

Conifer Succession— Trouble for Livestock and Sage-Grouse

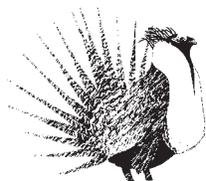


Rocky Mountain juniper succession into sagebrush habitats near Virginia City, Montana (above) and Decker, Montana (left).

Improve Range Sustainability and Wildlife Habitat:

- *Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP)*
- *Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)*

Contact your local NRCS office, and learn more about how these programs may benefit you and your land.



In the past 50 years, Rocky Mountain juniper, ponderosa pine, and Douglas fir have spread into rangeland areas across Montana. This gradual increase results in a number of resource problems, such as reduced forage for livestock, increased soil erosion and the loss of sage-grouse habitat. Conifers provide valuable wildlife habitat for many wildlife species. However, when they spread into sage-grouse habitats this can be problem for the grouse. It negatively alters habitat for sage-grouse, a ground-nesting bird, and other wildlife.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers voluntary

conservation programs, such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) that provide financial assistance to landowners who want to treat the increase of this woody vegetation on their land.

NRCS Brush Management (314) and Range Planting (550) Standards and Specifications will be used to address this issue. Program funding is currently being focused on reducing conifers to lower densities. If left unchecked, range value for livestock grazing and for grouse is reduced as grass and forbs are replaced by conifers. Preliminary studies suggest that sage-grouse abandon sites with as little as five percent tree canopy cover.



Junipers increasing on sagebrush grassland.



Example of lop-and-scatter cutting.

Financial Assistance Available for Reducing Densities of Conifers on Rangeland in Montana

Since the late 1800s, conifers have gradually spread onto range land in eastern and southwestern Montana that was once dominated by grasses, forbs and shrubs. Fire suppression starting with the first homesteaders has allowed these trees to increase or allowed plant succession to occur. As Rocky Mountain juniper, ponderosa pine, and Douglas fir increase, they alter and reduce forage production, increase soil erosion, change wildlife habitats, and reduce spring water flows.

Early Intervention Is the Key

When caught early at low densities, woody vegetation management is easily administered. Once conifers become dense, understory rangeland plants important to livestock and sage-grouse are choked out and become a challenge to restore or reclaim. Conversely, if treated early, conifer increase is relatively easy and far less expensive to treat. Sage-grouse are sensitive to conifer succession and their populations have declined due to the loss of their habitat to trees.

Financial Assistance

NRCS has several voluntary conservation programs that provide

financial assistance to landowners who want to treat conifer succession on their ranches. Participants in the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program and Environmental Quality Incentives Program receive payments, typically 50 to 75 percent of the average cost, to implement conservation practices according to approved specifications. Program participants may choose to do the work themselves or hire it out. NRCS reimburses participants at a set rate upon successful completion of the practice.

Interested landowners can apply for these and other programs at their local NRCS field office. Eligible applications are ranked and compete against other projects for funding. Generally, higher preference for conifer management is given to

projects located in high priority sage-grouse habitat.

Treatment will consist of practices that will keep the sagebrush component intact. Such practices include cutting with chainsaws or other mechanical means and treating slash material through lop-and-scatter and pile-and-burn methods.

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a new effort to sustain working ranches and conserve sage-grouse known as the Sage-grouse Initiative (SGI). It is a collaborative effort and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is a major conservation partner. To coordinate your conifer treatments and other sage-grouse conservation efforts across public and private lands please contact your local BLM office or visit www.mt.blm.gov.

The Montana counties and NRCS offices where conifer succession is most prevalent within sage-grouse habitat are:

Montana County	NRCS Office	Phone
Beaverhead	Dillon	406-683-3800
Big Horn	Hardin	406-665-3442
Carter	Ekalaka	406-775-6355
Fallon	Baker	406-778-2238
Madison	Sheridan	406-842-5741
Powder River	Broadus	406-436-2321

Other counties not listed may also qualify.