

***GUNNISON BASIN  
HABITAT PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM  
COMMITTEE***

***HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN  
2010-2014***



Approved, Colorado Wildlife Commission, March 11, 2010.  
This plan is valid for 10 years from the approval date.

# ***GUNNISON BASIN HABITAT MANAGEMENT PLAN***

**GUNNISON BASIN HPP AREA MAP ..... 3**

**GUNNISON BASIN HPP COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP ..... 4**

**COMMITTEE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES ..... 4**

**INTRODUCTION.....5**

**GBHPP COMMITTEE AREA DESCRIPTION..... 6**

    A.    COMMITTEE AREA SIZE..... 6

    B.    GENERAL HABITAT TYPES..... **ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.**

    C.    LAND OWNERSHIP ..... **ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.**

**HABITAT EVALUATION ..... 9**

**GUNNISON BASIN RESOURCE CONFLICT AREAS.....10**

**PROJECT TYPES AND PRIORITIES.....12**

**BUDGET GUIDELINES.....13**

**PROJECT MONITORING.....13**

**WILDLIFE POPULATION SUMMARIES ..... 13**

    A.    MULE DEER ..... 14

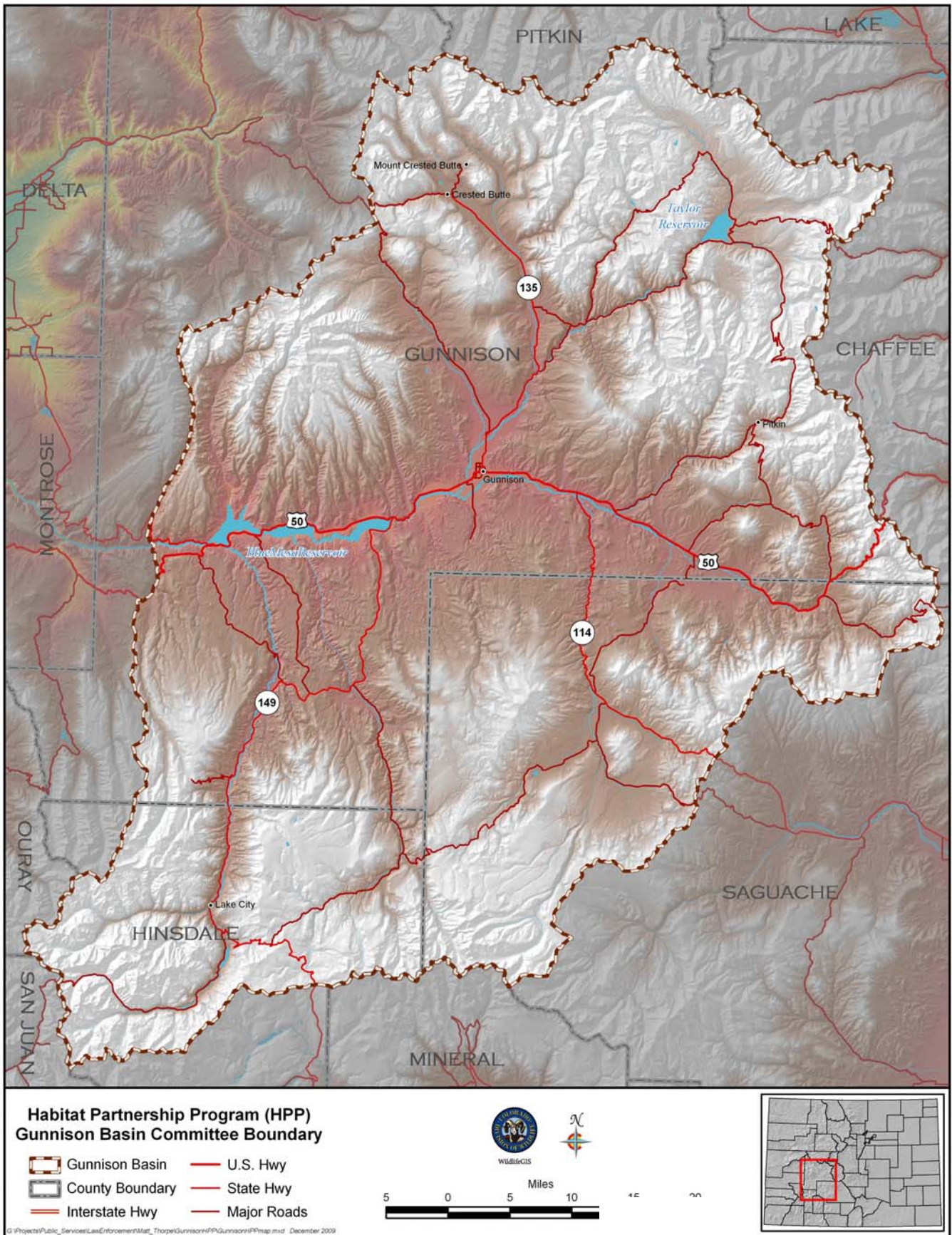
    B.    ROCKY MOUNTAIN ELK ..... 14

    C.    AMERICAN PRONGHORN ..... 15

    D.    MOOSE.....15

    E.    GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE.....15

**APPENDIX A- WRIS MAPS.....16**



## Committee Membership

The Gunnison Basin HPP committee has the following committee members: three members representing local livestock growers, one member representing the sportsmen of Colorado, one member representing the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), one member representing the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and one member representing the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW).

The following is a list of the of the current Gunnison Basin Habitat Partnership Program Committee members:

Stan Irby (1991) – Livestock Growers Representative  
Doug Washburn (2001) – Livestock Growers Representative  
Steve Guerrieri (1998) - Livestock Growers Representative  
Navid Navidi (2001) – Sportsmen’s Representative  
Mark Hatcher (1991) – Unites States Forest Service Representative  
Russell Japuntich (2008) – Unites States Bureau of Land Management Representative  
Matt Thorpe (2004) - Colorado Division of Wildlife Representative

The terms of service in this committee are non-expiring and determined by the groups that each member represents. Elections to serve on this committee are based on recommendations made to the existing committee, by the livestock growers association, sportsmen’s group(s) or agencies and subsequent approval of those nominations by the Director of the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the Wildlife Commission.

## Committee Goals

The committee has five main purposes, as follows:

1. To reduce conflicts between wildlife and agricultural producers.
2. To encourage an atmosphere of cooperation among wildlife and habitat managers of public and private lands, and users of the wildlife resources.
3. To create/update, implement and maintain a Habitat Management Plan for wildlife included in the local area, i.e., Game Management Units 54, 55, 551, 66 and 67.
4. To prioritize public and private rangeland, habitat and/or distribution management problems, recommend solutions and commit funds for implementation.
5. To ensure that private land habitat and management issues are considered in big game herd management (Data Analysis Unit) plans.

## Introduction

By the early 1990's Colorado had experienced the effects of burgeoning elk populations, declines in habitat resources and game damage conflicts between wildlife and agricultural producers. The Colorado Division of Wildlife's (DOW) long standing Game Damage Program began showing its limitations in dealing with these conflicts due to its re-active nature. A new program, the Habitat Partnership Program (HPP), was developed. This new program would compliment the existing Game Damage Program. The idea was that partnerships between agricultural producers, sportsmen, land management agencies and the Colorado Division of Wildlife could devise strategies for addressing these conflicts in a *pro-active* fashion, reducing the need to rely solely on damage payments to alleviate conflicts. Dollars generated by hunting license sales within the partnership committee area were to be used to implement these strategies.

The Gunnison Basin Habitat Partnership Program Committee (GBHPPC) was created and committee representatives appointed on November 14, 1991, by Perry Olson, the Director of the Colorado Division of Wildlife at that time. The charge of this committee was to address fence and forage conflicts between the big game and livestock interests by devising proactive management strategies that could be implemented within the Gunnison Basin.

The GBHPPC worked hard over many months to develop their strategies. The committee identified a variety of conflicts, ranging from the traditional damage to fences, haystacks, and private pastures during the winter/spring periods, to conflicting overlap of grazing areas by big game and livestock during all seasons. The timing of the hunting seasons, other recreational uses, limited access to some public property and the stockpiling of virtually un hunted big game on private land refuges have complicated the management of all of these conflicts.

The GBHPPC decided in order to build confidence in the program; the recommended solutions should be grouped into short and long term objectives. It was felt that by tackling immediate problems, such as fence repairs, stack-yard erections, fertilization projects, etc., the persons most affected by big game conflicts could see program results very quickly. The livestock growers in the Gunnison Valley had long maintained that a major credibility gap existed between the DOW, other resource agencies, and the private agriculturist. Implementing this strategy to build confidence in the program was a success. Over time, these initial successes have increased the livestock grower's willingness to work with the committee and increased the level of credibility between all those involved.

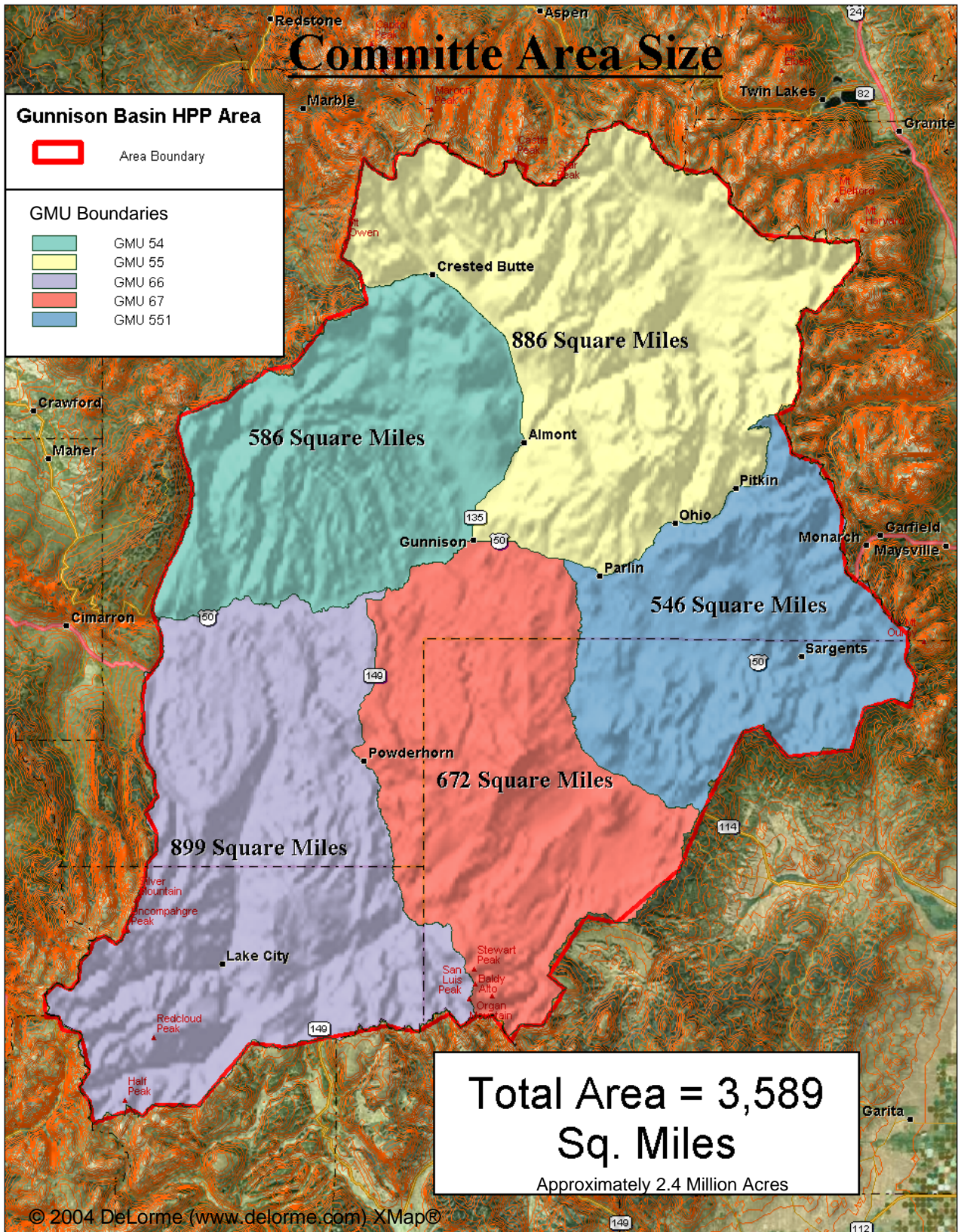
Some other examples of the work that this committee has funded include, but are not limited to: an elk survival study to determine yearly survival rates in a high mountain basin; fence construction to protect sensitive habitats or improve grazing management; an Ecological Classification of the habitat types that occur in the Gunnison Basin; habitat inventories based on that classification on Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, National Park Service, State and private properties; and rangeland enhancement treatments (mechanical and prescribed fire).

Over time, many of the short-term conflicts have been addressed and the committee has begun to focus on long-term solutions to the remaining conflicts. Many issues remain and the complexity of these conflicts offer challenges for the GBHPPC to overcome.

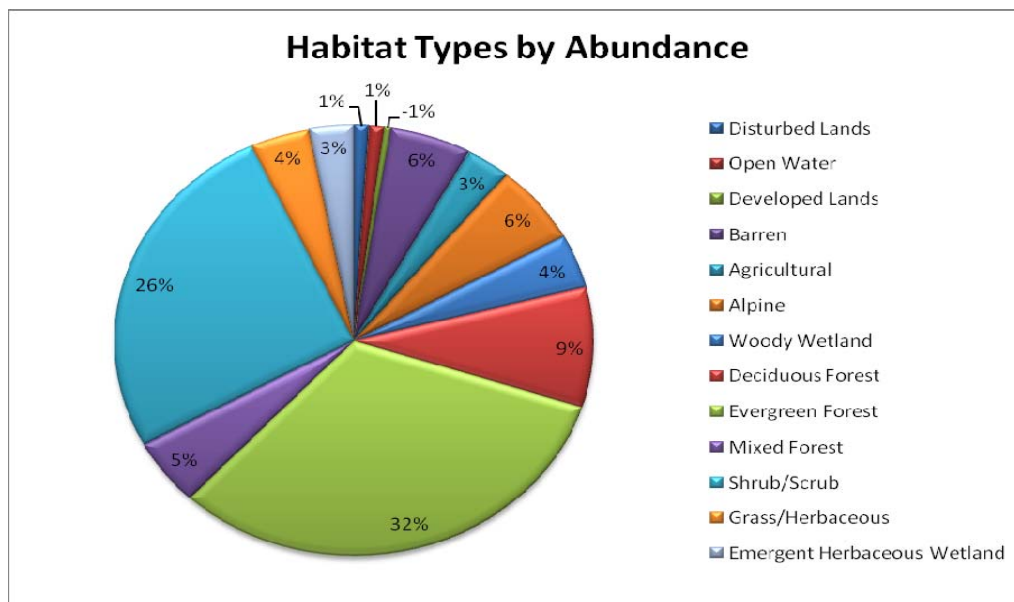
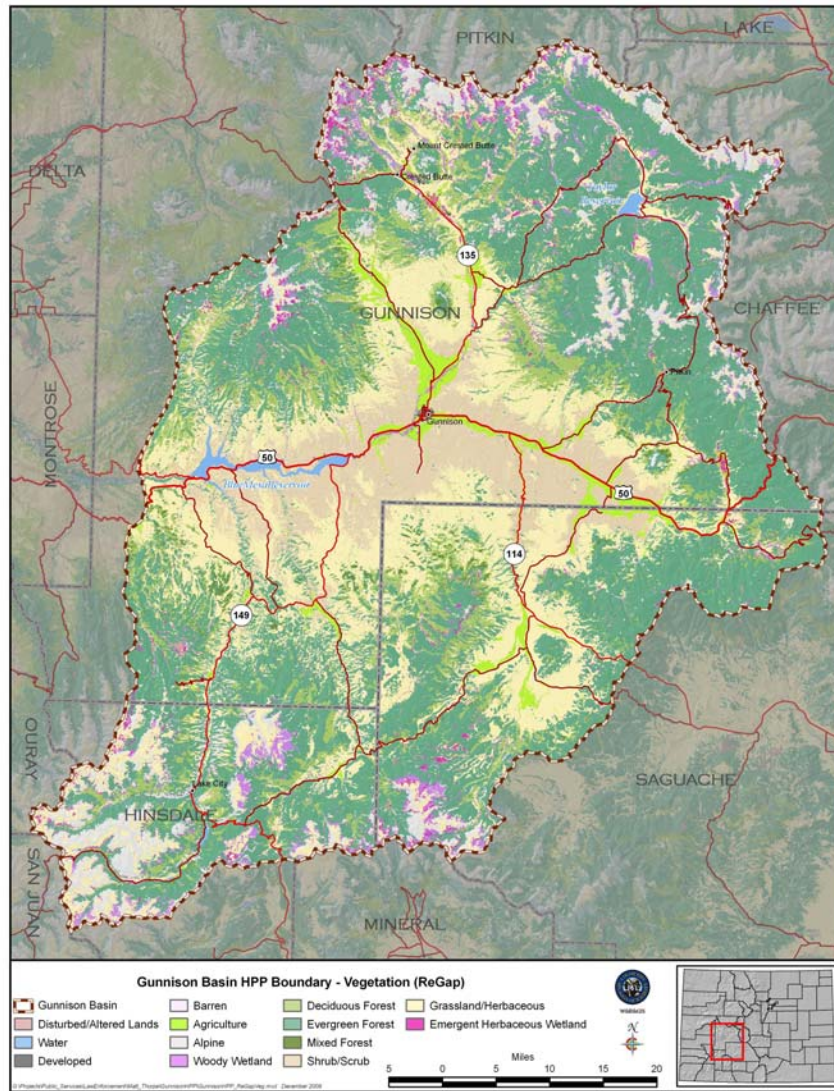
This HMP is the document that this committee will utilize to direct funding to management strategies that deal with conflicts identified in 1991 that remain today, and new conflicts that have arisen and will continue to arise due to the ever changing social, biological and economic environments that exist in the Gunnison Basin. All issues not specifically addressed in this HMP, will be handled according to the HPP Guidelines and/or Colorado Revised Statutes.

# HPP Committee Area Description

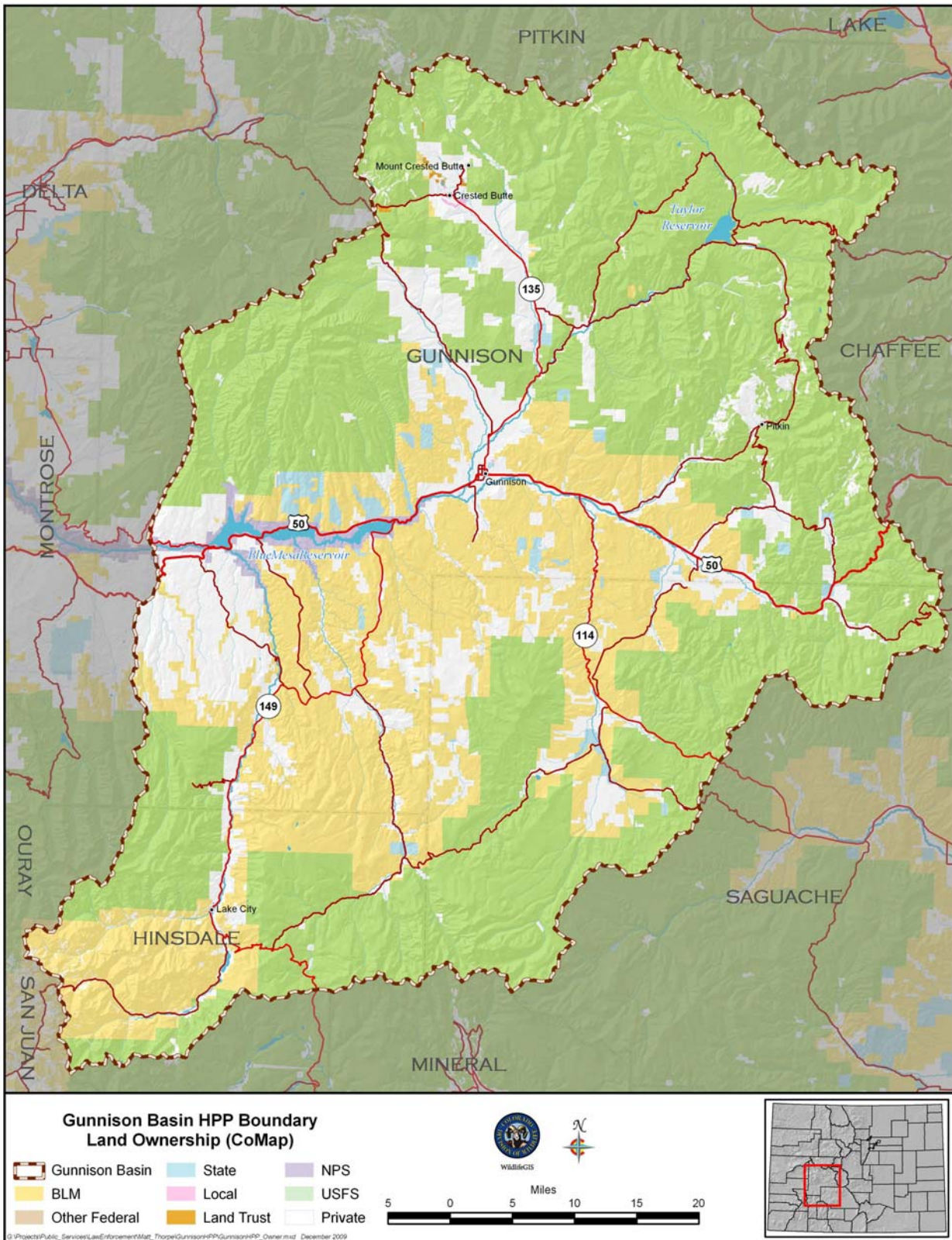
## A. Committee Area Size



## B. General Habitat Types



## C. Land Ownership



The Gunnison Basin contains about 2.4 million acres, of which about 1,280,000 acres (51%) are National Forest, about 585,000 acres (24%) are public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, about 40,000 acres (2%) are in the National Park System, and 160,000 acres (8%) are state, tribal, and municipal lands. Private lands constitute about 300,000 acres (15%) of the land.



## HABITAT EVALUATION

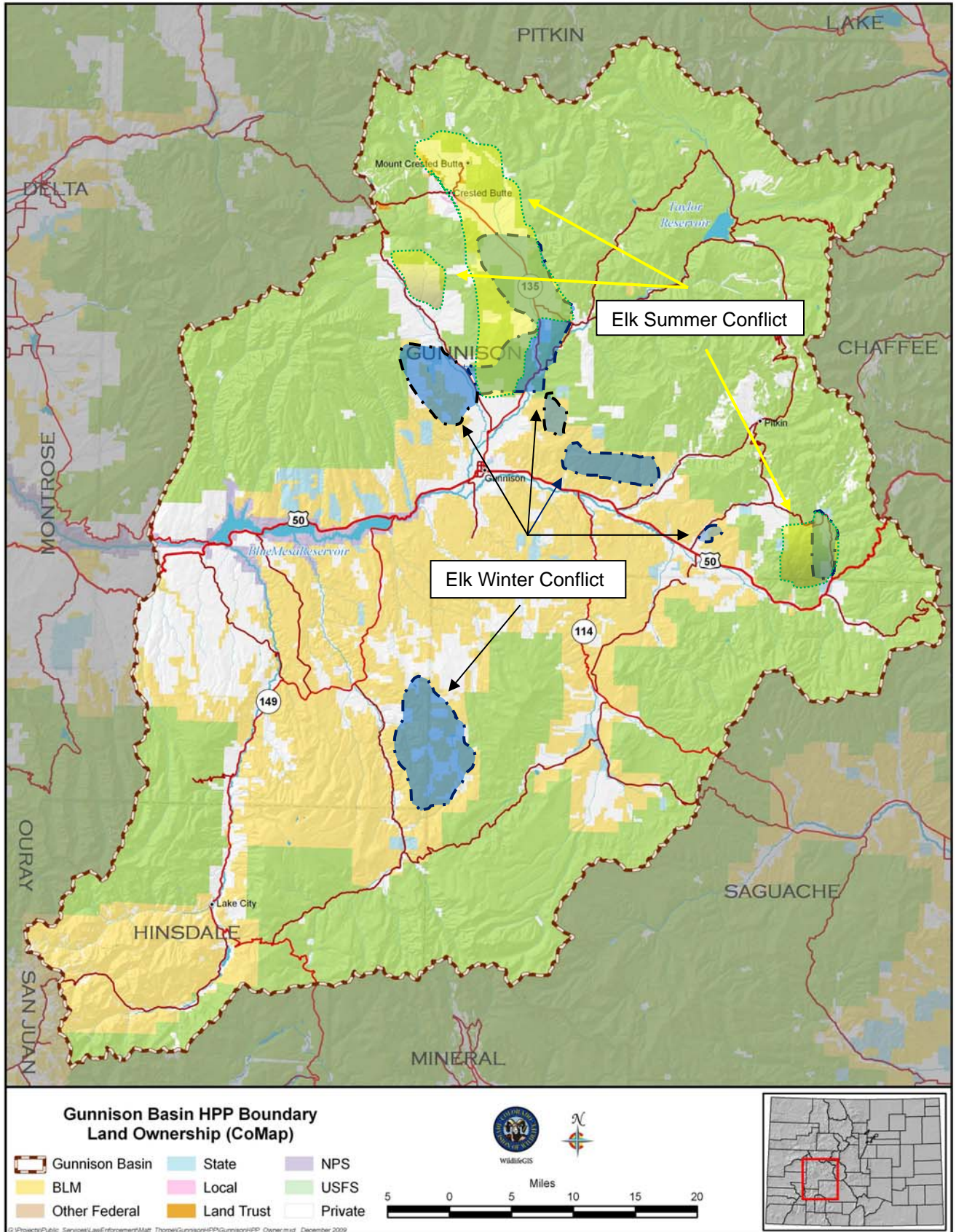
At the completion of the ecological classification, two publications were produced, *ECOLOGICAL TYPES OF THE UPPER GUNNISON BASIN* and *FIELD GUIDE TO ECOLOGICAL TYPES OF THE UPPER GUNNISON BASIN*. One of the goals of the classification and the ensuing habitat inventory was to make the information that had been derived by these two efforts usable to the GBHPPC and the participating agencies. Due to volume of data that had already been gathered, coupled with the new data gathering efforts and lack of technology, the ability to put the data directly to use was limited. With the advances and proliferation in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) units, the original ideas put forth for the use of the classification in management decisions are now becoming reality.

In 2002, a renewed effort to come up with a system to input, store and distribute data among the agencies was begun. Cooperative efforts between a group of employees from the US Forest Service, US Bureau of Land Management, US National Park Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife and the GBHPPC have resulted in a Habitat Information Database (MICROSOFT ACCESS).

The agencies with land management responsibility mentioned above have adopted the ecological classifications into their data collection efforts. All inventory of habitat is based on this classification. The data is either entered into the database directly in the field using mobile data collection units or at a later date using the paper forms on which data was collected in the field. Polygon data that is used in the GIS computer software is delineated using aerial photos and then scanned into the computer. Habitat records in the database can then be linked to the polygon data. This results in the ability to visualize one or multiple layers of data on a map. A shared server will be dedicated to house the data layers and database so that all agencies can access and utilize the shared data. Cooperative agreements will need to be signed to make this a reality and all the agencies involved have declared their desire to be involved with these efforts.

Rather than a static document, the capabilities of the GIS programs and ACCESS database will serve as the basis for the Habitat Evaluation that will be used by the GBHPPC. The ability to view, manipulate and analyze habitat data in conjunction with wildlife use data and conflict area data will provide the GBHPPC committee with the information that it needs to address conflicts in the Gunnison Basin. Other habitat evaluation tools may be used as they become available at the discretion of the GBHPPC.

# GUNNISON BASIN RESOURCE CONFLICT AREAS



PITKIN

LAKE

DELTA

Mount Crested Butte

Crested Butte

Taylor Reservoir

135

GUNNISON

Elk Summer Conflict

CHAFFEE

Pitkin

Blue Mesa Reservoir

50

Gunnison

Elk Winter Conflict

50

114

149

MONTROSE

OURAY

Lake City

HINSDALE

SAGUACHE

MINERAL

## Big Game Conflicts:

Conflict areas are public or private lands where concentrations of big game animals cause a problem with the management of those lands. The impacts can be to forage, growing crops, harvest aftermath, fences, and/or general use on a property. Although some very localized issues have occurred with mule deer in the past, they have not been an issue in the last five years. The vast majority of conflicts in the Gunnison Basin HPP Committee area involves elk and may be due to elk numbers or because of animal distribution.

### Winter Conflict Areas:

These are places where elk move during the winter months and cause conflicts. Depending on the severity of the winter, problems can include: damage to fences, elk eating with livestock in feed lines, and destruction of stacked hay. Conflict areas on public lands may result in degradation of range grasses, forbs, shrubs, and aspen communities.

Some of the winter conflict areas identified by the Committee include:

- Lost Canyon/Cabin Creek/North Parlin area of GMU 55
- Sargents and Tomichi Dome area of GMU 551
- Powderhorn area of GMUs 66 and 67
- Ohio Creek/Flattop area of GMU 54

### Summer Conflict Areas:

These are areas affected by the movement and distribution of elk during the summer months and can affect both public and private lands. Most of the conflicts on public lands are associated with elk herds that compete directly with cattle for forage. There are also concerns that elk that have learned to follow cattle herds throughout the summer and graze the re-growth that occurs after cattle have left an allotment. Some operators have also experienced elk damage to growing hay.

Another aspect of the summer conflict involves recreation-related dispersal of elk. Long-time operators in the area have witnessed dramatic differences in the places and ways that elk utilize the available public lands, particularly in the Crested Butte area. Both motorized and non-motorized recreation have caused elk to avoid some of their traditional summer ranges and increased utilization on remaining ranges. In other instances, the amount of human disturbance has brought elk into conflict on private lands in the area.

Summer conflict areas identified by the Committee include:

- Crested Butte/Round Mountain area of GMU 55
- Tomichi Dome/Sargents area of GMU 551
- Carbon Peak/Flattop Mountain area of GMU 54



## BUDGET GUIDELINES:

The base-operating budget for the State HPP program is based on 5% of total annual revenues for big game license sales in the HPP areas. The Statewide HPP Council allocates funding to the individual HPP committees. The Gunnison Basin HPP budget was developed to best meet the goals and objectives outlined earlier in the plan, while maintaining the flexibility to deal with emergencies and take advantage of opportunities.

The statewide HPP financial system allows local HPP committees to carry specific project dollars over from year to year if the project is ongoing or the funds have been committed. This allows us to better address long-term management and larger, more complicated projects as well as giving us the flexibility to more efficiently prioritize our projects.

Additional funds are also available through the Statewide HPP Council and the HPP Coordinator for special projects or unforeseen opportunities outside of the capacity of the local committees. These dollars supplement our existing budget and allow us to take on special projects from time to time.

The Gunnison Basin HPP Committee has developed a budget allocation in line with our vision, which allows for short-term strategies to deal with immediate fence and forage conflicts caused by big game, but concentrates on adaptive, long-term management strategies leading to the establishment of healthy and sustainable rangelands. Our budget for the five-year period has been broken down as follows:

### BASE BUDGET ALLOCATION:

Habitat Manipulation	55%
Fencing & Game Damage	20%
Information & Education	5%
Administration & NEPA Related Activities	5%
Conservation Easements	10%
Research	5%

TOTAL ALLOCATION: 100%

It is important to acknowledge that the budget allocation is based on past projects, future projects that are likely to be proposed as well as committee emphasis in funding certain project types. While these are desired and/or likely allocations, the committee retains the ability to shift funds as needed between categories as projects and opportunities arise or as situations dictate.

## PROJECT MONITORING:

Monitoring of projects is critical in order to determine if a project was successful in reducing a wildlife conflict. Monitoring for all projects will occur as described in detail in the "Exhibit A" for each individual project. Generally, the GBHPPC will use photo points, line transects, pellet plots, and completed landowner project evaluations to monitor completed projects. In the case of projects occurring on public lands, the land management agency will be responsible for conducting any project monitoring, maintaining monitoring reports and records, and reporting the results to the Committee. Feedback from local landowners and land managers will be solicited to help the Committee determine if the project is accomplishing the desired results.

## Wildlife Population Summaries

Current WRIS information maps for the following species can be found in Appendix A.

### A. Mule Deer

Like what was occurring in most western states through out the 1990's, Mule Deer populations in the Gunnison Basin declined. Various opinions about the reasons for those declines exist, but one can be sure that they were not due to one factor alone.

DOW Data Analysis Plan (DAU) planning efforts for deer and elk were undertaken using a new public participation tool that was developed in New York State. The Citizens Task Force, a group of people representing stakeholders in the area, was formed and public meetings where held starting in late 1997.

Those efforts resulted in DAU plans for the three deer DAUs that make up the Gunnison Basin. The DAU plan objectives are as follows:

#### D-21 West Elk Herd (GMU 54) –

Objective Population: 6,500-7,500	Objective Sex Ratio: 40-45 males: 100 females
Current Estimate: 4,200	39.7 males: 100 females (3 year average);

#### D-22 Taylor River Herd (GMU's 55 and 551) -

Objective Population: 6,500-7,500	Objective Sex Ratio: 40-45 males: 100 females
Current Status: 4,800	39.8 males: 100 females (3 year average)

#### D-25 Powderhorn Creek Herd (GMU's 66 and 67) -

Objective Population: 4,500-5,500	Objective Sex Ratio: 40-45 males: 100 females
Current Status: 4,400	37.0 males: 100 females (3 year average)

The Gunnison Basin mule deer herds thrived until the severe winter of 2007-08, which had a significant impact on the herd. DOW estimates that 35-40% of the population was lost, despite large-scale feeding operations by DOW staff and the public. In response to this, deer license numbers have been greatly reduced and doe huntcodes were removed.

Few conflicts exist on private lands due to deer use.

### B. Rocky Mountain Elk

Elk populations in the Gunnison Basin have been the cause of much controversy. From conflicts with fences and forage resources to law suits over over-the-counter antlerless elk licenses and arguments about "real" and "paper" elk numbers, these issues have made managing elk populations incredibly complicated.

Advancements in research and management of elk populations have increased significantly in the last 10-15 years. Researchers have found that elk live and can remain productive up to 20 years or more and that elk survival rates are very high. Estimates suggest that in the late 1980's and early 1990's elk numbers in the Gunnison Basin may have been somewhere in excess of 20,000.

Since the time this committee was appointed, Gunnison Basin elk models have been refined multiple times and an elk survival study was conducted. The latter found that elk survival in Gunnison is in line with what was observed on the Grand Mesa study. The management trend has been to reduce total elk numbers and increase bull/cow ratios.

The DAU plan objectives are as follows:

E-41 Sapinero Herd (GMU 54) –

Objective population: 3,000-3,500  
Current Status: 6,500

Objective Sex Ratio: 25 males: 100 females  
28.2 males: 100 females (3 year average)

E-43 Fossil Ridge Herd (GMU's 55 and 551) –

Objective population: 3,000-3,500  
Current Status: 5,800

Objective Sex Ratio: 25 males: 100 females  
26.2 males: 100 females (3 year average)

E-25 Lake Fork Herd (GMU's 66 and 67) –

Objective population: 3,500-4,500  
Current Status: 4,500-5,000\*

Objective Sex Ratio: 25 males: 100 females  
25.2 males: 100 females (3 year average)

The Wildlife Commission was petitioned in both 2004 and 2009 to institute limited elk hunting in GMUs 54, 55, and 551. The proponents felt that this was a potential tool to address the over-objective elk herds in those units. The Wildlife Commission approved some modifications to license distribution for the 2010-2014 in those units with the hope that they will increase harvest. DAU Plan revisions in regard to population objectives will likely be incorporated in 2010.

E-41 (GMU 54) has become the focal point of conflict in the Gunnison Basin. The elk population is nearly double the objective set forth in the 2001 DAU plan. Conflicts mainly center in the Ohio Creek area where large refuge areas harbor elk and is preventing the needed harvest. This will likely be a major focus area for the Gunnison Basin HPP Committee for the next several years.

Conflicts with elk on public and private lands still occur even though actions by this committee and others have lessened or alleviated some of the original conflicts. Conflicts will be addressed as outlined in this plan.

### **C. American Pronghorn**

The Gunnison Basin is home to a small population of pronghorn, approximately 350 animals. No conflicts have been identified, but there is potential for conflict between pronghorn and Gunnison Sage-grouse to occur.

### **D. Moose**

The Gunnison Basin contains a relatively small moose population, located primarily in Game Management Units 66 and 67. Most of these animal immigrated into the area following moose transplants into the Creede area in the early 1990s. The DOW attempted to augment this population by transplanting animals from Utah in 2008. Due to their relatively low numbers, conflicts between agriculture and moose seem unlikely.

### **E. Gunnison Sage-grouse**

At the present time, the US Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to make a decision on whether to list the GuSG under the Endangered Species Act by the middle of 2010. There are many interested entities and individuals in the Gunnison Basin who have been actively engaged in actions to benefit Gunnison sage grouse. The Gunnison Basin HPP committee is among them.

Conflicts with regard to the loss of habitat by development and degradation of habitat by a combination of drought, big game use, cattle grazing, and other activities on public and private lands occur throughout GuSG range. The Gunnison Basin HPP Committee will continue to work with the agricultural producers, land management agencies, Division of Wildlife, Gunnison County, and other entities to minimize conflicts between sage-grouse and livestock. This plan has been written to allow this committee to address these conflicts.

## **Appendix A – WRIS MAPS**



