

Sage-Grouse and Fences: Why the Fuss?

A Landowners Guide

Livestock fences are very important tools used in the management of rangelands. In properly designed grazing systems, fences are used to assure rangeland plants have adequate grazing and rest. The vast majority of fences do not present problems for sage-grouse; however, sections of fence located in areas of sage-grouse concentrations can cause fence collisions or provide hunting raptors a place to perch.



Feathers indicate bird/fence collisions.

One study in Oklahoma found that marking fences, making them easier for the birds to see, actually reduced prairie-chicken mortality. Prairie-chickens frequently fly closer to the ground than do sage-grouse, making prairie chickens more susceptible to fence collisions. These collisions result in an estimated 40% mortality rate on wire fences. The fence mortality rate for sage-grouse in Montana is significantly lower because there are fewer areas with high fence densities than in Oklahoma.

There are documented sage-grouse fence collisions reported in other states. In Utah, at least 36 sage-grouse were killed the first winter after a barbed wire fence was installed at a winter habitat site. Similarly, installation of a two-mile length of fence in Wyoming resulted in the deaths of 21 sage-grouse. A study conducted on the Deseret Ranch in Utah concluded the second highest cause of death there for sage-grouse involved fence collisions.

Researchers in Oklahoma marked over 100 miles of fence to make them easier to see. One-third of the marked fences were in areas in which there were frequent fence collisions in previous years by lesser prairie chickens. Subsequently, there have not been any collisions along the marked fences.

Even though fence collisions have not been identified as a significant problem in Montana, areas where sage-grouse concentrate are subject to other threats. Golden eagles, major sage-grouse predators, are known to flush escaping sage-grouse into fences. Fences can also provide elevated hunting perches for avian predators at locations where none were historically observed. When fences are erected through intact sage-grouse habitats, they can extend the reach of avian predators into the bisected habitat. Steel posts do not pose a perching problem; however, wooden posts do. Simple cones or nails placed on the tops of the wooden posts can discourage use by these predators.

Sage-grouse fence concerns in Montana usually involve new fences, fences in winter concentration areas, and fences near or through dancing grounds (leks) or at other important movement locations such as to and from alfalfa fields.

Abandoned or unused fences should be removed. These fences are not maintained and can be problematic for both wildlife and livestock. Woven wire fences are particularly problematic where mammalian predators have been documented using fence lines for hunting, especially where sage-grouse often travel along the ground, looking for a crossing.



Golden eagle using wooden fence post for hunting perch

If you observe a fence collision, or come across a sage-grouse carcass within 30 yards of a fence and suspect a fence collision, and want to do something about it, please see the list below. It identifies specific problems and offers some solutions.

Problem: New fences in prime sage-grouse areas can cause collision problems.

Solution: Fences should be tagged or flagged to allow local wildlife, including sage-grouse, to adjust to the fence. NRCS offers a cost-share program for fence tagging.

Problem: Fences that go through or near dancing grounds cause collisions. There are fences known to pass directly through the middle of leks.

Solution: Avoid fencing near leks, as

grouse fly to display grounds before sunrise, making them vulnerable to fence collisions or making them susceptible to being flushed into the fence by predators. NRCS offers a cost-share program for relocating problem fences in sage-grouse habitat and for fence tags.

Problem: Abandoned fences are problematic for sage-grouse and other wildlife. Woven wire fences are particularly threatening to sage-grouse.

Solution: NRCS offers a cost-share program to remove abandoned fences in sage-grouse habitat.

Problem: Fences located in areas where sage-grouse concentrate or where the daily flight patterns routinely cross fences can be a collision hazard. Examples might be regular movement to and from an

alfalfa field or wet seep to feed or an important wintering area or lek.

Solution: NRCS offers a cost-share program for fence tags.

Problem: Segments of fence where grouse collisions or raptor perching are known to have occurred.

Solution: Placing fence tags on the wire and perching deterrents on the posts will help grouse avoid the fence and will discourage raptor use. NRCS offers a cost-share program for tags and perching deterrents.

When selecting fence tag diverters, elements to consider are expense, durability, ease-of-attachment, and effectiveness of the product. Strong winds can pose an extraordinary challenge when attaching or hanging anything in the open range. Large tags or markers can be unsightly in large numbers or draw enough interest to make them shooting targets.

If you are participating in a Montana NRCS sage-grouse incentive program, the fence requirements for fence tagging, fence-perching deterrents, and abandoned fence removal are:

- All fences within ¼ mile of a known lek must be tagged, and perch deterrents must be placed on wooden posts.
- New fences in sage-grouse high-use areas must be tagged as well as perching deterrents placed on wooden posts.
- Fences on leks should be relocated a minimum of 200 yards away. If the fence delineates two different landowners' boundaries, it cannot be relocated and must be tagged and updated with perch deterrents.
- All abandoned fences in sage-grouse habitats should be removed.

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“Do-It-Yourself” Easy Design for Fence Tags

This method developed by Sutton Avian Research Center uses the “undersill” trim-strips of vinyl house siding.



These undersill strips have a “lip” that will allow them to simply snap onto barbed wire fences.



Material can be easily cut into three-inch segments with a pair of trim snips or a miter saw with a blade made for cutting vinyl.



The suggested placement is as shown here: three on the top wire and two on the middle wire.



Nail on top of wooden post discourages perching.