



# 2016

## Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI)

NRCS Oregon Program Review



Photo Credit: Steve Fairbairn, USFWS.

### SGI OVERVIEW

September 22, 2015 was a historic day in conservation across Oregon and the West--that's the day that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the greater sage grouse did not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, thanks to years of strategic and effective conservation work. This success is being called the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history, but it would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication from private landowners and partners through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI).



Launched in 2010 and led by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation

Service (NRCS), SGI is a partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, and nonprofit groups working together with a shared vision of achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching.

### OREGON SGI 2010 - 2016



**331,090** acres of sage-steppe restored since 2010, addressing more than two-thirds of the conifer threat on priority private land



**23.4 million** invested in on-the-ground sage-steppe restoration in Oregon



**223** contracts with ranchers to perform conservation activities that are beneficial to sage grouse



Restoration efforts targeted within Priority Areas for Conservation (PAC) which support **90%** of birds in the state.

This partnership was built in response to the recognition of significant sage grouse population declines in Oregon and throughout the West.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) released its finding that the sage grouse warranted ESA protection but the listing was precluded due to higher priority actions, thereby making it a "candidate" species remaining under state jurisdiction but awaiting future consideration for federal protection.

## Reducing Invasive Conifer Threat

SGL leverages Farm Bill incentive programs to assist private landowners in proactively removing threats to sage grouse while improving the sustainability of working ranches. The expansion of conifers across the west has been identified

as a significant threat to sage grouse populations. Since the late 1800's, western juniper in particular has subtly been expanding its range across eastern Oregon into sites previously dominated by grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Conifer encroachment in sagebrush communities poses a number of problems for sagebrush obligate species, such as sage grouse, which have been documented to avoid areas with trees.

In response to this threat, SGI in Oregon targeted conifer removal to Priority Areas of Conservation (PACs).

As a result, the invasive conifer threat has been reduced by more than two-thirds on priority lands in Eastern Oregon.

## Additional Threats

While the majority of SGI funds in Oregon have been dedicated

to invasive conifer removal, other threats to sage grouse habitat have also been addressed. SGI has further enhanced rangeland health through the implementation of rotational grazing strategies, revegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses and the control of invasive annual grasses. SGI has also sponsored fence marking to reduce the chance of wildlife collision, with resources limited to areas identified as most likely to reduce grouse collision.

## Fiscal Year 2016 NRCS Oregon Sage Grouse Investments:

**EQIP:** Environmental Quality Incentives Program.  
\$3.9 million invested in 34 contracts to restore 32,500 acres.

**CSP:** Conservation Stewardship Program.  
\$160,000 invested in 4 contracts to restore 47,100 acres.

**RCPP:** Regional Conservation Partnership Program.  
\$326,201 invested in 5 contracts to restore 7,364 acres.

*Juniper removal in Eastern Oregon*



# LANDOWNER SUCCESS



Mark and Patti Bennett

*“We’ve got to be responsible with how we manage the land and our livestock, so that we have a long, sustainable future.”*

*- Mark Bennett  
Rancher and Baker  
County Commissioner*

**M**ark and Patti Bennett own a 8,000-acre working ranch near Unity, Oregon. Over the last decade, the Bennetts have made several improvements on their ranch that benefit water and forage quality, fish, and wildlife, including the greater sage grouse.

“Patti and I look at this as our legacy to our children and grandchildren,” says Mark. “We want to make sure that we’re making things better.”

When SGI and sage grouse-specific programs kicked off five years ago, the scale of the Bennett’s conservation work increased. They have removed encroaching juniper trees on more than 5,000 acres of valuable sagebrush lands. Most of the juniper encroachment was in the

early stages, Bennett says, but they were growing in fast.

The Bennetts hired local loggers to remove the juniper trees, thanks to contracts for funding through SGI. Their earlier juniper management was funded through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. As a part of these projects, loggers drop the trees and cut the limbs, pile the wood and burn it.

The Bennett’s list of conservation projects is long. They improved grazing management by upgrading fences in the forest, enhanced fish passage in Camp Creek, and built eight miles of water pipeline and nine water troughs.

With the help of SGI, they have installed nearly 7,000 feet of new wildlife-friendly

fencing, placed reflectors on the top wire of several miles of fencing to increase visibility for low-flying sage grouse, and they’re enrolled in the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Conservation Stewardship Program, a management program that adopts additional conservation practices to address natural resource concerns.

The Bennetts have also signed a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to further protect sage grouse on their private lands.

“People are watching what we do out here,” Mark says. “We’ve got to be responsible with how we manage the land and our livestock, so that we have a long, sustainable future.”

# Regional Conservation Partnership Program



## Taking Sage Grouse Conservation to the next level in Eastern Oregon

In January 2015, USDA awarded \$9 million in federal funding for a new five-year RCPP project led by the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts.

Partners are matching the federal funding, resulting in a total five-year investment of \$18 million.

The RCPP funding complements the on-going strategic investments of SGI by providing additional opportunities for landowners to engage in voluntary conservation to benefit sage grouse.

The RCPP project helps Eastern Oregon ranchers implement conservation activities in their Site Specific Plans, which are required for ranchers who enroll in 30-year Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA).

These agreements allow producers and ranchers to continue implementing practices that reduce threats to sage grouse and provide protection from future regulatory requirements, should the species be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in Oregon's sage grouse country are leading the charge on the CCAA piece of the project. The SWCDs work directly with local landowners to enroll them in a county-wide programmatic CCAA and help them develop plans to address threats to sage grouse.

NRCS is offering financial assistance to help landowners implement conservation measures identified those plans.

## Sage Grouse RCPP

**\$9 million**

USDA funding committed over five years

**\$9 million**

Partner matching funds committed over five years

**179** Letters of

Intent signed by Oregon landowners expressing a commitment to enroll in a CCAA

**1 million+**

acres of sage-steppe planned to be enrolled through CCAA collaborate planning effort