

North American Grouse Partnership (NAGP) & Lakes States Prairie Grouse Collaboration

Nov. 12, 2014 Conference Call Notes

PURPOSE: Discuss improving collaboration between the NAGP and local MN/WI/MI prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse groups and conservationists.

ATTENDEES:

NAGP – Steve Riley (President & CEO), Terry Riley (Director of Conservation Policy)

Minnesota – Charlotte Roy (DNR Grouse Project Leader), Ted Dick (DNR Forest Game Bird Coordinator), Lindsey Shartell (DNR Forest Habitat Assessment Biologist), Jake Granfors (PF Wildlife Biologist), Brian Winter (MPCS President & TNC), Dan Svedarsky (MPCS & Univ. of MN Crookston - Director - Center for Sustainability), Jodie Provost (DNR Private Land Habitat Coordinator)

Wisconsin - Bob Hanson (DNR Northwest Sands Biologist), Tom Doolittle (USFS Wildlife Biologist), Dave Evenson (WSGS President), Ed Frank (WSGS Board Member), Dan Eklund (USFS Wildlife Biologist)

Michigan – None

AGENDA:

Background – Due to concern about the decline of sharp-tailed grouse in e-c MN and WI, Jodie and others reached out to the NAGP. A conf. call in July with Steve, Terry and Jodie ensued. Key ideas from that discussion included: 1. more and better communication and coordination between the local/regional and the NAGP, 2. NAGP can help tell local/regional stories, 3. MN needs a long term, strategic, brushland conservation plan, and 4. keep securing funding to implement strategies that meet goals. This conf. call was then held to build the group of natural resource professionals interested in greater Midwest prairie grouse conservation collaboration and gather their input.

Where Are We At? –

NAGP – Steve explained that the NAGP works to protect grouse and their habitats in NA. They are a small, non-profit, 501c3 organization that wants to grow. They engage primarily in state and federal policy, and have a seat on North American Wildlife Conservation Partners (with PF, DU, NWTF, MDA, etc.). They collaborate with others and sign-on joint letters. NAGP hasn't gotten into on-the-ground-work. They had paid executive director, but the position is now vacant and funds are lacking to refill it. Thus, much collaboration ground work has languished. Steve and Terry are trying to re-connect, serve more regional groups and communicate more. They are both former SD and IA upland game bird ecologists and have federal and state agency backgrounds.

Dan felt the NAGP magazine was a first class form of outreach and education. It was costly and time consuming to produce, however, so it was suspended. Steve and Terry would like produce it again. A less elaborate e-version does exist. To receive the e-newsletter, simply join the NAGP or sign up for it on their website.

NAPG is not exerting effort on spruce grouse or ptarmigan due to less urgency compared to lesser prairie chickens and sage grouse. A gentlemen's agreement exists with Ruffed Grouse Society that they will lead the ruffed grouse conservation effort.

Dan wondered if much exists in the biofuels/energy arena for grouse welfare. Steve said they are monitoring it and have more concerns than hope for biofuels as value to wildlife. Most approaches are monotypes and thus have inadequate diversity.

MN Prairie Chicken Society (MPCS) – Brian explained that MPCS is also a small, non-profit organization with no paid staff. It began in 1974. Dan was a driving force. Grants, such as Outdoor Heritage funds, have been secured for grassland enhancement and protection. They are pushing for an improved survey. The newsletter is produced about twice/year. About 200 members belong. The website is the primary form of communication. Viewing blinds are coordinated in northwest MN. An annual meeting is held each April.

MN Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (MSGS) – Jodie serves as the DNR liaison to MSGS. They are also a small, non-profit organization with no paid staff. MSGS began in 1986. Grants, such as Outdoor Heritage funds, have been secured for brushland enhancement and protection, with great thanks to Pheasants Forever, the fiscal agent. A magazine, produced twice/year, and a website are their primary communication avenues. Up to 300 members have been on board, but it is dropping to about 100. Board and member recruitment and greater outreach are needed. A brush cut, habitat project is held each March. A bi-annual meeting is held in April. It has been held jointly with MPCS and WSGS on occasion. They will again meet jointly with MPCS on April 17-18, 2015.

MN DNR – Charlotte explained the landscape genetics research she has initiated for prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse, and effort to tie DNR brushland management to presence of sharptail. She was successful in getting FSA's ok to use CRP data. Lindsey has finished the second of three years of study on sharptail nesting, brooding rearing habitat and survival in east central MN. Implementation of the MN Prairie Plan will benefit prairie chickens and sharptail.

WI Sharp-tailed Grouse Society (WSGS) – Dave explained that WSGS stole the idea from MSGS. They began about 1990. Their major remaining population is in northwest WI. Creating habitat connectivity there is a focus. A bit less than 200 members belong. They are successful in getting small grants each year (~\$5000) and partner on larger grants for acquisition. Four to five "friends" organizations in the Northwest Sands area have recently formed a "friends of the friends" group to promote connectivity. They also have a website and annual meetings each April.

WI DNR & USFS – Tom shared that habitat management is intensive. They are reaching out beyond state borders. Education and communication is crucial. In January he has a presentation

at the Great Lakes Visitor Center near Ashland to rally groups and the community so there is representation across the Northwest Sands. How long can the small, remnant sharptail populations hang on? He looks forward to collaborating! Ed and Bob spoke of the “rolling barrens” idea and shifting the mindset of foresters to see forests as dynamic, working landscapes that can provide barrens habitat over time, and help implement the Northwest Sands Plan. A real possibility exists for Great Lakes Basin funds to be directed at sharptail management on USFS and private lands.

Michigan – Ed was impressed by MI’s 2006 plan. Will it be updated? Who should he contact regarding Hiawatha National Forest management? Tom noted a large burn over area in MI that is a barren manager’s dream – a real opportunity to work with MI DNR. We need to share information and get MI on board!

Our Vision – Sustainable populations of prairie grouse populations through implementation of plans, including a Lakes States, Prairie Grouse Conservation Plan?

Terry noted desire to coordinate across the greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse states in the Upper Midwest to develop a strategic land management plan that puts us a head of the game and sustains our populations through habitat enhancement, restoration and protection. We do not want what has happened with the lesser prairie chicken or sage grouse. We’d like to keep authority to manage our prairie grouse at the state level. In the mid-1990s, a petition was done to federally list the lesser. It took about 20 years for five states to develop a coordinated plan. The lesser is now listed as threatened.

Steve explained we can use the 2008 Grassland Conservation Plan for Prairie Grouse where applicable. It includes Bird Conservation Regions 11, 22 and 23 which encompass portions of western and southern MN and southern WI and MI. It thus includes much of the MN and WI prairie chicken ranges, but not sharptail populations in northeast/east-central MN, northwest WI and northeast MI of forest/brushland/barrens regions.

Present and future players in conservation of our prairie grouse need to be involved. We should capitalize on Farm Bill conservation programs such as EQIP where our sharptail and prairie chickens occur on private land. NRCS is involved with the lesser prairie chicken and sage grouse conservation effort on private lands through EQIP and boots on the ground. The lesser occurs primarily on private land, thus FSA and NRCS have much influence on success of their conservation. It creates challenges and opportunities. Terry or Steve meets with FSA soon to discuss encouragement of heterogeneity on private lands for nest and brood rearing habitat. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA) has a committee addressing it.

Some Midwest AFWA states presented the idea of a multi-state plan at the last AFWA and MAFWA gatherings. The next step is a letter to each state agency’s director. Terry sent it to the Wildlife Chiefs. Each state will have a rep on the multi-state group. Information on this effort could be shared at the joint MPCS/MSG meeting next April. A range-wide plan built by state partners/agencies and endorsed by them is desired. Grants can help implement the plan at the local, state level. States have information ready to feed into the plan. We need to coalesce resources and plans to support requests for fund, staff and implementation. The plan can have

population goals. State Wildlife Action Plans should be considered. It should likely be subspecies--specific for sharptails.

Action Items/Ideas

- 1. Develop this partnership/collaboration by increasing communication and information sharing-**
 - Steve - Set up an e-mail group and a web page for this group – Done
 - All – Use the e-mail group and web page!
- 2. Implement existing plans** such as MN Prairie Plan, WI Northwest Sands Plan, State Wildlife Action Plans and 2008 Grassland Conservation Plan for Prairie Grouse.
- 3. Increase outreach/education to public and partners** – NAGP can help us tell our stories.
 - All - Send articles for fall NAGP newsletter to editor@grousepartners.org ASAP.
- 4. Affect policy** – NAGP can weigh in on policy for us, such as influencing USDA, Congress, or state legislatures.
 - Influence and capitalize on the Farm Bill
- 5. Develop and implement a multi-state strategic land management plan to sustain our prairie grouse populations** across the Lakes States.
 - Secure support from MN/WI/MI DNR agency heads.
 - Discuss at 2015 MAFWA meeting.
 - Begin pulling elements of the plan together.
- 6. Secure funds for implementation of plans** - NAGP can send letters of support to grantees and partner on proposals.
 - Prepare to collaborate on a NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program proposal?
- 7. Develop fundraising ideas** – for habitat work, matching funds, ...
- 8. Get MI involved**
 - Jodie – Share notes with them. See if they want on e-mail group. - Done
- 9. Send draft meeting notes and action items out**
 - Jodie – Done