



## Working Lands for Wildlife - Sage Grouse



Photo: Brent Lathrop, The Nature Conservancy

Conservation easements on the Johnson Ranch, located near Elk Mountain, help protect sage-grouse habitat.

*"By removing the threat of fragmentation - due to the development of commercial wind or residential 40-acre tracts - it will ensure the landscape is protected for future generation."*

John Johnson, fifth generation rancher

In Wyoming, this strategy has resulted in:

- Responding proactively to a recent Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) decision that listing the sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is "warranted but precluded." This means the sage-grouse warrants protection but is not listed.
- A collaborative effort between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and FWS to assess conservation practices being implemented under Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) - Sage Grouse. FWS determined that NRCS practices and conservation measures will result in a positive response of sage-grouse populations.
- Landowners knowing that should the sage-grouse be listed in the future, they can continue the NRCS conservation practices and associated conservation measures designed to benefit the species, since those actions are in compliance with ESA.
- Eight land trusts in Wyoming working to use NRCS funding to protect more than 50 ranches. Conservation easements reduce fragmentation - the number one threat to the sage-grouse.
- Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead approved spending \$10 million in state funds to match NRCS dollars for easements on private lands, ensuring the core habitat is permanently protected.
- Bureau of Land Management protecting more than 6 million acres of core sage grouse habitat in Wyoming by restricting the development of oil and gas and wind power.
- Ranchers implementing: grazing systems to improve nesting and early brood rearing habitat; prevention of fence collisions by marking or moving miles of "high-risk" fence near sage-grouse breeding sites; and the installation of escape ramps in livestock tanks.
- Sustainable ranching that benefits rangeland and sage-grouse habitat. Aspects include large, intact landscapes; plant diversity; perennial grasses and forbs; and invasive species management.
- From 2010 to 2013, a total of 93 contracts treating 905,677 acres of sage-grouse habitat were done under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP).
- In Fiscal Year 2013, 25 contracts protected 101,069 acres under three easement programs: Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

## Working Land for Wildlife (WLFW) - Sage Grouse

- Conserves sage-grouse and other wildlife through sustainable ranching.
- Uses science to achieve the greatest biological benefits.
- Succeeds through partnerships, voluntary incentives, and community support.



### Background & Facts

#### **Who:**

NRCS launched the Sage Grouse Initiative (now known as Working Lands for Wildlife - Sage Grouse) in 2010 and continues to lead a growing partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, conservation groups, and businesses. Ranchers play a pivotal role by stepping up to voluntarily enroll their lands to improve habitat and conserve intact sagebrush lands.

#### **What:**

The partnership proactively conserves sage grouse, cares for other wildlife sharing the same extensive sagebrush country, and helps ranchers pass on their legacy and rural way of life. The new paradigm for at-risk wildlife works through voluntary cooperation, incentives, and community support.

#### **Where:**

WLFW - Sage Grouse covers 11 western states, targeting 78 million acres of intact sagebrush harboring the highest number of birds. Approximately 25% of occupied range contains 75% of sage grouse. Private lands are the primary focus, with partnership projects on public lands as well. While 40% of sage grouse dwell on private lands, those habitats often shelter critical wet meadows and riparian areas that sage grouse broods depend upon to thrive.

#### **When:**

In 2010, FWS found the sage-grouse merited listing under the Endangered Species Act, but other declining species ranked higher in priority. The Service will decide whether to list the species in 2015. WLFW -

Eleven states with sage grouse: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming. Canada harbors remnant populations of sage grouse in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

#### **National Achievements 2010-2012**

- 700+ ranchers enrolled;
- Conservation easements that reduce subdivision and sodbusting threats on 240,000+ acres;
- New grazing systems that increase hiding cover for nesting birds on 2+ million acres;
- Removal of invading conifers that restores historic sagebrush on 200,000 acres;
- Marking or removing 500+ miles of high-risk fences that prevent bird collisions.

Sage Grouse is taking a proactive approach to achieve enough conservation in the right places and to work with its partners to avert the need for a listing. The partnership is committed to long-term conservation of sage grouse and the hundreds of other wildlife species that inhabit the same range, while securing the nation's food and energy needs.

#### **How:**

The power of the Farm Bill cost share dollars to voluntary conservation projects in sage grouse strongholds across 11 western states. Those dollars that run through NRCS programs are leveraged many times over through partnerships. From 2010 through 2012, investments of \$145 million generated \$70 million in matching contributions.