

# Conserving the Greater Sage-Grouse:

## Learning from our American cousins?

By Ian Urquhart

**I**mpressive. Wherever you look the signs of a healthy sagebrush ecosystem meet your eyes. Knee to waste-high clumps of sagebrush dot the landscape near and far. At your feet the shrubs offer vital shelter to native grasses forcing their way skyward out of the scale-like pattern of dry, cracked soil typical of semi-arid lands. Far to the east at the edge of the horizon you can make out cattle – black specks alternately appearing and vanishing as they move among the sagebrush and graze. To the west a four-point buck emerges from a dry creekbed only to be swallowed up by shoulder high sagebrush. This landscape is delivering on the promise of a brighter future for mule deer, greater sage-grouse, and the hundreds of other species relying on this sagebrush ecosystem.

What's more impressive than the scene above is the partnership that's making it possible. Sadly, I'm not talking about a Canadian partnership. Instead this partnership and the landscape I'm imagining is an American one. Government agencies have partnered with ranchers and conservationists across 11 states to try to halt the dramatic decline of greater sage-grouse populations in the western U.S. Sage-grouse numbers are estimated to have fallen 90 percent from where they were 100 years ago. The Sage Grouse Initiative, the partnership that's been formed to halt and reverse this decline on private lands, suggests that perhaps only 200,000 birds remain of the 16 million sage-grouse that strutted across western landscapes before settlement. Fifty-six percent of the bird's

historic range has been taken away by one face of human settlement or another.

Today's American sage-grouse population is more than bountiful compared to the puny remnants of the greater sage-grouse hanging on by a thread in south-eastern Alberta. Nonetheless, what may appear as bountiful north of the 49th parallel wasn't seen that way by the U.S. government over four years ago. In March 2010 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found that listing the greater sage-grouse under the federal *Endangered Species Act* was warranted but precluded. This meant that, while adequate grounds existed to list the bird, an endangered species listing was precluded by the need to deal with other, higher priority species. The greater sage-grouse became a candidate for listing. Subsequent litigation in the U.S. courts requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to decide the question of whether the greater sage-grouse should be listed under the ESA by September 2015.

### The Birth of the Sage Grouse Initiative

To some private landowners in the U.S. the *Endangered Species Act* is dark magic. Washington D.C. is their Lord Voldemort and Washington regularly concocts laws such as the ESA and the *Federal Land Policy and Management Act* to destroy their traditional ways of life. Outrage over federal control of much of the West's public lands and the use of these laws to reduce grazing on those lands helped fuel the original Sagebrush Rebellion against Washington in the latter half of the 1970s.



“Sage grouse is probably the largest conservation experiment that’s ever been conducted in the United States.”

Dave Naugle,  
Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The fear of more dark magic swept across the western U.S. in the wake of the 2010 Fish and Wildlife Service decision. This fear was that the Fish and Wildlife Service would recommend listing the greater sage-grouse in 2015 and draconian restrictions on public and private land activities would follow. “A listing of sage-grouse potentially impacts agriculture in a very significant, meaningful way,” explained Tim Griffiths of the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), “as so much of the regulations could potentially impact those producers.” Building on the NRCS’s pre-existing support for sustainable ranching fear of the ESA sparked the birth of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI). This initiative, led by the NRCS, envisions a suite of voluntary conservation measures, developed collaboratively with landowners, which will be implemented on private lands in the American West. These private lands constitute 31 percent of the sage-grouse’s range; the federal government owns 64 percent of the bird’s range lands; states own the remaining five percent. By contrast private lands



*The iconic greater sage-grouse mating display. PHOTO: © C. OLSON*

constitutes somewhere between 13 and 20 percent of sage-grouse range in southeastern Alberta.

## The Initiative on the Ground

Since its birth in 2010 the SGI has sought to improve sagebrush habitats across more than 15,000 square kilometres (6,000 square miles) of private lands in the western U.S. More than 950 ranches have joined the program. More than two-thirds of the private lands now benefiting from the initiative have incorporated conservation practices into grazing plans. The goal is to improve sage-grouse nesting, rearing, and wintering habitats without sacrificing the needs of cattle. The respective habitat requirements of cattle and sage-grouse may be very complementary. “When we developed this list of all the threats to sage-grouse and we had another list of all the threats that are facing our sustainable ranching in the West,” said Griffiths, “the

lists were really one and the same.”

“What’s good for  
the bird is good for  
the herd.”

*Tom Sharp,  
Chair, Oregon Cattlemen’s Association*

NRCS officials such as Tim Griffiths pride themselves in the Service’s longstanding commitment to work with landowners. It began with soil conservation efforts during the Dust Bowl days of the Dirty Thirties to today’s determination through the SGI to develop grazing plans where both profitability and sage-grouse conservation are furthered. In addition to sustainable grazing plans NRCS also helps landowners establish conservation easements, remove invasive conifer species, and remove, replace, and/or mark fencing posing high-risks to sage-grouse. By the end of 2013 the SGI could boast that more than

800 kilometres of fences responsible for nearly 3,000 collisions with sage-grouse had been marked or removed.

The experience of the Delaney 44 Ranch in central Montana offers one illustration of the “win-win” possibilities the SGI may deliver. New fencing, grazing plans, water wells, and pipelines figure prominently there. The SGI-approved grazing plan rests 20 percent of the ranch for up to two years at a time. Resting pastures produced impressive increases in pasture growth. These pasture improvements and modified grazing rotations have improved the health and manageability of the Delaney family’s cattle. “They now graze about 75 fewer head of cattle,” *Beef* magazine reported in August, “but with higher profitability.”

*National Public Radio* reported a similar story from the southwest corner of Montana. In the Centennial Valley ranchers participating in the SGI now graze their cattle in tighter groups; they’re using portable, sage-grouse friendly, fencing to manage



*Fading or coming over the horizon? In Montana greater sage-grouse are doing the latter. PHOTO: © C. OLSON*

their cattle this way. Resting larger areas from grazing is increasing the growth of the types of vegetation sage-grouse need.

## Protecting Ranchers from the “Unthinkable”

Participating in the Sage Grouse Initiative also will protect private landowners from having to take additional conservation measures in the event the unthinkable happens and the greater sage-grouse is listed by the Fish and Wildlife Service next year. These guarantees appear in the form of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA). The “candidate” refers to a candidate species under the ESA (such as greater sage-grouse since 2010). “Assurances” is the key word for ranchers; these agreements offer assurances to those who sign and implement them that a future listing will not subject them to any additional conservation measures or restrictions. If sage-grouse are listed the rancher’s conservation obligations will go no further than what she already had agreed to voluntarily through the CCAA. The only conservation measure all enrollees in a sage-grouse CCAA are obliged to implement is to “(m)aintain contiguous habitat by avoiding fragmentation (e.g., do not subdivide property, consider conservation easements).” Other

conservation measures are identified and agreed upon depending on each landowner’s circumstances.

“As a rancher, I am excited that the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District and leaders of Harney County worked with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to develop a tool that can help preserve the cultural and economic activities of our rural communities while meeting the habitat needs of sage-grouse.”

*Stacy Davies,  
Manager, Roaring Springs Ranch*

Two umbrella Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances have been established so far – one in Wyoming and the other in Harney County, Oregon. In Harney County the umbrella CCAA covered over one million acres of the state’s best sage-grouse environment. Thirty-nine landowners, holding more than 250,000 acres, stood ready to enroll their lands under the CCAA when the agreement was signed in May. The SGI set aside dollars in Oregon for these ranchers to use to improve sage-grouse habitat. When the sun rises on this iconic western landscape it rises on a more certain future for ranchers and a brighter future for sage-grouse.

## That Other Key to Rancher Participation in the Sage Grouse Initiative

Money – other than the threat of a future ESA listing federal funds have motivated nearly 1,000 ranchers to jump aboard the sage-grouse conservation train. The U.S. “Farm Bill” is sweeping, multi-year legislation, passed roughly every five years, that earmarks hundreds of billions of dollars in agriculture-related spending. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that, under the 2008 Farm Bill, the federal government would spend \$284 BILLION over the 2008



to 2012 fiscal years. Twenty-four billion dollars from this pot of gold was slated for conservation. From 2010 to 2013 NRCS spent \$247 million on SGI projects; these projects received a further \$107 million in matching funds from landowners and other SGI partners. Over four years \$354 million was spent in the western U.S. on efforts to conserve sagebrush habitat and to increase the greater sage-grouse population.

Tim Griffiths identifies the Farm Bill as a powerful lever to encourage “land rich, cash poor” ranchers to participate in sage-grouse conservation. Banks are not necessarily enthusiastic about lending ranchers the money they need to build new water wells and pipelines. Ranchers too may be reluctant to finance such an investment from their operating budgets. Neither constituency may want to devote funds to projects that may take a decade or more just to break even. The NRCS, through the SGI, steps in as the primary financier. If the NRCS can develop a mutually agreeable sustainable grazing plan with a rancher then the SGI will cost share the expenses of the improvement with the landowner. Generally the costs are shared 75/25 with the Department of Agriculture agency paying the lion’s share of the project. NRCS gets a commitment to long-term ranching sustainability, the sage-grouse get better, healthier habitats and the rancher gets a better chance at profitability

and the opportunity to see his children carry his legacy into the future.

### Time to Transplant?

Gardening friends tell me that fall is an excellent season for transplanting perennials. Maybe it would be a good season to transplant an American program like the Sage Grouse Initiative and introduce it to the semi-arid landscape of southeastern Alberta.

I’m happy to offer a tip of my Stetson to the Sage Grouse Initiative. This proactive program and its wide-ranging partnership should be applauded. Blinkered thinking – the idea that all human activities must be prohibited or regulated strictly in order to restore greater sage-grouse – misses the mark entirely. First, it denies the possibility that sustainable ranching may be complementary to sage-grouse conservation. Second, it destroys any chance of building alliances and partnerships to pursue a shared vision of what the landscape should look like and what activities that landscape should host. Does AWA want ranchers off the land? Absolutely not. AWA recognizes, following the scientific research out of Montana, that grazing has an important positive role to play in the silver sagebrush ecosystem. This research, as AWA’s Cliff Wallis emphasized, is “showing better productivity on grazed

ranges than they are on ungrazed ranges.” If we can’t have bison doing the grazing, cattle are a good second choice.

Embracing the approach championed by the SGI means paying ranchers to conserve landscapes. Do you want your taxes spent this way? When private landowners pursue their livelihoods in ways delivering significant public or collective goods this strengthens the case for public financial support. Sage-grouse conservation is such a public good and the cost-sharing features of the SGI reflect this understanding of what the private interest/public good relationship could look like. Canadian governments should embrace sustainable ranching in southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan that attacks habitat fragmentation.

**“In stark contrast  
is the Canadian  
government’s delay  
and minimal action.”**

*Environmental lawyer Meredith James  
comparing American and Canadian efforts to  
conserve greater sage-grouse.*

A baby brother to the SGI arguably already lives in Environment Canada. It’s



Historically plains bison shared the sage-brush ecosystem with greater sage-grouse. PHOTO: © C. OLSON

the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk. Approximately \$10 million is spent annually across the country to support actions aimed to protect species at risk and enhance their habitats. The federal government's greater sage-grouse emergency protection order declared this would be one of the programs Canada will use to "promote and support effective voluntary stewardship measures." It's an opportunity for those ranchers who talk about sustainable ranching to walk that talk. From AWA's experience the federal government needs to make it much easier for interested parties to access the support that's available.

More generally, sage-grouse conservation is an opportunity to create what a recent book about conserving working landscapes in the U.S. called "sustainable working landscapes." Working landscapes are ones where renewable resources such as grass are the foundation for livelihoods. Sustainable means these landscapes are used in ways that allow the resources to renew themselves and do not compromise biological diversity or ecological integrity. The SGI and a beefed up Habitat Stewardship Program could help seize this opportunity.

But before urging government to steer tax dollars towards ranchers who will help craft these sustainable working landscapes in Canada's sage-grouse country I need, like ranchers in the U.S., assurances. My needed assurances are different though – I need to know the ranching operations we're going to help finance are really committed to sustainable ranching. Ranchers who nurse at the breast of the petroleum industry don't practice sustainable ranching. Those who take money from petroleum and pipeline companies operating on their private or leased lands benefit from the activities responsible for the noise and landscape fragmentation that's darkened the horizon for sage-grouse. They can't have it both ways.

As promising as the Sage Grouse Initiative might be it's too late to rely primarily

on voluntary stewardship in Canada. It's disingenuous to suggest that even a Canadian SGI flush with cash is all Alberta's puny sage-grouse population needs to be restored to a healthy, self-sustaining level. That counsel is stone-blind to reality; the Calgary Zoo pegs the entire Canadian population at less than 138 birds. So desperate is the situation here that we import birds from Montana and hope wistfully they will somehow survive in a landscape poisoned by fragmentation. The Calgary Zoo's captive breeding program also has been enlisted during these desperate times. It's trying to put more birds out onto the landscape that fragmentation has turned from friend to deadly foe. While the zoo is optimistic its breeding program can play a positive role in sage-grouse recovery this year's breeding program results don't appear to have been very encouraging. How many of the 11 chicks hatched earlier this year are still alive? All the zoo will say now is that they "have lost some chicks, however, it is too soon to comment with specifics." This unwillingness tells me the news won't be good. I hope I'm wrong.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Maybe the U.S. doesn't need an ESA listing in order to brighten the future of greater sage-grouse. Canadian grouse, given their dire straits, certainly for years have needed an emergency protection order under the federal *Species at Risk Act*. Furthermore, it's long past time Canada's federal government started to show the financial commitment the U.S. federal government makes to the protection of endangered species. In the 2013 fiscal year Washington spent \$1.67 BILLION on endangered species; Ottawa spent a paltry annual average of \$17 million on species at risk programs over the 2008/09 to 2011/12 fiscal years. It's a shameful comparison.

When it comes to greater sage-grouse the accompanying sidebar suggests the emergency protection order's restrictions are entirely complementary to sustainable ranching on private and public lands.

Given all the major accommodations the emergency protection order offers to ranchers it's hard to understand why some ranchers in southeastern Alberta met the order with howls of outrage.

Like the perennially disappointed drought-stricken farmer who hopes for rain, I've hoped year after year that someday we might see some semblance of balance on Alberta's landscapes. I've hoped we'd see some real commitment from our governments to make our working landscapes sustainable ones. If Ottawa and Edmonton would follow the lead of their American cousins and generously support voluntary stewardship as well as enforce the emergency protection order maybe this hope finally will be realized. 🌱

## Why the Greater Sage-Grouse Emergency Protection Order Doesn't Threaten Sustainable Ranching...

Does the Emergency Protection Order apply to private lands? **NO**

Does the Emergency Protection Order prohibit ranchers from grazing their cattle on public lands? **NO**

Does the Emergency Protection Order require ranchers to graze their cattle differently? **NO**

Does the Emergency Protection Order require ranchers to replace existing fences with sage-grouse friendly fencing? **NO**

During the mating season the Emergency Protection Order imposes a noise prohibition from dusk to dawn. Does the Order exempt people traveling to and from their residence or their agricultural operations from this noise prohibition? **YES**