



Big Hole Watershed Committee

Monthly Meeting Minutes

November 18, 2015 – 6:00 pm

Divide Grange

In Attendance

Jennifer Downing, BHWC; Tana Nulph, BHWC; Sarah Washko, BSWC/BHWC; Tom and Betty Bowler; Craig Fellin, Outfitter; Steve Jennings, BVHD Outdoors Association; Vanna Boccadori, MFWP; Carolyn Sime, MSGOT/DNRC; Kay Jensen; Brandy Janzen, BLM; Tom Helle, Rancher; Rollie Miller, Vigilante Electric; Randy Smith, BHWC/Rancher; Jim Carpita, BVHD County; Jim Hagenbarth, BHWC/Rancher; Bill Cain, BHWC/sportsman; Rick Hartz, BVHD County; Jim Magee, USFWS; Doug Finnicum, BSB; Lindsay Schmitt, NRCS; John Reinhardt, BHWC/Rancher; Russ Riebe, USFS, Jim Olsen, MFWP, Kirwan Webb; Kim Snodgrass, W.E.T.; Russ Anderson, Morrison-Maierle, Inc.; Roy Morris, BHWC/GGTU; Jenny Gonyer, Salmon Valley Stewardship; Gina Knudsen, Salmon Valley Stewardship; Steve Luebeck, BHWC/Rancher; Brian Ohs, Montana Trout Unlimited; Paul Hooper, USFS; Jesse Barta; Julie Willson, USFS; Mike Roberts, DNRC, Jim Berkey, BHWC/TNC, and Craig Fager, MFWP.

Introductions *Attendees introduced themselves.*

Meeting Minutes *October 2015 meeting minutes were reviewed, no additions or corrections.*

Reports

Director's Report - Jennifer Downing

- This is the last meeting for 2015; we'll see you again in February!
- Governing board members should have received packets of governing board/bylaw changes – hopefully they have reviewed and submitted comments by now ***(If you still have comments to submit, please get them to Jen or a steering committee member ASAP).***
- Will adopt new bylaws at the January 20th governing board meeting at Fairmont.
 - Previously, there were 22 “members” and 4 steering committee as the board. The new version makes the 22 members the board and steering committee as executive board.
- Fall newsletter is complete.
- Annual appeal is coming up – this is a great time to recruit new participants and donors to BHWC, etc. ***Please talk to your friends/acquaintances about BHWC – help us spread the word!***
- Mt. Haggin restoration projects update – on schedule.

Streamflow Report –Mike Roberts, DNRC

- Gages are seasonal and are turned off for the season;
- Snow pack is looking good.
- El Nino year – predicting warmer than average temperatures and below average precipitation.
- New Wise River gage – installed on 10/29/15 at the mouth of the Wise River. Will be able to access flow and temperature in Real Time. Funded by TNC/BHWC. Installed/operated by DNRC/MBMG. This gage will run until it freezes rather than being shut off in November.

Drought Management Plan

- Annual DMP review meeting to be held November 23, 2015;
- Craig Fellin: “I would like to sincerely thank the ranching community for their participation in the Drought Management Plan to save our beautiful river. It was a tough summer for everyone, but your efforts helped save the resource and the fish. When we have a summer like we just did, we really have to think about the future and not just try to deal with the present, and we really appreciate what you did this year.”

Steering Committee – Randy Smith

- Steering Committee is happy with progress BHWC is making.

Wildlife Committee – Jim Hagenbarth, Tana Nulph

- Carcass Compost Facility and Carcass Removal Program
 - Agreement nearly in place with MDT; work day pending to set up compost facility;
 - Producers can choose to participate in the carcass removal program and/or drop off carcasses themselves during prearranged hours or by appointment with the Wildlife Programs Technician. The purpose of these programs is to use nonlethal methods to reduce/prevent predator/livestock conflict.
- Range Rider/2nd Range Rider
 - Range Rider program wrapped up in September for 2015; review meeting held in November;
 - BHWC will seek funding to hire a 2nd Range Rider to work in the middle Big Hole.

Land Use Planning Committee – Jennifer Downing

- Big Hole River Incentive Program:
 - A program created and operated in partnership with Future West. Future West will create the tool and BHWC will operate it. Both groups are responsible for fundraising and monitoring. BHWC is responsible for education and outreach;
 - The program will provide monetary incentives for ranchers in the Lower Big Hole that participate in activities that produce conservation values;
 - Look for more information regarding this program in the spring!
- Floodplain map adoption:
 - BVHD County has adopted new regulations and will adopt maps for the Big Hole River as well as the rest of the county that has already been regulated. An ordinance has been put together to adopt the regulations. November 17th was the first reading of the ordinance, the next reading is the 30th, expected that it will be adopted and go into effect in early 2016.
 - Jim Carpita will be retiring the 1st of the year, Rick Hartz will take over his floodplain duties.

Special Report: Sarah Washko, Big Sky Watershed Corps member, Term Summary

- 5th year of Big Sky Watershed Corps program – places interns with watershed groups to help them build capacity and get projects on the ground;
- Sarah's work for BHWC in 2015:
 - Community service, on-the-ground work; helped several other watershed groups with their projects, BHWC project documentation, outreach & capacity building, social media, monitoring for the CCAA/DMP.
- Sarah took several beautiful photos of the Big Hole, which BHWC will be able to use for future publications, social media, etc. Here are two of our favorites!



- When Sarah first came to the Big Hole, she felt out of her element and totally “stuck”. But she engaged herself with the community, turned her experience around, and ended up having a very positive time in the Big Hole! Sarah says “Thank You” for involving her in our work and community.

Meeting Topic: Sage Grouse

*Presentation by: Carolyn Sime, Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT)/Department of Natural Resource Conservation
Vanna Boccadori, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Craig Fager, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks*

Background: The topic of sage grouse conservation is not one in which BHWC has been previously involved, but have discussed and would like to engage. There was a decision released by USFWS in September 2015 that the Greater Sage Grouse would not be listed under the ESA, but management for and of sage grouse is still a very important topic (and a listing decision may still be released at a later date).

Governor's Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program – Carolyn Sime, DNRC

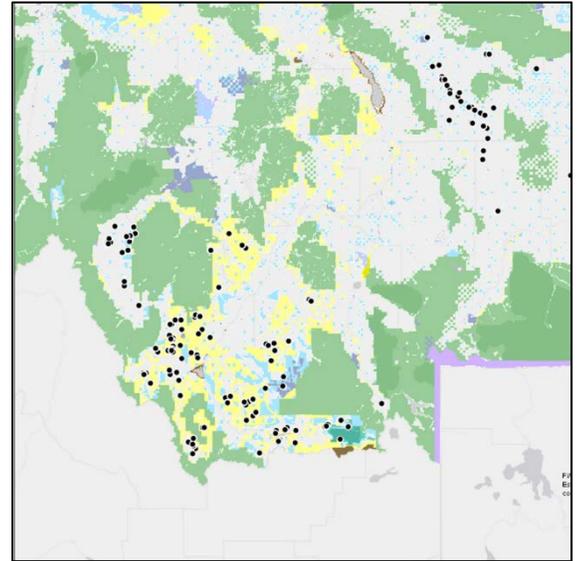
- Early 2000s – people in the US began to be concerned about sage grouse;
- In 2010, the USFWS decided that sage grouse may warrant listing under the ESA, but higher priorities prevented it from being listed at that time;
 - USFWS entered into a court settlement agreement saying they would decide the status of the sage grouse by September 2015. This began a review of the sage grouse's status, including threats, across 11 western states. The biggest threat in Montana was determined to be habitat fragmentation.
- The Governor's Sage Grouse Advisory Council was formed in 2013. The Council met many times and conducted public meetings across the state to get comment.
 - The Council presented final recommendations to Gov. Bullock in January, 2014. The Governor adopted most, if not all the recommendations and signed Executive Order 10-2014.
- In 2015, the MT State Legislature passed the Montana Greater Sage Grouse Stewardship Act (MT Code Annotated 76-22-101 through -112):
 - Governor Bullock updated the executive order in September 2015. It is known as Executive Order 12-2015.
 - End of September – USFWS announced that listing of sage grouse was not warranted – this is a positive reflection on updated land management plans by BLM/USFS and Montana's State Conservation Strategy and Executive Order 12-2015. Decision based on Montana Conservation Strategy, land management agency plans, and conservation efforts to date. It's important that MT and the federal agencies follow through on implementation.
 - USFWS will do status review within 5 years; petition possible at any time.
- MT Legislature created the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) – Carolyn does staff work for this team, helping to implement the executive order for the governor.
- Montana Sage Grouse Program Goals:
 1. Maintain viable sage grouse populations and conserve sage grouse habitats;
 2. Preserve flexibility to manage our own lands, wildlife, and economy (and prevent listing under ESA next time around).
 3. Guiding Principles:
 - Key threat to sage grouse in Montana is habitat fragmentation through development, land conversion of native range;
 - Recognize the important role Montana's private landowners have played to date and will continue to play in sage grouse conservation efforts;
 - Respect private property rights and existing uses and activities,;
 - Provide voluntary incentives to help landowners stay on the land and preserve vital sage grouse habitat;
 - Effective conservation requires "all threats – all lands" strategy (work across all landownerships);
 - Effective conservation requires collaboration and working together.

- Montana has been looking to the state of Wyoming – they set the standard through the WY Governor’s Office leadership and WY’s own Executive Order. USFWS approved Wyoming’s approach, so many other Western states have used Wyoming’s strategy as a model to develop their own strategies.
- Strategy:
 1. Executive Order 12-2015:
 - MSGOT, State & Federal agencies;
 - Program: consultation with project proponents, makes recommendations to proponents and agencies for projects requiring permits;
 - Applicable in core, general, and connectivity habitats;
 - Disturbance tool for proposals in core habitat (avoid, minimize, reclaim, compensate):
 - Some projects will impact sage habitats and require mitigation (create debits);
 - Other projects can improve/restore/conserves sage habitats (generate credits).
 - Habitat quantification tool:
 - Defines credit and debit;
 - Determines how many credits are available;
 - Determines how many debits are created by a project’s disturbance and impact on habitat; and
 - Ledger/reporting mechanism.
 2. Stewardship Fund: MT Legislature appropriated \$10 million from the State’s general fund to create a stewardship fund for sage grouse (idea is that this fund will become self-sustaining in time):
 - 2015 appropriation;
 - Grants to benefit sage grouse and sage grouse habitat;
 - Grants prioritized to create credits;
 - MSGOT awards grants; and
 - MCA establishes criteria, eligibility, use of funds.
 3. Mitigation: Mitigation banking – disturbance in one area is offset by restoration or other positive habitat actions in another area. Compensatory payments (offset disturbance by providing money to the stewardship fund) are also possible.
 - Habitat exchange = a marketplace;
 - Make credits available for purchase to offset debits created by development (buyer);
 - MCA requires USFWS approval;
 - One or more Bankers to conduct transactions and “hold” credits; and
 - Ledger/reporting mechanism.
- There is an open comment period from December 10, 2015 through 5pm, January 22, 2016 regarding the statute (76-22-101 through -112) grant rules.
- There is a meeting regarding the State’s grant rules 6:30 p.m. on January 11, 2016 in Dillon, Bureau of Land Management office, 1005 Selway Drive, Dillon, Montana 59725.
- **Submit public comment there or to Carolyn @:** csime2@mt.gov or Carolyn Sime, Sage Grouse Resource Program Manager, Department Natural Resources and Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601.
- *Question: About how far from the core habitat does that affect private permitting? Answer: The Executive Order requires consideration of sage grouse for any new proposed activity (habitat disturbance) that requires a permit from the state anywhere in core habitat. The key area analyzed is within 4 miles from center of lek.*

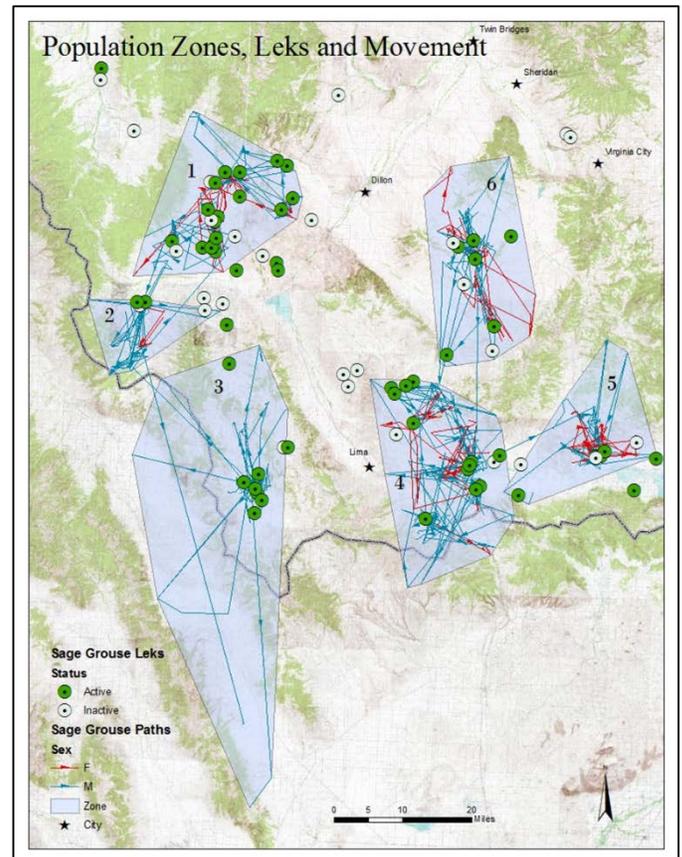
Sage Grouse in Southwest Montana – Craig Fager, MFWP

- Over the past 10-15 years, sage grouse have required a lot of attention and work. Of all the species MFWP deals with, 95% of the calls they get are regarding other species besides sage grouse.
- Leks:

- ~75 leks in SW Montana (some inactive, likely some unidentified) (*photo to the right*).
- Birds start lekking early in March (earlier if less snowpack). Will lek into May/June. April is the important survey window for MFWP as far as lek activity.
- April 2015: 57 leks surveyed in SW Montana:
 - 0-79 males/lek (high count averaged 21.4 males);
- 9 leks in Region 3 are used for Adaptive Harvest Management (AHM);
- There are 88 leks statewide used for AHM:
 - Each year, AHM lek counts are used to determine harvest limits for sage grouse.
 - Sage grouse lek count numbers have been steadily declining since the 1980s; however, numbers have increased slightly since 2013.
- Disturbances: Once Greater sage brush habitat is cleared, it takes ~30 years for it to replace itself, and potentially longer for the birds to reestablish populations.
 - Humans: photography, automobile trampling;
 - Predators: golden eagles.



- Harvest:
 - In 2014, harvested ~2100 birds throughout the state (SW Montana contributed ~500).
- Core Habitat: best of the best in terms of habitat
 - The entire Big Hole is general habitat, not core.
- Behavior:
 - In the winter, feed exclusively on sage brush leaves. In the summer, have a larger range of food sources, including forbs;
 - Sage grouse are extremely strong fliers; some males will travel 4-8 miles between leks;
 - Some birds are migratory and travel long distance between winter & summer ranges. Others stay in Montana all year (*lek location & grouse movement map to the right*);
 - Have 4-8 chicks at a time; lose many of them due to snow, predators, etc.

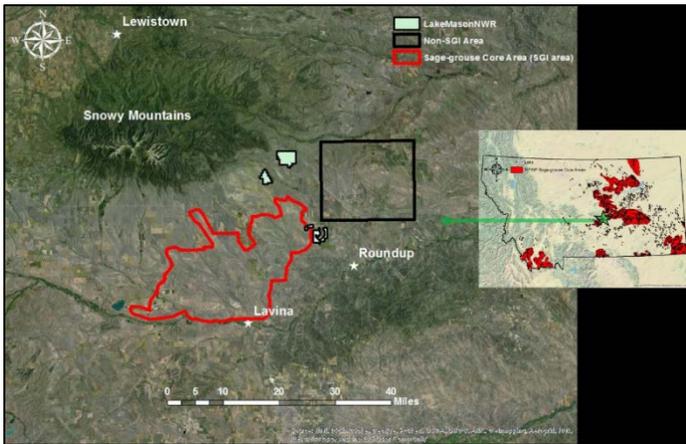


- Wing ages:
 - MFWP assess age of birds harvested using their wings. This gives a better idea of age distribution, survivability, reproductive success, etc.;
 - Huge variability year-to-year.
- Conifer encroachment is a major threat to sage grouse. Just 4% conifer encroachment can make habitat undesirable for sage grouse. Conifer encroachment has huge implications for a variety of wildlife and livestock grazing.

- FWP supports using fire as a cost effective way to address conifer encroachment when certain thresholds are met. Sage brush is killed too, but Mountain Big Sagebrush has ~15 year return interval.

Lorelle Berkeley's Research – Vanna Boccadori, MFWP

- USFWS published report identifying threats to sage grouse. One threat identified was conversion of sage brush habitat to croplands.
- USFWS decided to provide incentives to landowners to influence them to keep sage brush habitat rather than converting it.
- Lorelle's research looks at implementing a grazing/rest rotation system to directly influence/improve sage grouse habitat.



- Lorelle's research is focused near Roundup. (see map to left).

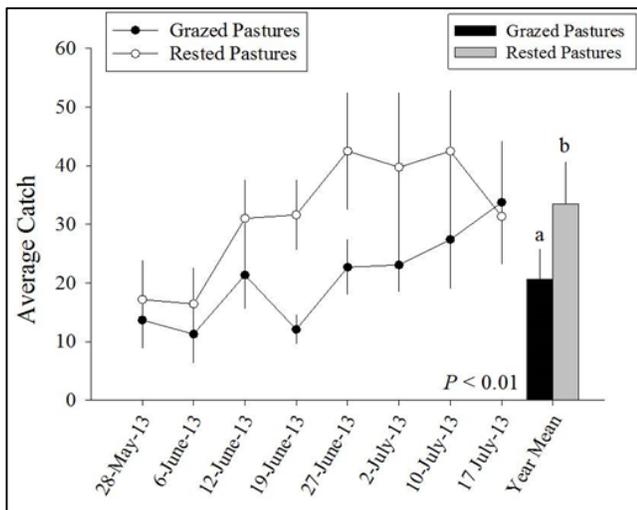
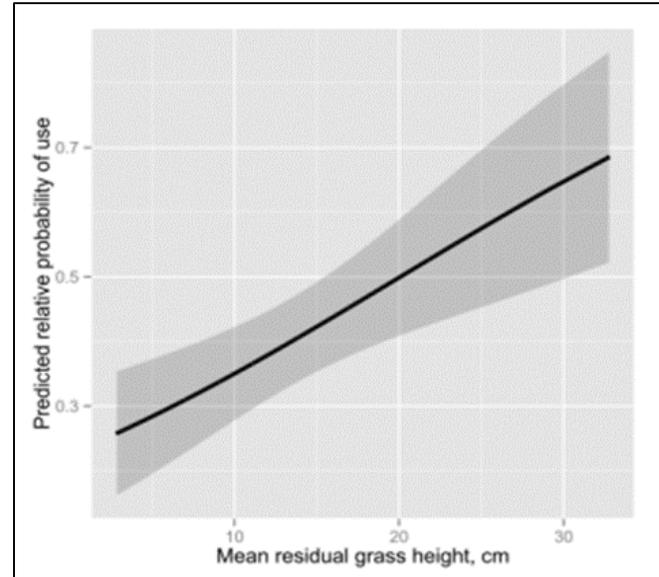
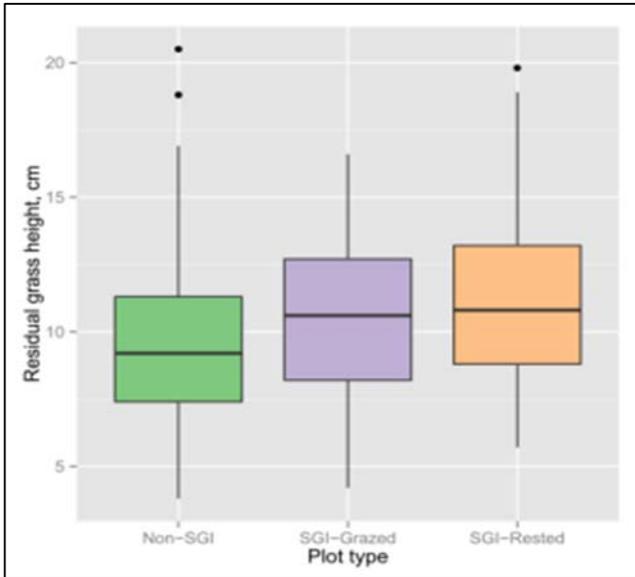
- The landowners in the red voluntary signed up with SGI to participate in a grazing system. The black square is the control group, in which landowners were not enrolled. This is a similar program to the upper Big Hole CCAA in that it is voluntary and provides landowner incentive for management actions that positively affect sage grouse.

- Most important factors influencing population growth (vegetation conditions greatly affect each of these):

- Hen survival;
- Nest success; and
- Chick survival.
- Two levels of study:
 1. SGI grazing system vs. non-SGI grazing system;
 2. Grazing treatments within SGI grazing system:
 - Nesting (April 1-July 15);
 - Brood-rearing (July 15-September 15);
 - Fall/winter (September 16-March 31);
 - Rest.
- They are in the 5th year of a 10 year study (it takes several years to see the implications of changing management actions).
- Methodology (all metrics will be measured with respect to grazing treatments):
 1. Radio-collar 100 hens (to measure survival and habitat use throughout the year);
 2. Monitoring nesting activity and success;
 3. Radio-mark 1-2 chicks from each brood (measure survival and habitat use);
 4. Measured sage brush habitat characteristics at sage-grouse use sites and random sites in sage-grouse habitat among grazing treatments.
- Preliminary Population Results (for all birds collared/marked on both SGI and control plots):

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Hen Survival	57%	65%	76%	67%	96% (not complete)
Nest Success		30%	54%	40%	64% 52%
Chick Survival		21%	10%	20%	15% 28% (not complete)

- Preliminary Vegetation Results:



- *Question: In the control area, are there potentially other grazing practices going on there? Answer: Yes, I'm not sure how they're selecting for those control lands, but there are potentially other grazing practices happening. From Lorelle: there are a variety of different types of grazing occurring on land that is not enrolled in the Sage Grouse Initiative. That is why we talk with landowners and categorize each pasture into a grazing treatment based on timing of grazing, rather than looking at particular grazing systems. Comparing pastures grazed during different time frames and receiving varying amounts of rest provides flexibility to apply the results to whatever grazing system is being used because results are not*

specific to a particular system.

Discussion – What next steps should occur for sage grouse and BHWC involvement in the Big Hole?

- USFS is in a grazing EIS for 11 allotments in the Big Hole – they will incorporate recommendations into those allotment grazing plans. Should have little to no effect on sage grouse management.
- Kyle Tackett is working on identifying sage grouse habitat in the upper Big Hole. A lot of that land is State land but there is some private land. Hopefully we can use this issue to obtain funding to enhance the sage brush ecosystem in the upper Big Hole, but we need to find out what we have up there in terms of both populations and habitat before we can decide how to proceed.
- How agencies decide to handle sagebrush issues will determine if ranchers can proceed if they have been (or stay in business at all).
- BLM recently produced an EIS on sage grouse in Idaho; the State of Idaho has taken the BLM to court over the issue.
- There is a lot we can do if the agencies will let us do it – the way the current management plan is written is pretty restrictive in terms of management actions that ranchers can take.

- It would be helpful to have a sage grouse assessment in the Big Hole – maps of the leks, maps of landowners on top of that, identify threats, etc. Then we can prioritize how we will address the threats and what conservation measures will be used. Also prioritize areas.
- The way the Big Hole is pieced together under different agencies makes it really difficult to have a comprehensive picture of what we're dealing with.
- We're used to working with riparian habitat, which bounces back very quickly; we need to be patient and remember that rangeland doesn't respond as quickly.
- Tie the compost facility into sage grouse preservation – removing livestock carcasses “makes honest predators” and can potentially reduce predator numbers and benefit sage grouse.
- We need to get SGI funding; the Stewardship Fund is also a good avenue for funding.
- Potential funding from Governor's office: Easements, conifer encroachment, incentives for retaining habitat, fence marking – many opportunities cited in the statute. Outside of parameters could also be considered – looking for best bang for buck. Matching funds positive. Application process: Legislature oversight team is developing administrative rules for grants now. Meeting setup for Dillon BLM office: January 11th, 2016, 6:30 pm, opportunity to provide comment on the rule. Documents will be available to the public mid-December. Finish up the rule by February (possibly earlier), try to set up an online tool for grant applications. Applications will likely be due in March.
- Conifer encroachment is a problem that needs to be addressed. Is there money available through the state to mitigate conifer encroachment or grant money to help private ranchers mitigate it?

Next Steps:

- ***Consensus: Need more information about what we have, migration patterns, landownership, threats, etc. so that we can decide how to proceed. A Big Hole Sage Grouse assessment that brings together information, partners, needs and next steps would be valuable.*** BHWC Wildlife Committee will convene to discuss the issue and bring back recommendations to full committee. Jim Hagenbarth will oversee this as co-chair of this committee.

Upcoming Meetings

- No BHWC public meeting in December. Happy Holidays and see you in 2016!
- January 20, 2016, BHWC annual governing board meeting @ Fairmont Hot Springs Resort.
- February 17, 2016, BHWC public meeting, 6pm @ Divide Grange. Topic: TBA

Adjourn