

SAGEBRUSH LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PROJECT A BOON TO WORKING LANDS

By Steve Stuebner

The Commission's two-year grant-funded project to restore wet meadows in southern Idaho benefiting sage grouse and wildlife habitat, due to conclude in June 2020, has already exceeded most of its deliverables. Partners and landowners and are pleased.

"The Sagebrush Landscape Restoration Specialist position the Commission hired has worked out really great," said Trisha Cracraft, state biologist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "It was a huge need for us, and we accomplished what we intended to do."

Derek Myneer, a wildlife biologist hired by the Conservation Commission after the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) funded their grant, has been working over the last two years to deliver the priorities outlined in the grant. They included working on habitat-restoration projects and organizing workshops to train professionals from a variety of natural resources agencies in Idaho in wet meadow habitat-restoration work.

"A big part of the position was the tech-transfer component from training workshops and taking those tools into the field to implement projects," said Cracraft, who helped write the grant with Conservation Commission Administrator Teri Murrison.





Several training workshops were held like this one near Hailey where participants go to get their hands (and waders) dirty, installing BDAs.

The \$200K grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation was matched by in kind contributions of \$107,000 from the Conservation Commission and \$95,000 from the Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC).

"Derek's been filling a role to help partners where staff time is lacking," said Josh Uriarte, OSC project manager and sage grouse coordinator. "He helped bring projects to fruition in places where we were struggling with lack of staff."

Mynear has been working with Cracraft, Uriarte, and other partners to install beaver dam analogs (BDAs) and other woody debris structures in degraded streams across Idaho. These structures consist of vertical posts and primitive materials such as willow branches that slow down stream flow and spread out the water table around riparian areas. They expand the "green line" at the edge of riparian areas for sage grouse late-brood rearing and other wildlife benefits.

He also assisted in putting together several BDA workshops with partners and professionals from Utah State University and Anabran Solutions to spread the word about BDA technology with a mul-

tiplicity of interested partners. Mynear is planning another workshop in the spring of 2020 where participants will learn to install Zeedyk rock structures, another new-to-Idaho low-tech and low-cost restoration technique.

"In just 1.5 years, I feel like we've done a ton of work in terms of grant deliverables, and in providing some of the training necessary for restoration practitioners across the state to begin the process of implementing more projects of this type" Mynear said. "It's gone really well."

Two of the BDA projects – one on Baugh Creek and two other tributaries of the Little Wood River – and one on Hurry Up and Hurry Back Creek on private land in the Owyhee Canyonlands have been widely praised by project partners and landowners.

The Commission has recently completed a video featuring a project on Hurry Back Creek where 60 structures were installed utilizing Sage Grouse Action Team funding.

The Owyhee Canyonlands project occurred on rancher and Bruneau Conservation District supervisor Chris Black's

private property in Toy Valley. It turned an ephemeral stream into a perennial stream – at least so far. The Idaho Range-land Resource Commission publicized the BDA story in the Owyhees in a Life on the Range video titled, "Beaver Dam Analogs catching on in Idaho." The video was shared widely on social media.

Black invited conservation professionals from the Conservation Commission, NRCS, Pheasants Forever, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Governor's Office of Species Conservation and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to install about 20 BDAs along Hurry Back Creek in the first year, and last fall, they added another 60 structures on Hurry Back Creek using funds from the Sage Grouse Actions Team and contributions from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG).

"They came in and put them (BDAs) in very successfully," Black said. The BDAs are "backing water up, they're creating habitat for spotted frogs, for sage grouse and for beaver."

In fact, when the group visited the project site recently, a few people got down on their hands and knees to look for spotted frogs in the expanded "green line" around



Baugh Creek runs through a large meadow in the Pioneer Mountains near Hailey.

the creek. Seconds later, a biologist had a frog in his hand. “Found one!”

Research shows that sage grouse depend on wet meadow areas – often located on private lands – in the August time period before they migrate onto federal lands.

“Late-season brood-rearing habitat is seen as a limiting factor,” Cracroft says. “It’s good to see that we’re expanding that habitat in Idaho.”

Black likes the way BDAs hold water back in the spring, expand the wet meadow habitat around creeks, and slowly release water over time. Overall, about 350 wildlife species depend on healthy riparian areas during the year.

“It just benefits a whole host of wildlife species, and that’s why Fish and Game is really interested in this,” says Chris Yarbrough, habitat conservation biologist for Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game. “It’s a low-cost way to get a lot of bang for your conservation buck.”

On the Baugh Creek site north of Carey, a planned BDA project ended up being rapidly expanded after the 65,000-acre Sharps Fire occurred in August 2018. The fire was ignited by a Bellevue resident shooting at an exploding target on a 95-degree day. Conservation professionals with Utah State and Anabranch Solutions saw a big opportunity to restore downcut

streams by catching sediment after it ran off the mountain in the spring of 2019.

They installed 120 structures, including BDAs, but also debris jams, bank-attached jams, and mid-channel jams to help distribute some of the sediment expected to run off the mountains into the stream bank in strategic locations to accelerate the healing process.

Mynear noted that it was a first-of-its-kind project in Idaho to install primitive structures in the three creeks in a post-fire environment. All of the project partners really had to hustle to get the project designed and installed after the smoke cleared from the Sharps Fire in September and before winter came in December.

“This project could not have been completed if it weren’t for the mighty slate of partners we had who worked tirelessly to make this happen,” Mynear said. “It was truly an example of Conservation the Idaho Way, and once again, highlights the importance of partnerships in getting stuff done.”

Partners on the Baugh Creek project included Trout Unlimited, Idaho Fish and Game, the Wood River Land Trust, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy and the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation.

The project also was a great example of marrying fire-rehab efforts by the Bureau of Land Management in the Pioneer Mountains above the project, with private lands restoration work on the three streams in the meadows below, officials said.

“The net result is exactly the way we like to see projects come together – landowners and land managers working together to transcend ownership boundaries and do landscape-level conservation in harmony with each other and the environment,” Murrison says.

The Baugh Creek project was publicized as an in-depth feature story in December 2018 in the Conservation Commission’s monthly newsletter, *Conservation the Idaho Way*. The project was also showcased in a panel discussion sponsored by the Idaho Environmental Forum in Boise, a meeting that was attended by about 150 people.

An 8-minute documentary video on the Baugh Creek project will be premiered to the Idaho Legislature in the 2020 session. The video features private landowners Rebecca Patton and Tom Goodrich of Hailey who had purchased the Baugh Creek property to do wildlife conservation and restoration work with conservation professionals.

In touring the Baugh Creek area after flood waters had swept through the

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meadows in May 2019, so far Patton is quite pleased to see the results.

“We were very interested in that intersection between that working lands orientation and conservation,” Patton says. “We wanted to show that we could do restoration that could benefit wildlife and livestock and be a healthy, sustainable way to manage the land.

“It looks to us, that the BDAs performed the tasks well that they were set out to do, which was to slow down the water and create pockets, allowing sediment to collect, and begin the process of creating that meandering beautiful stream, allowing that good riparian habitat to develop.”



One sign of a restored wet meadows success is the return of beaver to the stream. Photo courtesy Eric Winford, Idaho Rangeland Center, University of Idaho.

“Yes, I would say these look great. Especially post-fire, with the uncertainty of runoff and sediment,” said Scott Shahveredian, who designed the project. “Having these still be intact - at about the same level as the dam was “pre” - is a really great sign.”

Myneer helped with coordination, permitting and logistics. “I’m extremely happy with this project,” he said. “It’s not like we were just restoring a stream, but we were doing it post-fire, and that had never been done before.”

The BDAs “provide a late-season source of water for wildlife and livestock,” he says. “If we can build these systems up, build that water table, build up the riparian area and create that sponge, if you will, it will help to build higher resiliency and promote a much healthier, functioning system. It’s not just a benefit for sage

grouse, but for cattle producers, wild ungulates and other critters that will use these areas in the hottest time of the year.”

BDA structures also were installed in a different Owyhee County project on Fish Creek and in Blaine County where some water rights issues surfaced after installation.

“That was a good learning experience,” Cracroft said, referring to the Fish Creek project, where issues are being worked out. “We need to be aware of any downstream issues when we put in these projects.”

The Salmon field office of the BLM has partnered with OSC on a project on Hawley Creek, and more projects may be forthcoming. Such federal lands projects will allow us to cast a much wider net, and expand our efforts across a wider range of jurisdictional boundaries. This will be

key as we move forward in our attempts to focus our efforts in key watersheds and make a bigger impact at watershed scales,” Myneer said.

“The work being done up in Salmon is a showcase for what can be done when various agencies pull together their time and resources to make something happen,” he said.

“It’s been a great project,” concluded Murrison. “One that continues another six months and we’d like to take further. Sagebrush landscapes were a new focus for the Commission, but our constituents – private landowners – were the same. Finding a new way to serve them and improve working lands for wildlife and landowners is very rewarding.”

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

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