

Introducing the Sage Grouse Partnership

What's the issue?

The Greater sage-grouse is a critically endangered species facing imminent extirpation from Alberta if immediate action is not taken. In Canada the species' is restricted to a meagre 6% of its historic range following large-scale population declines over the last three decades. In 2012, a mere 13 males were observed at Alberta leks equating to a staggering provincial estimate of only 30 birds. Without expedited protection of critical habitat, experts suggest the species may vanish from Alberta grasslands within a few years.

What's limiting recovery?

Greater sage-grouse require continuous tracts of unfragmented prairie to thrive. The primary threat to sage-grouse survival and recovery in Alberta is ongoing habitat loss, disturbance and degradation as a result of industrial development, increased human traffic and extensive human infrastructure on the landscape (SARA registry 2010).

How has AWA been involved?

In 2009, AWA and other environmental organizations won a successful court case to compel the federal minister to recognize critical habitat for sage-grouse. In September 2011, AWA hosted an emergency summit with leading sage-grouse scientists, southeast Alberta landowners, conservationists, and environmental organizations. As a product of the Summit, a communiqué outlining the actions required by both provincial and federal governments to prevent the extirpation of the Greater Sage-grouse and protect its habitat in both Alberta and Canada was produced. Many of these actions can be implemented rapidly with little cost.

What's the plan?

Clearly, current policies and laws of Alberta are failing as is seen by the ongoing and alarming decline of the species. The recovery of sage-grouse populations is possible but action must begin immediately to improve habitat in the short-term and deindustrialize the landscape in the long-term. To be effective, the process must be founded on discussions with landowners, industry and government. This approach provides opportunity to collate knowledge regarding what is currently happening within critical habitat areas, define priority actions and identify barriers to enacting solutions. It also ensures parties are given the opportunity to articulate their individual needs and participate in a collaborative effort focused on sage-grouse recovery that will be beneficial to all.

Where do WE go from here?

In recent months AWA has been engaging members of industry, ESRD and landholders in conversation regarding the development of a Sage Grouse Partnership and identification of individual concerns and needs. Following further collaborations through community information sessions, representatives from each special interest group will cooperatively identify and prioritize initiatives aimed at immediate habitat improvement and community outreach. The partnership will also work to develop a long-term vision, assuring the gradual de-industrialization of the landscape and rehabilitation of sage-grouse range.

What types of initiatives will be addressed by the SGP?

- 1) effective and appropriate methods of habitat improvement projects such as flagging fences, rotational cattle grazing and removal of abandoned infrastructure;
- 2) effective and appropriate methods for reducing impacts related to motorized vehicle and road use such as speed and timing restrictions;
- 3) effective and appropriate methods for removing or phasing out existing infrastructure and industrial development in the area in area;
- 4) creation of protective buffers around designated critical habitat;
- 5) appropriate designation of additional critical habitat; and
- 6) targeted restoration of existing native grassland.

Through conversation and cooperation AWA looks forward to supporting landholders, industrial developers and government groups in their efforts to secure a future for this iconic prairie species in Alberta!



Photo courtesy of Christyann Olson