

Sage-grouse Conservation in the United States:

An Update on the Sage Grouse Initiative

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Canada is not the only country with greater sage-grouse. In fact, Canada contains only the northern tip of their range. The majority of their sagebrush habitat lies in the United States, where sage-grouse can be found across 11 states. Current population estimates are at between 200,000 and 400,000, much more than the few hundred found here in Canada, but far fewer than the 16 million estimated to have once roamed the sagebrush lands of western North America.

Like Canada, sage-grouse populations in the states have experienced a sharp decline, especially in the last few decades. In 2010, the US Fish and Wildlife Service found that the greater sage-grouse was warranted for protection, though precluded from listing due to higher priorities. That year also saw the start of the Sage Grouse Initiative.

Led by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), the Sage Grouse Initiative focuses on the use of voluntary, incentive-based approaches to conserve rangelands. It is funded through the US *Farm Bill*, legislation passed roughly every five years that includes conservation on working lands, or any lands used to support livelihoods. Not only are many of the conservation practices beneficial to sage-grouse, they help to sustain ranching operations, which face many of the same threats. As the saying goes, "What's good for the herd is good for the bird." As I was curious to learn more about the program, I spoke to Dr. Dave Naugle, the Sage Grouse Initiative's science advisor at the University of Montana in Missoula.

As Dr. Naugle told me, what they do is "work with landowners to implement beneficial practices for their grazing operations that also benefit wildlife." Partnerships are important – much of the work could not be completed without the cooperation of ranchers, and the Initiative is aided in its work by collaboration with conservation districts, non-government organizations, corporations, and academic institutions.

The approach has been well received, and has expanded in recent years, becoming Working Lands for Wildlife and extending its work east into the Great Plains grasslands. It now operates under two frameworks: the USDA's *Framework for Conservation Action in the Sagebrush Biome* and the *Framework for Conservation Action in the Great Plains Grasslands Biome*. Together, the two frameworks cover nearly all rangelands in the western half of the United States.

In the sagebrush biome, four main threats are addressed: exotic annual grass invasion, land-use conversion, woodland expansion and the degradation of mesic areas, or areas with a moderate supply of moisture. Using satellite mapping, they are able to identify and target core

areas of intact grasslands, where they can have the most impact against threats, and concentrate on proactive, low-cost solutions. Another tool they employ is conservation easements. These are one-time payments made in return for letting go of certain rights on the land, preventing cultivation or development. Since inception, the Sage Grouse Initiative has invested \$580 million, and conserved over nine million acres, nearly 10 times the sage-grouse habitat remaining in Alberta.

The Sage Grouse Initiative has been successful in achieving conservation through voluntary programs. They are helped in part by federal legislation, such as the *Farm Bill*, and by state regulations, including the statutory limits to oil and gas well density which can prevent extensive fracturing of an area. The Initiative is then able to secure voluntary easements atop those lands to prevent their loss to housing development or crop cultivation. Cultivation, urban and industrial development and invasion of non-native plants and woody conifers have fragmented the sagebrush landscape. Slowly, with hard work and through multiple partnerships, the Sage Grouse Initiative is winning some of the land back for sage-grouse. 🐦



A greater sage-grouse chick resting within its prairie habitat in southern Alberta. Photo © W. Lynch