measure the same inside and outside categories
- d. Create data-sharing clearinghouse regarding associated species and prairie dogs
 - a. Include TBGPEA and USFS data
 - b. Include range conditions, ground cover
 - c. Include private landowner data
- e. Regardless of where Plan is amended, update Strategy that is tied to State plans
 - a. Bring all federal agencies together to coordinate ferret reintroduction Statewide
 - b. Explore whether private landowners are interested in black-footed ferret (re)introduction on their land

Group 3

- a. Monitoring and inventory of erosion
- b. Range conditions (cactus treatment, reseeding, cheatgrass)
- c. What is prairie dog objective? Action levels? Triggers?
- d. Allowing ground-ready projects
- e. Project deadlines and transparency why delayed
- f. Get house in order
 - a. Quicker internal decision
 - b. Plan amendment?
- g. Dedicated resources

Group 4

- a. Restoration
 - a. Sage brush areas need help before they can’t help self (riparian, mesic)
 - b. Identify species usage to determine areas that will use annual plant community
 - c. Identify area of erosion concerns
 - i. Partner with Conservation Districts who can get water quality/erosion money
 - d. Use oil and gas mitigation dollars
 - e. Determine where there is landowner flexibility
- b. Prairie dog population control
 - a. Identify areas where we want prairie dogs
 - i. * “Category 1”
 - b. Coordinate with private landowners
 - c. Have Weed and Pest coordinate communication
 - d. Recreational shooting should remain everywhere
 - e. Implement lethal (compare lead versus steel bullets)
 - f. More education on lethal for landowners (chemical)
- c. Money manager to coordinate projects
- d. Determine impacted land areas to become new prairie dog core areas
 - a. If categories are being revisited, look at bottom-up approach

- i. TBGPEA maps
 - ii. Mapping and funding and project ideas
 - iii. Prairie dog extant maps
- b. Where we want prairie dogs: areas that are already impacted because can't afford restoring them
- c. Where we don't want prairie dogs: preserve healthy lands and not accept

Vote on new meeting format

- 6 times per year, one day, morning for workshops, afternoons for working group, start to examine issues beyond prairie dogs
- Approved by group (1's and 3's)
- Rationale:
 - Way to be more efficient/productive
 - Some would like to have a higher level of NGO participation

Other thoughts

- Don't want to eliminate CWG: thinks CWG has helped to build trust, rapport, relationships
- Today's meeting felt a little different, more positive, would like to see this continue
- Look at local collaborative examples to help this group decide on a structure
- Want to expand discussion beyond prairie dogs
- Need mutual accountability
- Does this working group give the USFS enough backing to make decisions?
 - Yes, this is a good way to synthesize information from stakeholders that goes to higher ups at the USFS, influences recommendations

Next meeting October 11th in Newcastle

- Finalize options for implementation
- Review of what has been accomplished or is in progress
- 10-J rule
- Steel versus lead bullets
- Wildlife Services (Mike Foster) how prairie dogs are being treated
- Get USFS projects and gaps
- Funding mechanisms
- Charter