

Wildlife Habitat Committee Newsletter

Dec 2007

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Committee Contacts

Chair

Ted Toombs
(303) 447-7210

[ttoombs@environmentaldefe-
nse.org](mailto:ttoombs@environmentaldefen-
se.org)

Chair-Elect

Steve Petersen
(801) 422-4885

steven.petersen@byu.edu

Sagebrush Ecological Site Description Forum Draws Large Crowd

Joel Brown

An overflow crowd participated in the first SRM issues forum in Park City UT, October 23-25. More than 275 attendees heard leaders in the fields of ecology, wildlife habitat and rangeland management discuss the use of Ecological Site Descriptions (ESDs) as management tools for improving decision making in sagebrush ecosystems. Following the presentations by a range of agency and academic scientists, people divided into groups representing geographic ranges of sage grouse populations to learn more about the mechanics of ESDs and discuss ways to improve their utility. It was clear from the outcomes of the workgroups that ESDs are an increasingly important tool to inform land management decisions, but their success will hinge on how different groups of professionals, representing a wide range of disciplines and expertise, contribute their knowledge and experience to

their development and implementation.

Several opening-day speakers provided some critical ecological knowledge of a rapidly changing sagebrush ecosystem. In addition to livestock grazing, sagebrush ecosystems are now being exploited for energy exploration, exurban development and recreational activities. In addition, a changing climate and invasive species are having a dramatic impact. Many of the important ecological processes that formed and maintain this unique ecosystem have been disrupted and the results are that many of the ecosystem services we have come to rely on sagebrush systems to provide are endangered.

Another set of speakers addressed specific concerns about sagebrush obligate wildlife. While the sage grouse is the species of most interest right now, there are many others that will struggle to maintain healthy

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Notes From The Chair

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populations as pressures grow. Key elements of local, landscape and regional ecosystem behavior and important habitat characteristics were described and put into a management context.

Armed with the most topical information available, as well as their own expertise, the practicing resource professionals were asked to examine the existing dogma of ESDs and come up with reasonable recommendations for improving not only individual ESDs, but the ESD system as well. Rarely has there been such a focus of energy and passion on a technical issue. Individuals and groups came up with a wide variety of recommendations that ran the gamut from “include structural vegetation measurements” to “increase national level collaboration and leadership” and everything in between.

The final half-day was devoted to a field trip with stunningly good weather to

see an active sage grouse lek site. The field trip offered the opportunity for researchers and practicing habitat managers and advisors to look at a real landscape and discuss the potential, and the limitations, for ESDs in improving sagebrush management decisions.

This meeting demonstrated that there is a need and an eager audience for gatherings (workshops, conferences, symposia) based on rapidly changing issues of interest to rangeland managers. The willingness of a wide variety of individuals and professional groups to work together to organize a meeting like this clearly shows that we can improve SRMs image and role as the professional society for rangeland management.

*Information about the meeting, including speaker presentations and workgroup outcomes, can be found on the SRM website

Patch Burn Grazing Working Group

Sherry Leis (Grassland Botanist)

Who belongs to the working group?

Professionals and producers in at least seven states who are interested in learning more about patch burn grazing and other ways to increase heterogeneity in grasslands have joined the Working Group. Members belong to universities, state and federal agencies, and private organizations such as The Nature Conservancy and Environmental Defense. The group has a list serve hosted by

Kansas State University and plans an annual field meeting to share information. The next field meeting was held in Nevada, Missouri September 27-28th, 2007.

At the first meeting of the Working Group in early 2005, a mission and set of objectives were decided upon. Generally speaking, it was hoped that formation of the group would facilitate sharing of information and data as well as to enhance indi-

Patch Burn Grazing Working Group

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vidual research programs by avoiding redundancy and answering questions of importance to other members of the group. Another important function of belonging to the Working Group was to share information about grant opportunities or other funding and labor resources needed to get work done.

The Working Group agreed patch burn grazing is an important tool because it can enhance ecological heterogeneity in grasslands while maintaining economic opportunities. Furthermore, research programs should focus on questions that lead to a better understanding of the ecological processes with an eye on economic constraints. The following subheadings outline priority topics the Working Group determined would best enhance our understanding of the potential of management tools for increasing heterogeneity.

Why study patch burn grazing (PBG)?

- Method is designed to mimic historical disturbance patterns of fire and large grazers.
- Improve habitat heterogeneity for wildlife, especially grassland birds.
- Increase or maintain plant and animal diversity on a landscape scale.
- Investigate impacts on livestock production (animal health and economics).

Working Group objectives:

- Provide intellectual support for research on heterogeneity management tools. Current emphasis is on Patch Burn Grazing.

- Pool resources to obtain funding and share information on resources.
- Potentially fund, train, and manage a temporary labor crew to do vegetation and wildlife monitoring through the region.
- Disseminate information to extension and field personnel.

Priority Patch Burn Graze Research questions

1. Document and compare monetary inputs and profits of using PBG as compared to other systems. (Economics are critical for exporting patch burn to private lands).
2. What happens to conservative plants using PBG?
3. Response of birds, insects, and structure to PBG.
4. How does insect biomass and diversity change through a PBG cycle and as compared to other management systems?
5. Can PBG improve structure for introduced grass systems ie fescue, brome, and CRP?
6. How would PBG affect production of over-seeded prairies?
7. Does seedling recruitment differ under PBG as compared to other systems?
8. How can PBG affect management of sericea and invasive species (especially woodies)?
9. What are the long term impacts of using PBG? Define recovery and recovery rates.
10. Is there a functional difference between PGB and patch haying?
11. Define stocking rate (develop a rule of thumb for stocking PBG systems).

Patch Burn Grazing Working Group

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12. Effect of PBG on cool season species, for example, percent change of dominance of exotic or native cool season species.

Many of these questions are currently under investigation, but others remain to be addressed. A proposal has been submitted for the 2008 SRM meeting in Louisville to discuss patch burn grazing and other methods of managing for heterogeneity.

BioPioneering: New frontiers for implementing the Texas Wildlife Action Plan on private lands.

Matt Wagner, Program Director for Wildlife Diversity, Texas Parks and Wildlife

With 10 distinct ecological areas and over 150,000,000 acres of rural lands, Texas is second only to California in total biodiversity. Since about 95 percent of the state is privately owned, public/private partnerships and economic incentives are essential in managing wildlife, including a status assessment of nongame species and habitats in the state. Completed in 2005, the State Wildlife Action Plan identifies priority species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates and plants and their habitats that warrant conservation attention. Although many of these resources are known or thought to be in decline, the true status is unknown because of restricted access to private lands to conduct surveys. The last statewide assessment was conducted by Vernon Bailey in 1905. TPWD biologists are committed to assisting landowners in voluntary planning for wildlife on their properties. With over 5,500 landowners and nearly 20 million acres under wildlife management plans, demand for this technical assistance is accelerating at an ever increasing rate.

TPWD offers an array of incentive programs for landowners to engage in wildlife habitat management including the Managed Lands Deer Permit Program and the Landowner Incentive Program for rare species. Both of these programs are habitat based and reflect not only the diversity of needs for game and nongame species, but the diversity of the landowners themselves. For example, biologists on the Shortgrass Prairies of the High Plains are working closely with landowners to conduct Pronghorn surveys in hopes of answering questions about their long term decline. At the same time, willing landowners are offering their ranches as re-introduction sites for Black-tailed prairie dogs threatened with urban expansion on other parts of their range. In the Hill Country, excessive White-tailed deer populations require control using longer hunting seasons and higher bag limits offered by the Managed Lands Deer Permit Program under voluntary wildlife management plans written for cooperating landowners. These same plans may also include information on how to protect an important bat cave or spring, identify endan-

BioPioneering: New frontiers for implementing the Texas Wildlife Action Plan on private lands.

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gered cactus, and offer eco-tours. In the mixed woodlands of East Texas, Bobwhite quail are rapidly becoming the state's next endangered species. Concerned landowners are forming cooperatives to restore native grasslands and savannahs to recover this popular gamebird. This shift in land use will ultimately provide habitat for numerous other species of concern such as Henslow's and Bachman's sparrows.

Just as important as working with private landowners is engaging an urban public far removed from the rural landscape. Numerous hands-on activities for "citizen science" are offered through the

Wildlife Diversity Program including Nature Trackers, Master Naturalists, the Texas Wildscapes Program, and others.

This combination of technical assistance to private landowners and urban outreach will help us recover those species of concern as identified in the Texas Wildlife Action Plan.

All 50 states now have wildlife action plans, which are tied to a State Wildlife Grants designed to build partnerships with other conservation organizations. To get involved in any of the programs mentioned, contact us at www.tpwd.state.tx.us or call (800) 792-1112.

SRM - Wildlife Habitat Committee Meeting Louisville, Kentucky 2008

Please come join us at the next wildlife habitat committee meeting in Louisville, Kentucky.

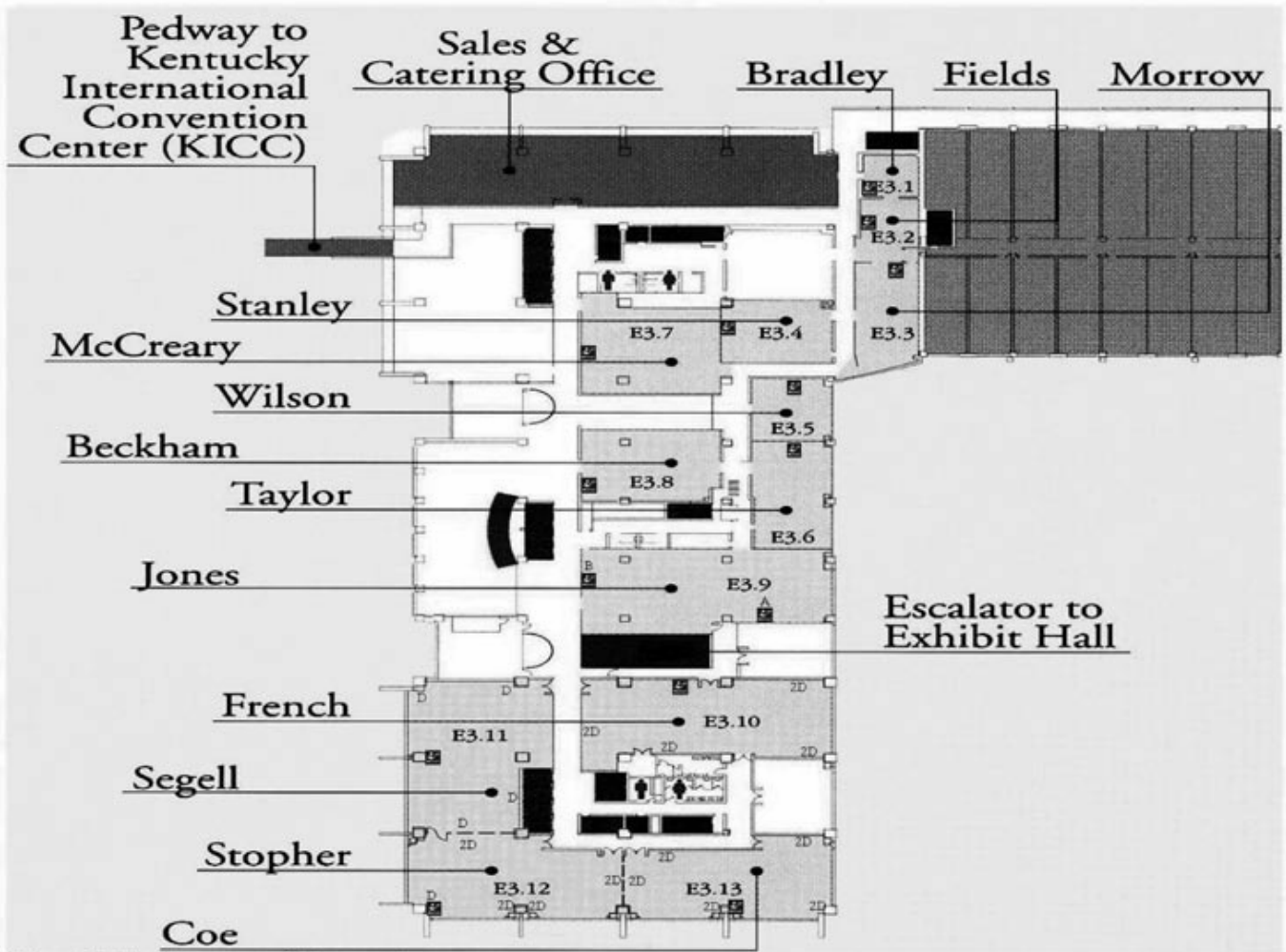
Date: Sunday, January 27th, 2008

Time: 1-5pm

Location: Segell room, Galt House Hotel and Suites

Hope to see you there.

East Tower, 3rd Floor



Ports are labeled with room name if only one port
If additional ports are in the room the label is room name followed by a unique identifier

Comments From The Editor

If you have information that you would like posted or an article that you would like to share with the Wildlife Habitat Committee, consider this newsletter an excellent forum for exchanging ideas and experience. The next issue will come out next year (May). Please send information by e-mail to:

Steven_Petersen@byu.edu

You can also find this and every past newsletter on this site as well

(http://www.rangelands.org/wildlifehabitat/whc_newsletters.shtml)

Happy Holidays

