

Scoping Document

SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

Uinta National Forest, Heber Ranger District

AREA DESCRIPTION

Watershed:	Strawberry River
County:	Wasatch
Legal Description:	Township 4 South, Range 11 West
USGS Quad:	Strawberry Reservoir, NE
Proposed Treatment Area:	4 to 6 acres
Target NEPA Completion Date:	July 2004
Proposed Implementation Date:	Last half of July 2004

BACKGROUND

Greater sage-grouse populations have been declining, and petitions to list the species under the Endangered Species Act are currently being reviewed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There are 2 populations of greater sage-grouse on lands managed by the Uinta National Forest: one on the Vernon Unit and one in Strawberry Valley. The Uinta National Forest has been working closely with Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), Brigham Young University (BYU), and Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission (URMCC) to stabilize and increase the Strawberry Valley sage-grouse population.

Researchers from BYU have been studying the Strawberry population since 1998. BYU research has determined that predation by a large population of red foxes in Strawberry Valley is one of the factors negatively affecting the sage-grouse population.

During the spring mating season, sage-grouse gather at sites called leks where the males display and reproduction occurs. Lek sites are open, and sage-grouse continue to use the same lek sites for many generations. Sage-grouse are highly vulnerable to predation during the spring mating season, and much of the red fox predation on sage-grouse documented by BYU has occurred at the lek site during the mating season. Biologists from DWR and researchers from BYU have expressed concern that the heavy sagebrush cover surrounding the primary Strawberry sage-grouse lek site allows red foxes to hide and effectively prey on sage-grouse on the lek. They have recommended that the Forest Service thin sagebrush in the area immediately surrounding the primary lek site.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the proposed action is to improve Strawberry Valley sage-grouse habitat by reducing cover for predators in the area immediately surrounding the primary sage-grouse lek site. The need results from increasing sagebrush

canopy cover around the lek site and an increased risk of risk of red fox predation resulting from an increased density of red foxes in Strawberry Valley.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to mechanically thin sagebrush cover in an area surrounding the current primary Strawberry Valley sage-grouse lek site. The proposed treatment area is 4 to 6 acres. Sagebrush would be thinned using hand tools and motorized brush cutters. Sagebrush stems would be cut about 2 to 5 inches above the ground, so the proposed action would result in only minimal ground disturbance. Dead sagebrush plants would be piled and later burned during a period of low wildfire risk during the late fall.

LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN OBJECTIVES

The proposed project site is located within the Strawberry Reservoir Management Area. The management prescription for the site is 3.2 Watershed Emphasis, which emphasizes high quality soil productivity and watershed conditions. Livestock grazing and timber harvesting are not allowed within areas with this management prescription. The Visual Quality Objective for the site is "Partial Retention." Partial Retention implies that management activities remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape.

POTENTIAL ISSUES

Wildlife Habitat

The proposed action would result in a temporary reduction of 4 to 6 acres of sagebrush cover. Sagebrush plants would likely naturally begin growing back in the project area within the first couple years following treatment.

Water Quality, Fisheries, and Riparian Habitat

The proposed project site is located adjacent to the high-water line of Strawberry Reservoir. The site is dry and dominated by mountain big sagebrush and mixed grasses and forbs and is not located near any streams or wet meadows.

Weeds and TES Plants

Weeds are present along the perimeter of Strawberry Reservoir adjacent to the proposed project site. No Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive (TES) plant species are known to occur in or near the proposed project site. Only minimal ground disturbance would result from the proposed action because sagebrush plants would be cut above ground level using motorized brush cutters.

Recreation and Visuals

The proposed project site is not visible from any roads, trails, or developed recreation sites. The site would be visible from boats at one site on Strawberry Reservoir.

DECISION TO BE MADE

Through the environmental analysis process the Forest Service will decide what type of treatment, if any, will be implemented.

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM YOU

The Forest Service uses public input to aid in project design and the decision-making process. The Forest Service needs to know what the public thinks about the proposal and whether there are additional issues or alternatives that should be considered.

WHEN ARE YOUR COMMENTS NEEDED

Public comments can best be incorporated into project planning if submitted early in the process. Please submit comments by July 12, 2004.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If additional information is needed, contact Jeff Waters (Wildlife Biologist and Interdisciplinary Team Leader) at the address below, by phone at (435) 654-7227, or by e-mail at jwaters@fs.fed.us.

COMMENT SUBMISSION

Comments can be submitted in writing to:

Julie King, District Ranger
Heber Ranger Station
2460 South Highway 40
P.O. Box 190
Heber City, UT 84032

Or by email to <mailto:comments-intermtn-uinta-heber@fs.fed.us>.