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SEEKING COMMON GROUND FOR ALL UTAH LAND MANAGERS

By Jordan Smith and Terry Messmer, Utah State University

When it comes to making land management decisions in Utah, finding common ground can often be difficult. As a public land state, nearly three quarters of Utah is managed by different federal agencies, each of which has their own specific mandates, policies, and decision-making practices. Additionally, there are thousands and thousands of active private landowners across Utah, each of whom holds slightly different beliefs about how and why their land should be managed. Many of these private landowners, like second-home owners, want their properties to be managed for aesthetics and recreational amenities. Others, like agricultural producers and ranchers, need their land to be managed so that it supports cultivated plants and livestock. With so many landowners and so many interests involved, how do scientists and policy makers know what the shared research and funding needs are? Until now, they didn't. That is about to change, however, with the launch of the Utah Land Management Evaluation and Assessment Network (ULMEAN).

Local Working Group tours allow land managers to observe first hand the response of treatments in sagebrush habitat. Photo courtesy of Lorien Belton.

What is the ULMEAN?

ULMEAN is an inclusive network of private and public land managers who actively manage land within Utah. Members in the network provide information on the most important information and research needs related to land management within the state. These needs can then be used to inform future funding decisions by a variety of agencies and organizations throughout Utah.

How is ULMEAN being created?

ULMEAN is being created through voluntary participation in an online survey designed to identify common and high-priority funding and research needs. The survey instrument was developed by researchers at Utah State University in consultation with various land management programs around Utah; these programs include:

- The Watershed Restoration Initiative
- The Grazing Improvement Program (Utah Department of Agriculture and Food)
- The Cooperative Wildlife Management Unit program (Utah Division of Wildlife Resources)

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IN THIS ISSUE

Can Sage-grouse Habitat be Recovered After Wildfire?

By Terry Messmer, USU Extension

The loss of sage-grouse sagebrush habitat to fire remains the single greatest threat to sage-grouse in Utah. Fire can lead to direct loss of essential sagebrush and can result in invasive plants replacing native vegetation (Figure 1). Although human-caused and natural ignitions are difficult to predict, pre-suppression, suppression response and post-fire restoration can have a large impact on the severity of fire effects.

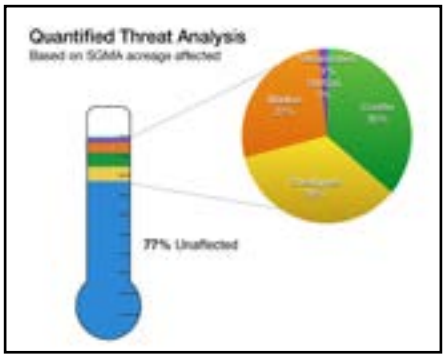

Figure 1. Greater sage-grouse species conservation threats in Utah.

Figure 2. This photograph is an example of how Utah Watershed Restoration Program is working to restore and protect watersheds in Utah. This restoration project not only restored sage-grouse habitat values but prevented the further losses by wildfire.

To reduce the size and frequency of catastrophic fires, Governor Herbert established the Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Steering Committee. The committee developed the Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy in 2013 to guide a collaborative strategy to protect the health and welfare of Utahns and Utah lands. In 2015, Governor Herbert signed an executive order, Implementing the Utah Conservation Plan for Greater Sage-Grouse, to further focus Utah's efforts. That order mandated the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands to prioritize fire-fuel mitigation activities near or in Utah sage-grouse management areas. It also set SGMAs as the second priority during pre-attack planning, after human life and structures. It is a high priority to proactively reduce or eliminate the spread of invasive species—particularly cheatgrass—that can alter fire cycles after a wildfire.

When fire burns sage-grouse habitat, there is an immediate and persistent negative influence on sage-grouse populations. Naturally ignited fire should be addressed as a serious threat. However, prescribed fire can increase the grass and forb cover that sage-grouse need for brood and late-summer habitat, but may also remove critical sagebrush cover and generally requires reseeding to reestablish sagebrush after a fire.

The Utah Conservation Plan for Greater Sage Grouse (https://wildlife.utah.gov/sage-grouse/Utah_Greater_Sage-grouse_Plan.pdf) requires that all state agencies coordinate and cooperate with federal and private partners to ensure the implementation of post-fire rehabilitation and restoration of sage-grouse seasonal habitats within SGMAs to benefit sage-grouse. The Utah Plan further defines permanent disturbance in SGMA as any ground disturbing activity where the effects would be expected to last 5 years or more. This means if sage-grouse habitat areas burned by wildfires cannot be rehabilitated to achieve Utah habitat guidelines, the area would be considered non-habitat.

The results of research recently published by Utah State University scientists shed new light on how well rehabilitation efforts conducted by Utah partners are doing in restoring sage-grouse habitats impacted by fires in timescales relative to conservation planning. https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/ecs2.2870. This research confirmed that recovery of sage-grouse habitat burned by fire, can be rehabilitated under Utah Department of Natural Resources Watershed Restoration Program (WRI) leadership to approximate Utah's sage-grouse habitat guidelines. (https://utahcbcp.org/publications/DahlgrenEtAl2019UtahSage-grouseGuidelines.pdf).

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National Bird Damage Management Meeting Comes to Salt Lake City February 2020

This February, professionals from across the country will gather to discuss the discuss the ecological and economic issues associated with mitigating damage caused by blackbirds, starlings, corvids, and vultures. Researchers estimate that these birds cause billions of dollars in damage to agriculture commodities and livestock facilities, transmit disease to humans and animals, are destructive to personal property, and are a safety concern at airports. The Bird Damage Management Conference is a venue in which professionals from all over the country will gather to discuss and share management approaches, research strategies, policy, and messaging around the management of blackbirds, starlings, corvids, and vultures. The main focus is on developing successful (cost effective and environmentally sound) strategies and tools for bird damage mitigation.

This conference will bring together a core group of researchers, managers, administrators, and stakeholders that are interested in the biology and management of these birds with an objective to involve key stakeholders in the development of a plan that will focus on meeting their challenges in protecting agriculture, urban, and natural resources.

The conference will have coordinated sessions on blackbirds, starlings, corvids, and black vultures, followed by panels on management and mitigation of damage. The last day will be devoted to break-out sessions to aid in the development of road-maps for future research and methods development.

The website for the conference is: https://conference.usu.edu/blackbirds/. Here you can find information on registration, livestreaming, and conference logistics. If you have questions, please contact conference logistics coordinator, Jessica Tegt at (435) 797-0570.

Bird Damage Management Conference

Blackbirds, Starlings, Corvids, Vultures

February 11-13, 2020
HILTON SALT LAKE CITY CENTER

To find out more about this educational conference and to register, visit our website:
https://conference.usu.edu/blackbirds/

Deadline for early registration is January 31, 2020! Register today!
Can't join us live? Register for our Live Streaming Option!




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If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

Seeking Common Ground for All Utah Land Managers, cont.

- The Utah Cattlemen's Association
- The Utah Wool Growers Association
- The Utah Association of Conservation Districts
- The Utah Farm Bureau
- The Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands

What are the goals of ULMEAN?

ULMEAN is intended to evolve and grow over time through periodic assessments of the most important information and research needs related to land management within the state. The ultimate goals of ULMEAN are to:

1. Improve interagency, stakeholder, legislative, and university communication and partnership in managing for multiple-uses.
2. Increase the effectiveness in managing public and private land and implementing restoration projects to optimize multiple-use benefits and incorporate the best available science.

How can you get involved in the Network?

Sign up to complete the ULMEAN needs assessment survey here (https://extension.usu.edu/iort/extension/ulmean_overview). The survey will only take about 10-minutes. If you participate, you can be entered to win one of 12 pre-paid $50 visa cards courtesy of the Utah Farm Bureau and the USU Berryman Institute. Once we have all the responses to the survey compiled, we'll share them with you as well as the leadership in each of the land management programs noted above. Help us in finding the common ground amongst all of Utah's land managers. If you have any questions about ULMEAN, feel free to reach out to us at jordan.smith@usu.edu or terry.messmer@usu.edu.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

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www.utahcbcp.org

Can Sage-grouse Habitat be Recovered After Wildfire? cont.

The research used long-term data from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Range Trend Project to assess short-term (1–4 years post-treatment) and long-term (6–10 years post-treatment) effects of fire on vegetation cover at 16 sites relative to sage-grouse habitat vegetation guidelines. Sagebrush cover remained low post-fire at sites considered historically unsuitable for sage-grouse (<10% initial sagebrush cover). In contrast, at sites that had higher (>10%) pre-fire sagebrush cover, sagebrush cover decreased to <10% in the short-term post-fire, but by 6–10 years after fire, most of these sites exhibited a recovering trajectory and two sites had recovered to >10% cover. Post-fire sagebrush cover was positively related to elevation (Figure 2, page 2).

Across all sites, perennial grasses and forbs increased in cover to approximately meet the habitat vegetation guidelines for sage-grouse. Cheatgrass cover did not change in response to fire, and increased perennial grass cover appears to have played an important role in suppressing cheatgrass. Our results indicate that, while fire poses a potential risk for sage-grouse habitat loss and degradation, burned sites do not necessarily need to be considered permanently altered, especially if they are located at higher elevation, have high sagebrush cover pre-fire, and are reseeded with perennial grasses and forbs post-fire. However, the result of the research confirmed that fire at more degraded sites, for example, those with <10% sagebrush cover, can result in cheatgrass-dominated landscapes and sagebrush loss at these sites should be avoided.