



2017 Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI)

NRCS Oregon Program Review



An Evolution in SGI

The Sage Grouse Initiative is a partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, non-profit groups and businesses that embrace a common vision: Wildlife Conservation through Sustainable Ranching.

It started in 2010 in response to increasing threats to sage grouse habitat across the West. To avoid a potential endangered species listing, partners came together through SGI to implement voluntary conservation activities across the bird's habitat range. Six years later, the partnership has evolved to encompass a wider breadth.

Today, SGI isn't just about the bird—it's about sustaining overall rangeland health. That means improving the diversity, health and vigor of rangeland ecosystems which provides multiple benefits to the landscape—benefits such as reduced wildfire risk, improved water quality, and enhanced habitat for over 350 species of birds and mammals that depend on the sagebrush steppe.

OREGON SGI 2010 - 2017



436,778 acres of conservation practices applied, addressing sage grouse threats on priority private land



27.9 million invested in conservation practices on private Ag lands



261 contracts with farmers and ranchers to perform conservation activities that are beneficial to sage grouse



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

A Strategic Approach to SGI in Oregon

Through SGI, Oregon NRCS targets its financial assistance programs to help ranchers improve rangeland health in Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) which support 90 percent of sage grouse in the state. PACs are areas designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners that contain high-value sage grouse habitat for breeding to support the long term viability of the species.

Conservation activities include removing invasive conifer trees such as juniper; treating invasive annual grasses like medusahead and cheatgrass; mark or remove high-risk fences to reduce sage grouse collisions; and renovating wet meadow habitat.

Below: NRCS supports farmers and rancher to remove juniper trees and promote sagebrush communities.



Above: Ranchers work with NRCS to make improvements on their land to benefit wildlife and agricultural production.

Conservation is based on a foundation of cooperation and partnership. This past year, SGI highlighted the inspiring work of our local, state, and regional partners; partnered with public land managers, such as the BLM, to develop landscape-scale conservation strategies that work across fences and beyond boundaries; and teamed up with partner organizations to manage new summer seasonal field staff.

Fiscal Year 2017 NRCS Oregon Sage Grouse Investments:

EQIP: Environmental Quality Incentives Program. \$3 million invested in 24 contracts to restore 31,671 acres.

CSP: Conservation Stewardship Program. \$125,728 invested in 6 contracts to restore 30,806 acres.

RCPP: Regional Conservation Partnership Program. \$1.5 million invested in 11 contracts to restore 10,336 acres.

*Based on NRCS Protracts preliminary data reporting system, subject to change.



Science is Key

SGI directly and indirectly supports researchers studying sage grouse, related wildlife and their environments. By leveraging new mapping products, decision-support tools, and outcome-based evaluations, SGI partners enable better targeting of resources and adaptive management. As the relevant scientific work and research builds, the body of literature that informs conservation delivery continues to expand and evolve. SGI aims to make the best use of available science to make decisions on the landscape.



Above: The study of sagebrush communities contributes to the development of new tools and practices to improve the landscape.



Partners with a Shared Purpose

NRCS, along with the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service are working together to address sage grouse conservation activities across public and private landscapes, through six collaborative components:

1. Control invading conifers in mutually agreed upon priority watersheds.
2. Implement practices across land ownerships designed to reduce the risk of fire and invasive species as identified by the Fire and Invasive species Assessment Tool (FIAT).
3. Restore and enhance wet meadow habitats in mutually agreed upon priority watersheds.
4. Develop science tools that refine delivery of priority conservation practices, jointly track implementation, assess benefits of such practices, and quantify resulting biological outcomes.
5. Coordinate communications to amplify outcomes achieved in conservation.
6. Coordinate, where appropriate, the planning and implementation of range structural improvements.

LANDOWNER SUCCESS



“I hadn’t seen birds in that area for nearly 30 years! It didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that what we had done was working and making a difference.”

*- Mike Greeley
Landowner*

The Greeley Family Ranch Rockville, Oregon

Above: Mike Greeley works with NRCS to remove juniper on his property and adopt prescribed grazing practices.

Mike Greeley’s family has ranched lands on and around Mahogany Mountain for close to four generations.

The Greeley family has completed multiple conservation projects on the ranch with financial incentives through the Sage Grouse Initiative. So far, they have cut 1,209 acres of juniper and plan to remove another 360 acres by the end of 2017.

Mike said he can already see some positive change from enhancing the wildlife habitat on the ranch by removing the trees. For instance, without conifers providing perches for raptors and other predators to prey on sage grouse, he is noticing more birds moving back into the area.

“The spring after we cut the trees, there were two sets of sage grouse nesting along the edge of the meadow where there used to be conifers,” says Mike. “I hadn’t seen birds in that area for nearly 30 years! It didn’t take a rocket scientist to see that what we had done was working and making a difference.”

Along with removing juniper, Mike is also enrolled in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). As part of this contract, Mike adopted a prescribed grazing plan. He waits to graze his cattle on pastures until after grasses have set seed and rotates pastures frequently throughout the grazing season. This prevents overgrazing and keeps pastures healthy.

Mike uses his cattle as a tool to help control invasive weeds like

medusahead and cheatgrass by targeting problem areas with grazing early in the season when young growth of the weeds is most palatable to cattle. Grazing in this fashion gives a competitive advantage for growing the desirable deep-rooted perennial bunchgrasses, which are typically dormant this time of year and critical for sage grouse food sources and habitat requirements.

“We’ve also established monitoring sites so we can compare grazing from one year to the next,” says Mike. “We want to track the weather, precipitation, and stocking rates, so we don’t overuse pastures and maintain good utilization, while leaving grass for the habitat needs of birds to nest successfully in the spring.”

Opportunities for Mesic Habitat Conservation

Mesic habitat refers to land with a well-balanced supply of moisture throughout the growing season. It includes streamside areas, wet meadows, springs and seeps, irrigated fields, and high-elevation habitats.

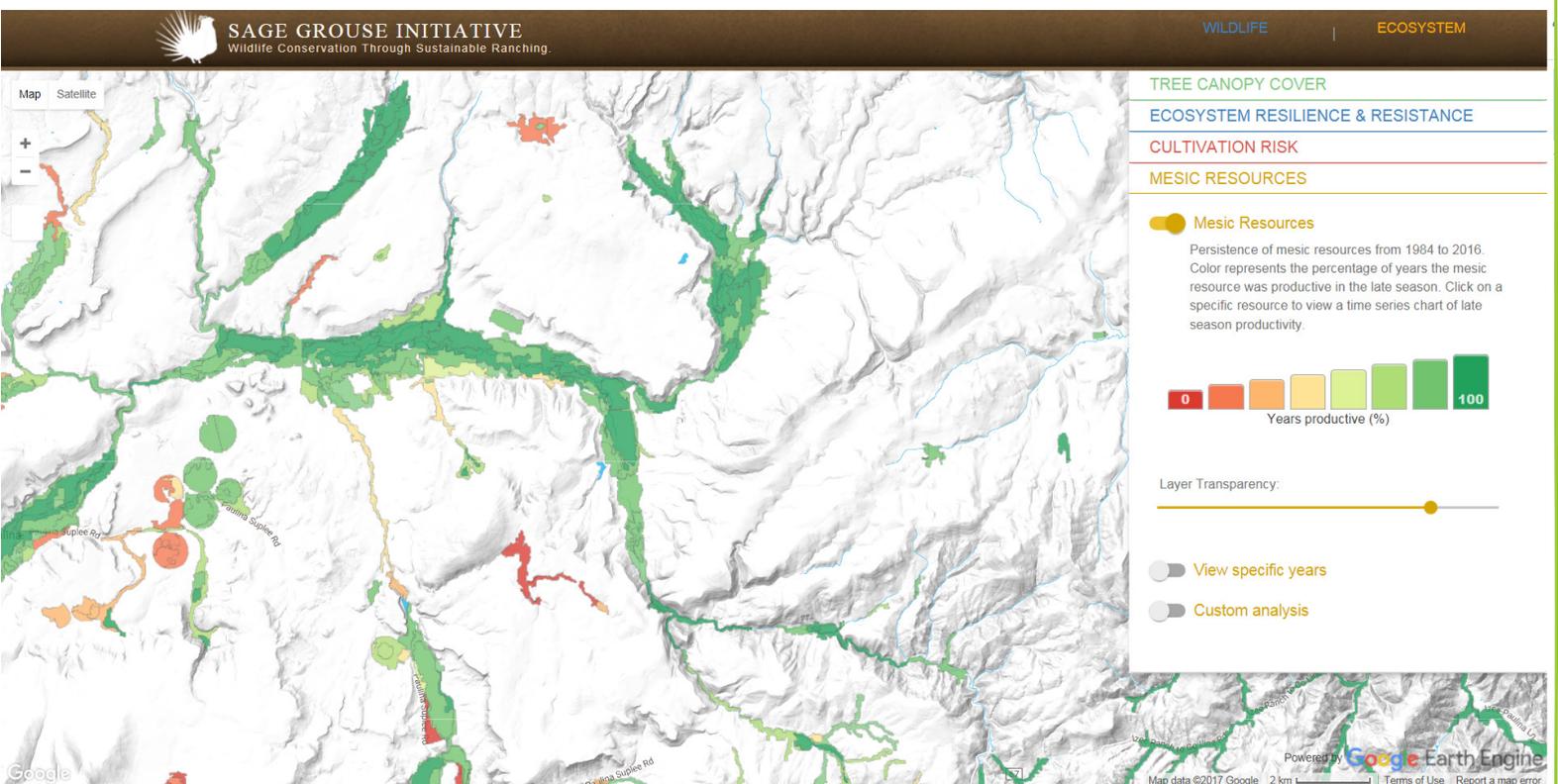
Mesic habitats comprise less than 2 percent of the entire landscape, and most of them are found on private lands. Through SGI, NRCS is supporting ranchers who are working to protect and restore mesic areas, benefiting livestock ranching operations and wildlife like greater sage grouse.

This year NRCS launched new resources to help conservationists and landowners explore opportunities for mesic habitat activities. Resources include a new Mesic Habitat Conservation Planning Guide; a mesic resources layer for SGI's interactive web application; and an outreach brochure for ranchers. Access these resources at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com.



Above: A beaver dam analogue is one of several conservation practices to support mesic habitats, which are important areas for sage grouse chicks (top).

Below: Map depicting highly productive mesic areas.



Bringing Healthy Sagebrush Communities Full Circle



As part of its ongoing public outreach campaign for SGI, this year NRCS released a new illustrated poster called "Healthy Sagebrush Communities." The poster highlights the complex sagebrush ecosystem under the umbrella of the greater sage grouse and connects conservation with rangeland threats such as conifer encroachment, invasive annual grasses, and threats of human development.

Download the poster and view the multi-media story map at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com



Above: The removal of invasive junipers and elimination of invasive grasses makes for a diverse sagebrush ecosystem.

