

**MINUTES**  
**MONTANA SAGE GROUSE OVERSIGHT TEAM**

November 20, 2023  
Meeting Summary  
DNRC Building, Montana  
Conference Room and  
Virtual Zoom Meeting

**Members Present**

Mr. Michael Freeman, Chairman, Governor's Natural Resource Policy Advisor  
Ms. Diane Ahlgren, Rangeland Resources Committee Chairman  
Representative James Bergstrom, House District 30  
Mr. Chris Dorrington, Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Director  
Mr. Benjamin Jones, Montana Board of Oil and Gas and Conservation, Administrator  
Ms. Amanda Kaster, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), Director (Proxy Director Dorrington)  
Mr. Malcolm Long, Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), Director (Proxy Chairman Freeman)

**Staff Present**

Mr. Mark Bostrom, DNRC Conservation and Resource Development Division, Administrator  
Mr. Logan Cain, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, GIS Analyst  
Ms. Therese Hartman, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation, Program Manager  
Mr. Adam Kauth, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, Biologist  
Ms. Jamie McFadden, PHD, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, GIS Analyst  
Ms. Emily Moran, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, Biologist  
Ms. Erin Reather, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, Biologist  
Mr. Nate Wold, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, GIS Analyst  
Ms. Heather Harris, Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (FWP), Grassland/Wetland Coordinator  
Mr. Tom Martin, Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), Environmental Services Bureau Chief

**Call to Order and Administrative Matters**

1:00 pm: Chairman Freeman called the November 20th Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) meeting to order.

Chairman Freeman introduced the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team members in attendance, quorum confirmed.

Chairman Freeman introduced the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program staff in attendance.

Chairman Freeman introduced other state agency staff in attendance.

Mr. Tom Martin, MDT, Environmental Services Bureau Chief  
Ms. Heather Harris, FWP, Grassland/Wetland Coordinator

Director Dorrington is the designated proxy for Director Kaster for the November 20th, 2023, MSGOT meeting.

Chairman Freeman is the designated proxy for Director Long for the November 20th, 2023, MSGOT meeting.

1:04 pm: **Chairman Freeman: Called for any changes or correction of the June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023 MSGOT Meeting Minutes**

No changes or corrections.

### **Executive Action**

1:04 pm: **Chairman Freeman: Called for a motion to approve the draft June 29, 2023, MSGOT meeting minutes.**

**Director Dorrington motioned to approve the draft June 29, 2023, MSGOT meeting minutes with the amendments.**

**Second: Administrator Jones**

**Voice vote conducted: voted unanimously to approve.**

**Discussion:** None.

**Motion Passed.**

### **Proposed Rule Change Hearing Update – Program**

1:05 pm: Ms. McFadden presented a brief overview of the HQT (Habitat Quantification Tool) Technical Manual Rule Change and provided an update on the Proposed Rule Change Hearing.

See [Rule Change, Conservation Leases, and Focus Group Presentation](#)

### **MSGOT Discussion**

1:08 pm: Chairman Freeman: Requested clarification on the public comment period and hearing for the HQT Technical Manual Rule Change.

Ms. Hartman: Explained that the Program received no written comments during the comment period and that the people who attended the hearing wanted to learn more about the Program and had no comments.

Mr. Martin: Requested clarification if rule change will impact suitable habitat.

Ms. McFadden: Explained there will be no change to the value of suitable habitat due to the rule change.

Ms. Hartman: Further explained that the rule change is to correct a typo to HQT Technical Manual and that prior HQT's have been processed correctly.

### **Public Comment**

No public comment was received.

### **Conservation Easement and Lease Grants Update – Program**

1:10 pm: Ms. Hartman introduced Mr. Brad Hanson, Eastern Manager for the Montana Land Reliance, to provide a brief update for the 2022 Conservation Easement Grants.

Mr. Hanson: Provided an update on the three conservation easements (High Ridge Land, LLC, Bruce Johnson Ranch, Dan & Mary Ann Johnson Ranch) that are being funded from the

most recent grant cycle. Each project is moving forward and MLR is in the phase of drafting the conservation easement document for each property. Baseline reports have also been contracted out for each easement. Depending on the weather, MLR hopes to have the contractor visits for the baseline reports done in mid-December. Estimated closing dates based on best guess are late spring for the High Ridge Land, LLC, and end of summer for the two Johnson easements but are dependent on a number of factors.

1:12 pm: Mr. Hanson also provided a quick update on the closing of the LO Ranch conservation easement in September that involved a permittee-responsible easement funded by Denbury Inc. (contact Rusty Shaw) on approximately 7,000 acres of designated Core Area in Carter County. Furthermore, an adjacent landowner (Cross W. Livestock) to the LO Ranch property has also expressed interest in a conservation easement with MLR involving an additional 7,000 acres. Denbury is committed to funding that project as well. Based on these two conservation easements, MLR would have about 14,000 acres under easements in this area located in a Core Area for sage grouse.

1:14 pm: Mr. Hanson expressed his gratitude to members of the committee on the support and funding for these projects. Indicated that there is also interest from an additional three landowners looking at conservation easements for their properties located in Core Areas. Information not yet publicly available but hoping to have some fantastic projects for MSGOT in 2024.

1:15 pm: Ms. Hartman provided a brief update on the restoration project for the High Ridge Land, LLC Conservation Easement.

See [High Ridge Land, LLC Conservation Easement and Restoration Project](#)

1:18 pm: Ms. Hartman provided a brief update on the 2022 Conservation Lease Grants.

See [Conservation Lease Updates](#)

#### MSGOT Discussion

1:19 pm: Director Dorrington: Requested clarification on payments to the Conservation District.

Ms. Hartman: Explained that payments to the Conservation District will involve funds for the Conservation Leases themselves as well as administration fees to the Conservation District for their services.

1:23 pm: Chairman Freeman: Inquired about estimated timelines for closing the conservation leases.

Ms. Hartman: Explained that the hope is to close soon but there are some details that still need to be determined for each conservation lease.

#### Public Comment

No public comment was received.

#### Stakeholder Workshop Update – Program

1:24 pm: Ms. McFadden presented an update of the stakeholder workshop.

See [Stewardship Account: Focus Group Update](#)

#### MSGOT Discussion



1:28 pm: Chairman Freeman: Interested if there was any feedback from stakeholders during the initial workshop and if stakeholders will have other opportunities to provide comments.

Ms. Hartman: Explained that people who attended were mainly interested in learning more about that Program, but people can still provide written comments to the Program using the website homepage.

1:29 pm: Chairman Freeman: Inquired about the estimated timeline for the development of a focus group and the involvement of University of Montana (UM) Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) economists.

Ms. Hartman: Anticipated this to be a long-term process as the Program continues to collaborate with stakeholders and coordinates with the UM BBER economists.

Chairman Freeman: Emphasized the importance of continuing to maintain a collaborative approach with stakeholders during this process.

1:31 pm: Chairman Freeman: Asked board if they had any other questions.

Director Dorrington: Inquired if planting sagebrush is an approved method of mitigation.

Ms. Hartman: Explained that the Program would encourage planting sagebrush as a restoration project. The planting of sagebrush has the potential to provide habitat quality uplift.

#### Public Comment

No public comment was received.

#### **2023 Greater Sage Grouse Population Report – Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks**

1:33 pm: Ms. Harris presented an overview of the 2023 greater sage grouse population report.

See [2023 Greater Sage-grouse Population Report](#)

#### MSGOT Discussion

1:46 pm: Director Dorrington: Referenced Table 2 (and Table 1) and pointed out that there is a change in confirmed active leks and a notable decrease in birds. Asked if the leks are sustained, is it anticipated that sage-grouse would return.

Ms. Harris: Explained that the current confirmed active lek numbers when compared to the 2017-2019 timeframe have gone down a little but are comparable to the mid 2012 numbers. Further explained that it will be a challenge to predict next year's numbers but believes the decline in the 2023 survey counts is mostly due to drought/spring conditions.

1:47 pm: Director Dorrington: Noted the drop in the population shown in Table 1 and rephrased the question that if leks are maintained would the population come back or rise again.

Ms. Harris: Explained FWP would expect the population to come back and that it is common to have variation between number of males that attend a lek from year to year. Ms. Harris also noted that the number of leks FWP was able to survey over the last two years has decreased and was not necessarily reported in the tables. In 2021, FWP surveyed almost 1,000 leks compared to about 750 leks in the past two years. Agency staff having time to survey and survey conditions has impacted the number of surveys conducted within the past two years. The number of times FWP

visits a lek a year also influences being able to get a peak high male count and drives the population model.

1:48 pm: Chairman Freeman: Inquired if the methodology for surveying leks and estimating sage-grouse populations is comparable to other states across the population range for sage-grouse.

Ms. Harris: Explained that the protocol for lek surveys in Montana is very similar to but not exactly the same as other state's protocols. Montana's model was created through research and scientific literature. While some states monitor a subset of leks, Montana tries to hit every lek that can be accessed in the spring.

1:50 pm: Chairman Freeman: Inquired if Montana could use methodologies from other states to verify the accuracy of the methodologies used in Montana.

Ms. Harris: Explained that the United States Geological Survey (USGS) is coming out with a 'Targeted Annual Warning System' (TAWs) as a new data tool for monitoring the sage-grouse population health that attempts to standardize the data across and differing methodologies across the entire range of sage grouse.

#### Public Comment

1:52 pm: Mr. Hanson: Referenced Table 2 from presentation and inquired about the extirpated lek data between 2002 to 2014 versus from 2014 to present. Asked if Ms. Harris could explain why there is such an increase in extirpated leks between these timeframes.

Ms. Harris: Explained that a confirmed extirpated lek classification means those leks are likely the result of significant habitat changes but could not speak to exactly what happened between those timeframes.

1:53 pm: Mr. Hanson: Requested a follow up question. Mr. Hansen inquired if FWP has datasets or are measuring loss of suitable habitat on a large scale in Montana.

Ms. Harris: Explained that beyond the actual lek surveys themselves, FWP has some resources and partners who do investigate land conversions.

1:54 pm: Garrett Titus- Montana Wildlife Federation: Inquired if FWP has region-by-region sage-grouse population estimates and if Montana will close hunting by region.

Ms. Harris: Explained that FWP does not necessarily have region-by-region population estimates based on their model but that leks are considered during FWP's adaptive harvest management framework and are divided up into three separate harvest management zones.

#### Public Comment on Other Matters

1:56 pm: Chairman Freeman: Asked for public comment on any other matters.

No public comment was received.

1:57 pm: Ms. Hartman: Will send out doodle poll for the next MSGOT meeting date.

Chairman Freeman: Suggested MSGOT hold the next meeting within the first week of December. Chair Freeman encouraged MSGOT members to respond to the doodle poll with their availability for the last MSGOT meeting of 2023.

1:58 pm: **Chairman Freeman: Called for a motion to adjourn the November 20, 2023 MSGOT Meeting.**

**Director Dorrington motioned to adjourn the November 20, 2023 MSGOT Meeting.**

**Second: Administrator Jones**

**Voice vote conducted: voted unanimously to approve.**

**Motion Passed.**

**Meeting Adjourned at 1:58 pm.**

Chairman for this meeting:

/s/ x 

Michael Freeman, Governor's Natural Resource Policy Advisor