



USDA NRCS OREGON

2015 Sage Grouse Initiative Program Review

OREGON SGI ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT A GLANCE

SGI OVERVIEW

September 22, 2015 was an 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 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



200,000 acres of key sage grouse habitat restored since 2010, addressing two-thirds of the conifer threat on priority private land



18.4 million invested in on-the-ground restoration



More than **100** ranchers have been assisted throughout Oregon in restoring sage grouse habitat.



Restoration efforts targeted sagebrush strongholds, which support **90%** of birds in the state.

conservation through sustainable ranching.

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

Conifer Removal

SGL marshals existing federal 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 leading 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, SGL in Oregon targeted conifer removal to areas with active nesting sites

and other occupied seasonal habitats identified as Priority Areas of Conservation or PACs. In the past five years, conifer removal has increased 1,411% inside PACs. In total, Oregon has dedicated \$18.4 million in on-the-ground restoration and assisted over 100 ranchers in implementing restorative efforts on their land. As a result, conifer invasion has been reduced by two-thirds or approximately 68 percent, and threat alleviation is nearly complete on priority lands in Central Oregon.

Addressing Additional Threats

While the majority of SGL funds in Oregon have been dedicated to juniper removal, other threats to sage-grouse habitat have also been addressed. SGL has further enhanced rangeland health through the

implementation of rotational grazing systems, revegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses and the control of invasive weeds. SGL 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.



Western Juniper

Juniper removal on the Catterson Ranch in Eastern Oregon



LANDOWNER SUCCESS

“We are throwing a one-two punch to knock out both these threats (juniper and medusahead) to the land.”

*- Cyndee Hill
NRCS Range
Management Specialist*



When both wildlife and vital natural resources began disappearing on their eastern

Oregon ranch, Frank and Sharon Catterson made the decision to fight back against invasive plants and weeds and reclaim their land. Today, with support from NRCS and its partners, the Cattersons are happy to declare success.

With technical and financial assistance provided in part by the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI), the Cattersons have successfully eradicated 650 acres of invasive western juniper from their ranchland.

A single juniper tree can consume up to 50 gallons of water each day, robbing arid rangeland of vital moisture, according to experts at Oregon State University. Removal of the thirsty trees leaves more water in soils and creeks.

“The eradication of juniper on the Catterson ranch has already made a positive difference,” said Cyndee Hill, USDA-NRCS Range Management Specialist. “It has helped restore the habitat and brightened the future of the ranching operation.” In addition to

the removal of juniper, an invasive annual rye known as medusahead is also scheduled for treatment.

“We are throwing a one-two punch to knock out both these threats to the land,” Cyndee said.

Not only beneficial for the land, juniper suppression also plays an important role in the preservation of sage-grouse habitat. Juniper encroachment on the bird’s natural breeding grounds, known as leks, have forced sage-grouse to abandon nesting in many areas, making them susceptible to predators and other threats. By removing juniper on their land, the Cattersons hope to thereby restore the bird’s breeding grounds and natural habitat.

The removal of juniper alone may not be enough to restore sage-grouse populations. Medusahead rye, a grass that challenges the viability of range systems because of its fast growth-rate, high-speed production and ability to out-compete other grass species, poses a new threat to sage-grouse habitat. Unpalatable to grazing animals, the plant smothers other vegetation and spreads rapidly.



Looking Ahead

Having addressed a significant amount of the juniper threat, Oregon SGI now looks ahead to focus on a holistic, "whole-ranch" planning approach.

The four priorities for Oregon SGI for 2015 – 2019 are:

- **Conifer Encroachment**
Continue scaling up juniper removal and support partnerships to treat adjacent public lands
- **Annual Grasses**
Leverage NRCS programs to address the treatment of exotic annual grasses that impact sage grouse habitat
- **Protection / Enhancement**
Incorporate NRCS programs such as the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and the Agricultural Conservation Easement



Program to provide ranchers with options to further protect their land through easements and enhancements.

- **Whole Ranch Planning**
Provide opportunities for ranchers to apply a holistic, "whole-ranch" planning approach to their land. Includes working with other agencies and partners to support tools such as Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) and other forms of regulatory protection/certainty.

Leveraging Partnerships

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. This project will provide holistic, whole-ranch planning options for ranchers in core sage grouse areas within eight Eastern Oregon counties. Partners are matching the federal funding dollar for dollar, resulting in a total five-year investment of \$18 million. The RCPP funding compliments the on-going strategic investments of SGI by providing additional opportunities for landowners to engage in voluntary conservation to benefit sage grouse.

One component of this RCPP is to provide technical and financial assistance to implement site-specific ranch plans addressing a suite of threats to sage-grouse for landowners enrolling in 30-year Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs). These agreements allow producers and ranchers to continue sage grouse habitat improvement practices and be protected from future regulatory requirements should the species be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Continued from page 3

In an effort to control medusahead outbreaks, the Cattersons plan to spray affected areas with an herbicide by helicopter. Because earlier rangeland treatment removed most of the invasive junipers on the ranch, it will be easier to see and treat the medusahead by air.

"NRCS has been great for us," Frank said. "There are so many things that ranchers have to take care of, that doing these extra things is just one more thing on the task list to do; if

it was up to us, we wouldn't be able to get it all done." With NRCS technical and financial support, the Cattersons developed a conservation plan and received cost-share payments to hire contractors to carry out their plan so they could concentrate on their ranch work.

The Cattersons hope to keep their ranch productive for generations to come. "We plan to keep this land in our family after we're gone," Sharon said.

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