



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Sage-Grouse Initiative Status Report Fiscal Year 2010



Fiscal Year 2010 (FY10) Achievements:

- SGI targeted program delivery to maximize benefits to populations by placing 71% of projects within core breeding areas, and 92% of projects within the species occupied range.
- Ranchers managed 640,000 acres of grazing lands to improve sage-grouse hiding cover during nesting season. Additional grass cover is expected to increase sage-grouse populations by 8-10%.
- Ranchers marked or removed 180 miles of 'high risk' fence near leks where sage-grouse breed, preventing 800-1,000 fence collisions annually, a number of birds equivalent to all male sage-grouse counted on leks in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Washington, and the Dakotas combined.
- Ranchers removed 40,000 acres of encroaching conifer from otherwise suitable sage-grouse habitat in key nesting, brood-rearing and wintering sites.
- Ranchers seeded 11,000 acres of burned rangeland and marginal cropland back to rangeland vegetation providing habitat for sage-grouse.
- Forty conservation practices were amended to ensure they were either benign or beneficial to sage-grouse, including upland habitat management, prescribed grazing and brush management for juniper removal.

Background and Purpose

In March 2010, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) to provide a holistic approach to conserving sage-grouse and sustaining working ranches in the West. In its inaugural year, SGI has quickly become one of the most significant conservation success stories in the West.

The sage-grouse, a ground-dwelling bird native to the sagebrush ecosystem of the American West, has experienced a significant decline in population and was listed as a "candidate" species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Healthy, working ranch lands are the key to conserving this species. By partnering with ranchers and using win-win conservation solutions that benefit grazing lands and sage-grouse habitat, SGI seeks to proactively conserve the species and keep populations healthy enough to avoid an ESA listing.

Eleven states are participating in the Initiative: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Conservation Funding Practices Applied

In FY10, NRCS approved 223 contracts, totaling over \$18.5 million in financial assistance, to simultaneously remove threats to sage-grouse and improve sustainability of working ranches. SGI used existing conservation incentive funding through Environmental Quality Incentives Program (\$14.6 million) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (\$3.8 million). Technical assistance funding was provided for NRCS staff and partners to assist producers in implementing conservation practices.

Practices included the creation of sustainable grazing systems to improve hiding cover for birds, marking or moving 'high risk' fences near breeding sites to reduce collisions and removal of encroached conifer for re-colonization of suitable habitats.



Participation and Partnerships Successes

Partnerships are the cornerstone of SGI. Marshalling and targeting existing NRCS and partner resources are the keys to doing more with less and solving complex natural resources issues in these tough economic times.

NRCS collaborated with US Department of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to provide "certainty" to landowners who enroll in NRCS programs that benefit sage-grouse. This means that participating landowners can continue normal operations even if FWS lists sage-grouse as a federally threatened or endangered species.

Training the NRCS and partner workforce on sage-grouse needs, threats, and treatment options is a top priority. NRCS delivered a 3-day classroom and in-field training class to nearly 500 NRCS employees and partners in all 11 western States, including all NRCS technical staff in counties where sage-grouse occur.

SGI is science-based, with evaluations carried out by reputable, independent scientists to measure the biological response of sage-grouse populations to conservation practices, assess SGI effectiveness, and adaptively improve program delivery. We worked with partners to map range-wide sage-grouse population centers or 'core areas' to refine SGI delivery ensuring conservation practices benefit large numbers of birds maximizing our biological return on conservation investments. SGI assessments reflect appropriately large scales at which sage-grouse populations use habitat resources year-round and transcend that of an individual ranch to encompass multiple and nearby ranches enrolled in SGI.

At-a-Glance Benefits

SGI is doing more than conserving sage-grouse, it is also working to save agriculture and wildlife in the West. SGI embodies NRCS' commitment to maintaining rural ways of life, a healthy agricultural economy, and world-class wildlife populations.

By ensuring the species thrives, ranchers can proactively avoid ESA regulations while simultaneously improving grazing management. If an eventual ESA listing takes place, participating ranchers know that they can continue implementing their SGI conservation plans, without increased restrictions or regulations.

What's Good for the Rancher is Good for the Grouse

Ranchers participating in SGI benefit by addressing threats shared by sustainable grazing lands and healthy sage-grouse habitat, such as land fragmentation, invasive species, unsustainable grazing systems, sod-busting, and conifer encroachment.



Beneficial for both ranchland and sage-grouse habitat:

- Healthy, large, unfragmented range land
- A well-designed grazing plan
- Range land plant diversity
- Perennial native grass cover and forbs
- Management of weeds and invasive species
- Removal of encroaching conifer (primarily juniper pine)
- Healthy, productive springs and seeps
- Productive sagebrush grassland with perennial grass understory

Negative for both ranch land and sage-grouse habitat:

- Urbanization/subdivision
- Human development including roads or power lines that fragment the range and spread weeds
- Encroached conifer that reduces forage and deters bird use
- Overgrazing by livestock
- Dominant club moss and blue grama
- Tanks that drown wildlife and foul stock water
- Agricultural tillage

Success Stories

Conservation practices are locally prescribed based on specific local needs. In Oregon, for instance, SGI focuses primarily on the removal of juniper trees in the early stages of succession. Other threats to sage-grouse may be addressed concurrently in juniper treatment areas, such as invasive weeds, problematic fences, stock water troughs without wildlife escape ramps, and inadequate herbaceous cover.



Example of Phase I - II stage juniper invasion site.



Removal of encroaching junipers restores open landscape required by sage-grouse.

Moving Juniper Aside so Grouse Can Thrive

On Boone Sullivan's land and on 5 million acres throughout Oregon, the western juniper tree has invaded vast acreages of rangeland that were once dominated by sagebrush, grasses and forbs—the habitat favored by sage grouse, mule deer and other wildlife.

Though a native plant, the lack of fire suppression and other factors allowed the juniper to expand to areas never before occupied. A host of resource problems have resulted, such as reduced forage production, increased soil erosion, altered wildlife habitat, and reduced stream and spring flows.

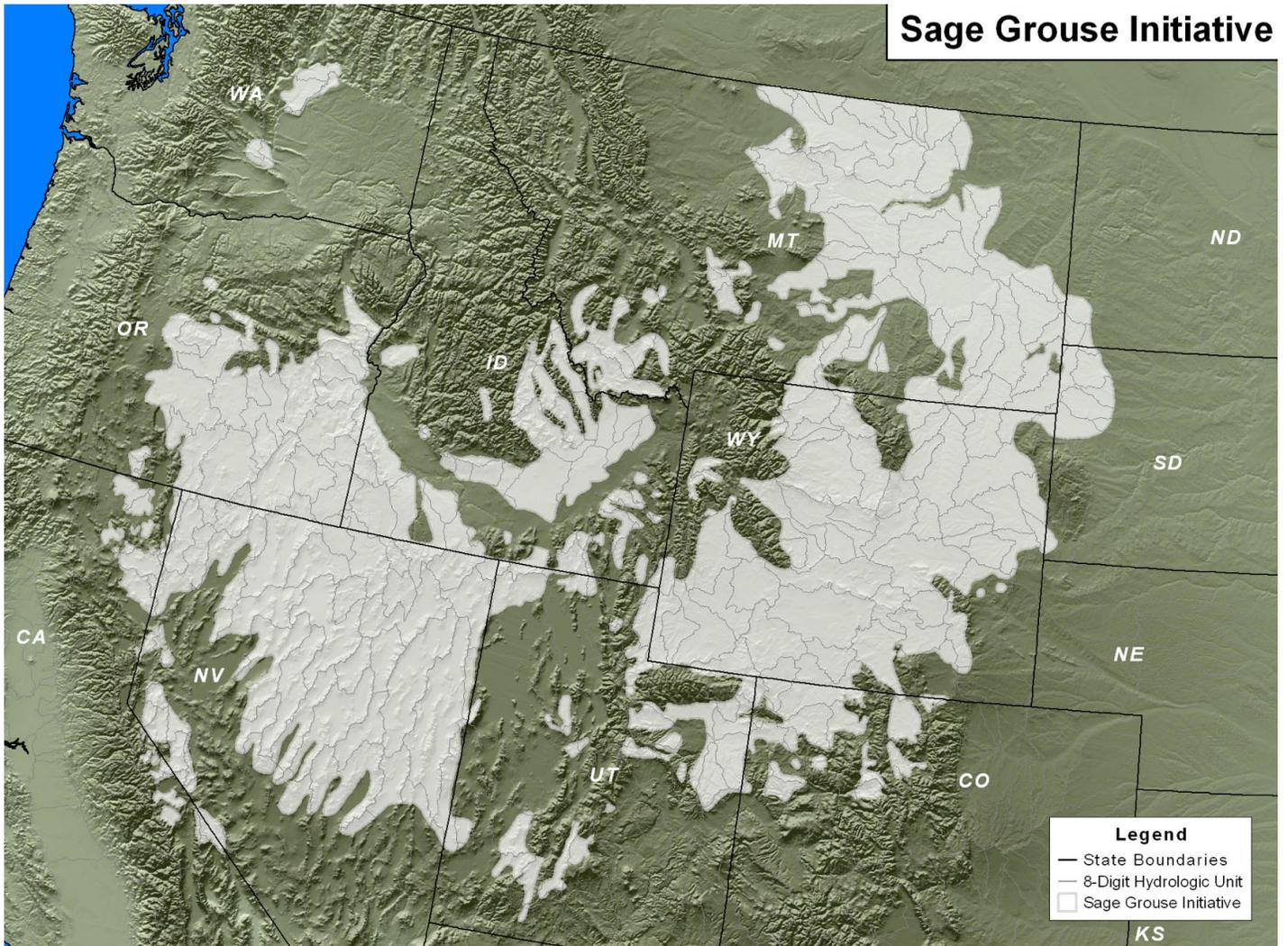
In 2010, over 1,000 acres of juniper removal in prime sage grouse habitat was funded on the Sullivan Ranch. The project opens and reconnects important seasonal habitats and movement corridors for sage-grouse. "Plans are to reseed with native grasses to prevent the growth of new juniper trees," says Boone.

The Sullivan ranch is co-owned by Boone, his three sisters Mary, Theresa and Cathy, and his mother Eleanor. Boone's great-grandfather, started the ranch in 1913. Boone remembers his father managing the health of the rangeland, setting small fires to burn the grass and undesirable conifers when the lightning didn't do the job for them. The fire regime is now managed and includes a firebreak around their land's perimeter. "We are trying to get the land back to what it looked like in 1913," says Boone; good news for the sage-grouse.

Moving Across Mountains in Nevada

Duane Coombs, ranch manager for Smith Creek Ranch in central Nevada, is a fan of the sage-grouse. "They are really a neat bird," says Coombs. But that's not why he's participating in SGI. "What's good for the birds is good for the cows," says Coombs, noting that the invasive pinyon pine and junipers destroying sage-grouse habitat are also negatively impacting grazing lands. These trees can invade sagebrush range land, crowd out brush and grass, reduce water infiltration and increase soil erosion. Coombs and his neighbor across the Desatoya Mountain Range are removing pinyon pine and juniper trees to open up habitat for sage-grouse and create a passageway from one side of the mountain range to the other. Removing the trees will not only improve habitat for the birds, but also provide forage for livestock and restore the natural ecosystem. This project will take place public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). "It's a great partnership effort, all of us working together to help these birds survive," says Coombs. "I'm looking forward to the day when they fill the sky like they did in the old West."

Area for map identifying initiative geography



U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Resource Assessment Division
Washington, D.C. April 2011

Map ID: 11574

Source: Sage Grouse Initiative
US Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

For more information

visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/initiatives/sqi

or contact: Tim Griffiths,

Tim.griffiths@mt.usda.gov

(406) 587-6812



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

www.nrcs.usda.gov

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.