



2018 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. Over the years, 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 - 2018



516,926 acres of conservation practices applied, addressing sage grouse threats on priority private land



32 million invested in conservation practices on private Ag lands



299 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.



Above: Conservation activities that are good for sage grouse are also good for wildlife, such as mule deer.

Fiscal Year 2018 NRCS Oregon Sage Grouse Investments:

EQIP: Environmental Quality Incentives Program. \$3.2 million invested in 33 contracts to restore 25,392 acres.

RCPP: Regional Conservation Partnership Program. \$1 million invested in 5 contracts to restore 5,915 acres.

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

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

Below: NRCS helps ranchers treat invasive annual grasses like cheatgrass and medusahead to improve rangeland habitat.

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; marking or removing high-risk fences to reduce sage grouse collisions; and renovating wet meadow habitat.

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.



LANDOWNER SUCCESS



“

I don't remember a whole lot of sage grouse when I was younger... Now, there's not a day you're not going to see a sage grouse.

”

— Joseph Fitzgerald

The Fitzgeralds Lake County, Oregon

The Fitzgeralds (pictured above) are doing their part to restore sagebrush communities in Lake County Oregon. For starters, they've cut down encroaching juniper on over 2,300 acres of their property. Both cattle and wildlife have more room to roam, and native vegetation like sagebrush is taking its place. In turn, there's more water available across the landscape, benefiting the entire ecosystem.

Conservation extends to their grazing management, as well. The family has increased the number of pastures on their property, which has allowed them to rotate their cattle grazing. With more pastures, the Fitzgeralds can rotate cattle grazing around the ranch, making sure every acre is utilized efficiently. Rangeland health has

improved, and plants can rest and recover after scheduled grazing has occurred.

Additionally, by strategically grazing areas threatened by invasive grass, the Fitzgeralds limit their spread. They also utilize herbicides in periods when the grasses are most vulnerable. Using this combination of targeted grazing and chemical weed control is helping them win the war against invasive annual grasses.

Last but not least, the Fitzgeralds installed seven water control structures to manage their wet meadow and maintain existing irrigation infrastructure to utilize snowmelt and rain across pastures and near the creek. They bank that valuable water

in fresh grass and can cash in when upland pastures begin to go dormant.

Their grazing strategy and timed rotations are specifically planned to improve the wet meadow habitat, enhance the hydrology of the creek, and maximize production for cattle and wildlife, benefiting overall sage-grouse habitat.



LANDOWNER SUCCESS



Cornelia B. Ranch

Paulina, Oregon

Over the last eight years, Cornelia Laakso, owner of Cornelia B. Ranch, and her neighbors in the Paulina/12 Mile focal area, located on the eastern side of Crook County in Central Oregon, have treated a combined 100,000 acres of core sage grouse habitat with practices such as removing invasive juniper trees, installing wildlife-friendly fencing (pictured right), building livestock watering facilities,

and implementing prescribed grazing plans.

Robin Laakso, Cornelia's daughter, has been assisting on the ranch for several years. She and Oleg Katsitadze (both pictured above), started working with NRCS a few years ago through SGI to address invasive conifer encroachment on the land. They've cut nearly 1,000 acres of juniper themselves and the want

to learn more about range conservation practices to deepen their connection to the land. In total, the family has completed 3,610 acres of conifer removal for sage grouse habitat on their property since 2011.

It's important to the family to leave some juniper trees intact and not to clear cut everything, especially trees that have a historic value to the land and to the family. NRCS worked closely with Robin and her mother to develop a cutting prescription that achieved the agency's goals for sage grouse habitat while also satisfying the owner's desire to maintain aesthetics and cultural value.



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Even though it has been a whole lot of hard work, the sense of doing right for the land and all the inhabitants is never far from our mind. We also get to see and hear a lot of wildlife up close, which is an amazing and lasting bonus!

”

— Robin Laakso