



United States  
Department  
of Agriculture

Natural Resources  
Conservation Service

# Introduction to NRCS' New Sage-Grouse Initiative:

## Wildlife Conservation through Sustainable Ranching



**SGI**  
Sage-Grouse  
Initiative

*Helping People Help the Land*

Photo ©John C. Carlson



Photo ©John C. Carlson

*In 2010, USDA launched a new and exciting effort to sustain working ranches and conserve greater sage-grouse populations in the West. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is using popular conservation programs including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) to assist producers in 11 western states (California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming) to simultaneously improve habitat for sage-grouse and improve sustainability and productivity of their native rangelands.*

*“USDA is taking bold steps to ensure the enhancement and preservation of sage-grouse habitat and the sustainability of working ranches in the western U.S.”*

*- USDA Secretary Vilsack*

## Sage-Grouse Population Status

Sage-grouse, a ground-dwelling bird native to the sagebrush steppe ecosystem of the American West, are highly dependent on sagebrush for food and cover. These birds have experienced a significant decline in population over several decades. Approximately 40% of sage-grouse habitat that supports populations occurs on privately-owned lands. This link with private lands makes NRCS uniquely positioned to focus agency resources to benefit sage-grouse, improve ranch sustainability, and maintain livestock grazing as the prevailing land use. Sage-grouse require a diverse mix of seasonal habitats throughout the year for nesting, brood-rearing, and overwintering. Diverse habitat needs make sage-grouse an umbrella species. If managed sustainably, their habitats will also benefit other wildlife species.

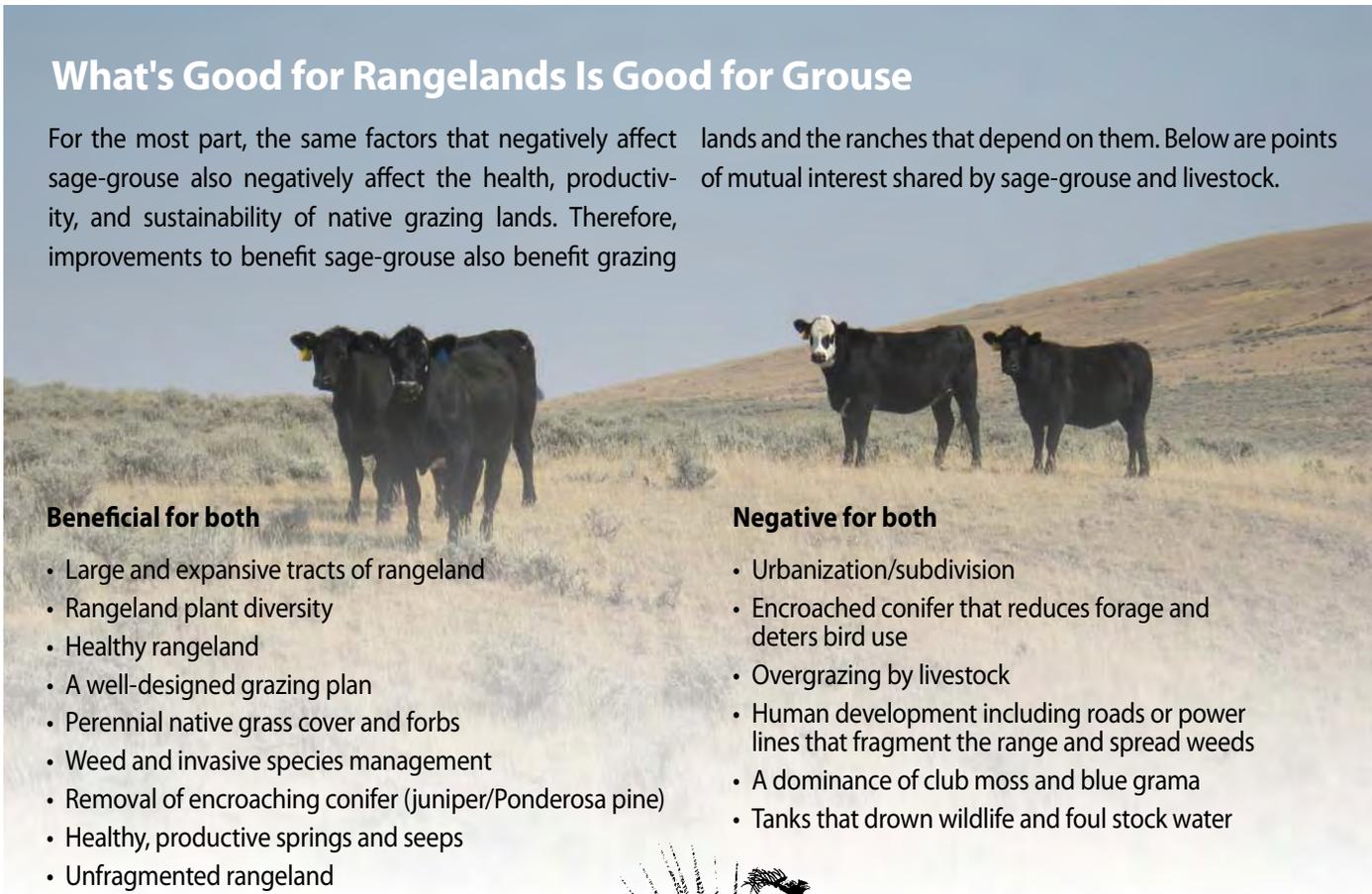
## The Link between Sustainable Ranching and Sage-grouse Conservation

SGI capitalizes on the strong link between conditions required to support sustainable ranching operations and habitat characteristics that support healthy sage-grouse populations. Several large-scale threats facing sage-grouse are identical to factors impacting the sustainability and productivity of grazing lands throughout the West. Fragmentation of sagebrush habitats from a variety of sources is the primary cause of the decline in sage-grouse populations. SGI aims to remove or reduce fragmentation threats common to sustainable ranching and sage-grouse conservation. Exotic species invasions, unsustainable grazing systems, sod-busting, subdivision, and conifer encroachment are examples of mutual threats.

### What's Good for Rangelands Is Good for Grouse

For the most part, the same factors that negatively affect sage-grouse also negatively affect the health, productivity, and sustainability of native grazing lands. Therefore, improvements to benefit sage-grouse also benefit grazing

lands and the ranches that depend on them. Below are points of mutual interest shared by sage-grouse and livestock.

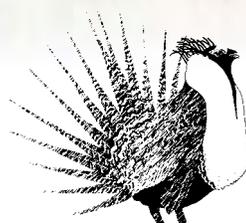


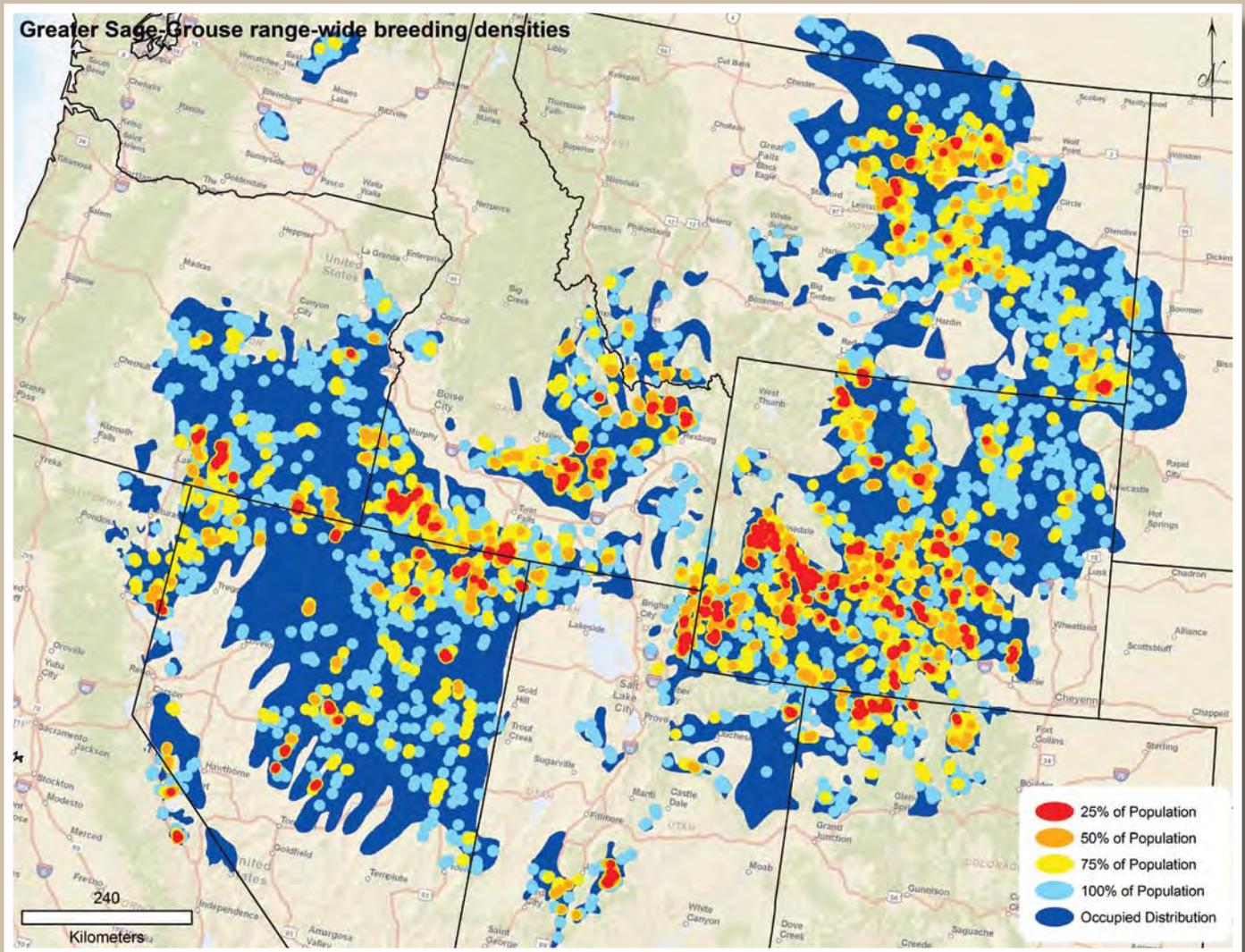
#### Beneficial for both

- Large and expansive tracts of rangeland
- Rangeland plant diversity
- Healthy rangeland
- A well-designed grazing plan
- Perennial native grass cover and forbs
- Weed and invasive species management
- Removal of encroaching conifer (juniper/Ponderosa pine)
- Healthy, productive springs and seeps
- Unfragmented rangeland
- Productive sagebrush grassland with a healthy perennial grass understory

#### Negative for both

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





Source: Bureau of Land Management

Map depicts sage-grouse population centers or 'core areas' across the species range. Warmer colors indicate larger populations and are additive with red areas containing 25% of nesting birds, red combined with orange is 50% of birds (see legend).

## Using Science to Achieve Results

A major goal is to strategically focus conservation in priority areas to maximize biological benefits to sage-grouse populations. NRCS has always implemented practices to enhance sustainability of grazing lands and sage-grouse populations. But past 'opportunity-based' projects focused on individual ranches instead of targeting resources to multiple landowners in the same priority landscape to ameliorate threats to entire sage-grouse populations. With SGI, NRCS is delivering conservation in sage-grouse 'core areas' to help maintain large and intact grazing landscapes rather than try to maintain small declining populations at the cost of further loss in the best remaining areas. Sage-grouse 'core areas' represent locations of high

abundance population centers containing a majority of birds. Although sage-grouse occupy extremely large landscapes (186 million acres), their distribution is aggregated in comparably smaller identifiable 'core areas'. A quarter of all sage-grouse live within 4% of the range (7 million acres) and 75% of birds are concentrated within 27% (50 million acres) of their world-wide distribution. Conservation priorities are widespread with each of 11 states containing at least 1 core with enough breeding birds to meet the 75% abundance threshold. By prioritizing and strategically focusing NRCS resources to range-wide core areas, benefits of conservation efforts for sage-grouse can be realized.





*Identifying and marking fences where sage-grouse collisions are likely have been shown to reduce accidental mortality caused by fence strikes.*



*A century of fire suppression has enabled conifers to encroach into sagebrush communities, reducing habitat for both sage-grouse and domestic livestock.*



*Grazing systems increase cover for birds and forage availability for livestock.*



*Removing encroached conifers opens up habitat for sage-grouse and other wildlife and increases forage available for livestock.*

## Program Delivery

### Conservation plans developed under SGI

employ conservation practices specifically designed to benefit sage-grouse populations and their habitats. Implementing SGI under the NRCS' Upland Wildlife Habitat Management ensures that a habitat evaluation is conducted and that limiting factors are reduced in order of their significance to populations. The purpose is to treat upland wildlife habitat issues identified during the conservation planning process to enable movement or to provide shelter, cover, and food in proper amounts, locations and times to sustain sage-grouse populations during a portion of their life cycle. Identification of the species' limiting factors at the level of the individual property owner is essential to ensure that the goals of the Standard are met through SGI.



## Partnering Across the West

NRCS structured SGI to be a collaborative effort with its conservation partners across the West. Funding enhances the opportunity for USDA to strengthen its conservation commitment with state agencies responsible for managing sage-grouse populations. SGI facilitates landscape-level improvements across the species' range while recognizing that threats and opportunities differ among states and within core areas. Close collaboration with many stakeholders, including State, local and Federal agencies, tribes, and NGOs, ensure that NRCS activities complement efforts already underway. SGI fosters coordination and implementation on a range-wide scale while ensuring local input and control over actions in specific States. USDA also works with Department of Interior (DOI) - US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to provide certainty to landowners who enroll in NRCS programs to benefit sage-grouse.

## SGL and the Endangered Species Act (ESA)

### SGL is equipped to help private landowners

respond proactively to a recent FWS decision that listing the species under ESA is 'warranted but precluded'. This designation means that the status of the species warrants protection under ESA but that it is not yet listed because FWS is focused on other higher priority species. FWS decision not to list the species provides extra time to proactively implement conservation actions to preclude the need for listing. In August 2010, NRCS and FWS completed a Conference Report on sage-grouse conservation. This collaborative effort assessed conservation practices being implemented under SGL. FWS determined that implementation of NRCS practices and associated conservation measures will result in a positive response of sage-grouse populations. The conclusion also lets landowners know that should sage-grouse be listed at a future date, they can continue implementing those NRCS conservation practices and associated conservation measures designed to benefit the species within their NRCS conservation plan since those actions are in compliance with ESA.

Conferencing under section 7 of the ESA assists a federal agency in planning a proposed action to help conserve a species that is not yet listed under the ESA. The Conference Report was selected as the appropriate vehicle to meet partnership objectives to facilitate sage-grouse conservation while ensuring the sustainability of working farms and ranches in the West.

*The Report gives confidence to landowners who are implementing NRCS practices to restore and enhance sage-grouse habitat that those actions are in compliance with the Endangered Species Act if sage-grouse are listed as Threatened or Endangered.*



Photo courtesy of Rebecca Smith, University of Montana

SGL informs FWS annual sage-grouse status reviews by reporting progress made through implementation of practices designed to benefit the species. NRCS is working to ensure landowner contributions to sage-grouse conservation are accounted for in future listing decisions, with the hope of reducing the need to list the bird altogether.

## NRCS Training for Effective Program Delivery

### Training the NRCS and partner workforce on

sage-grouse life history needs, threats, and treatment options is a top priority for enhancing program delivery. NRCS delivered a 3-day classroom and in-field training to help staff in all 11 western states learn about how to best use SGL resources to benefit sage-grouse and working ranches. Nearly 500 NRCS conservationists and partners concurrently received the same 3 days of training including all NRCS technical staff located in counties where sage-grouse occur. Additional training will be a future and integrated part of SGL.



## Monitoring Effectiveness

SGL includes science-based evaluations carried out by reputable, independent scientists

to measure the biological response of sage-grouse populations to conservation practices, to assess effectiveness, and to adaptively improve program delivery. Range-wide sage-grouse core areas have been mapped to refine SGL delivery ensuring practices benefit the largest number of birds. Now SGL-sponsored studies are underway in Montana and Oregon to assess benefits of grazing systems and removal of encroached conifers. The level of monitoring reflects the scales at which sage-grouse populations use habitat resources year-round and transcends that of an individual ranch to encompass multiple and nearby ranches enrolled in SGL. Rather than a focus on acres treated, the approach is biologically-based and uses sage-grouse habitat and population responses at multiple scales to evaluate program benefits.



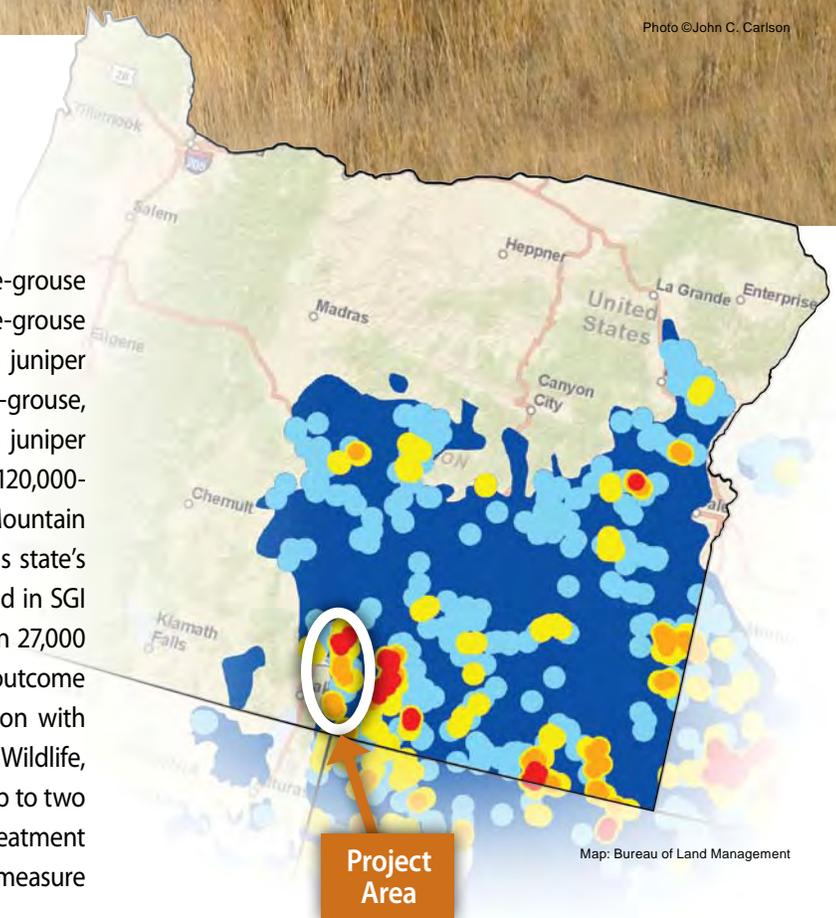
Photo ©John C. Carlson

*SGL research is conducted using birds fit with radio transmitters. This allows researchers to follow individual birds and measure changes in survival and reproduction that influence population growth.*

Photo ©John C. Carlson

## Monitoring - An Oregon Example

SGL in Oregon is reducing the fragmentation threat of juniper encroachment in high priority sage-grouse habitats. The monitoring goal is to evaluate sage-grouse response to removal of encroached juniper. Although juniper removal is widely assumed to produce benefits for sage-grouse, studies have yet to document a relationship between juniper removal and increased sage-grouse productivity. The 120,000-acre project area includes populations in the Warner Mountain region of south-central Oregon, a landscape within this state's largest remaining core area. Private landowners enrolled in SGL and BLM propose to remove post-settlement juniper on 27,000 acres over the next five years. Research to assess outcome of removal on birds is being conducted in coordination with private landowners, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, University of Idaho, and BLM. Project design includes up to two years of pre-treatment telemetry data on control and treatment areas and three years of post-treatment evaluation to measure population response.



Map: Bureau of Land Management



Photo ©John C. Carlson

## We can help

For more information on sage-grouse contact your local NRCS office or visit the web at:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or a part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program (not all prohibited bases apply to all programs). Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.