



Federal Funding Dollars for Sage-Grouse Management Benefit Western States



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Executive Summary

Millions of dollars flow to states in connection with restoration of sagebrush landscape, preventing wildland fire and improving sage-grouse habitat – but these benefits, which support private landowners and working ranches, depend on having a reliable framework to fund. That framework exists in the current sage-grouse conservation plans finalized in 2015 and the related commitments made by states.

These projects directly benefit land owners and ranching operations, as well as greater sage-grouse and the broader habitat on which hundreds of species rely. The Natural Resources Conservation Service, through the Sage Grouse Initiative, the Bureau of Land Management and the Department of the Interior provide substantial funding for a wide variety of projects ranging from conservation easements to management techniques to reduction of fire risks. The financial benefits are flowing from the direction set out in the current BLM and Forest Service management plans and the determination made by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the greater sage-grouse no longer warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act.

I. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Sage Grouse Initiative

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), has made critical resources available in western states to assist local landowners in the conservation of the Greater sage-grouse (GrSG). These funds are available through programs authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill. The western states that benefited include California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming – all within the 11 state range occupied by GrSG.

The NRCS has three goals that it is working towards through the SGI: (1) restore and protect habitat for sage-grouse, (2) provide habitat for other sagebrush dependent species, and (3) provide predictability to ranchers. In addition, NRCS recognizes that there are six threats to these goals that it hopes to address by 2018:

- reduce wildfire threat by removing invasive species from 2.17 million acres,
- remove invading confers from 246,000 acres,
- protect 320,000 acres from exurban development through easements,
- protect 921,500 acres of grazing lands from conversion to cropland (cultivation) through easements,
- protect 14,675 acres of mesic habitats, and mark 1.2 million feet (227 miles) of fences to prevent collisions.

Between 2010 and 2016, a total of \$518 million was invested in States by NRCS and partner and landowner matches. This allowed for improved sage-grouse conservation on 5.6 million acres of land. Between 2015 and 2018, when the current the Farm Bill expires, NRCS estimates there will be a total of \$751.3 million in funding spent on 8.0 million acres of land.¹

These funds were directed towards rangeland improvements on sage-grouse habitats, using a wide array of scientifically demonstrated practices that help address habitat quality and fragmentation. Seventy-five percent of these conservation dollars have been invested in Priority Areas for Conservation (PAC) (also called core areas), which were the Fish and Wildlife Service designations of critical habitat that preceded the current Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA). Improved conservation measures included the following activities between 2010 and 2014:²

¹ These data are from the Sage Grouse Initiative Webinar, “Estimating the Economic Impact of Sage Grouse Conservation on Ranches” (September 29, 2017), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLbQnrJD6rX93RSwdyoGIKaxI9yZ_xYIGK&v=SadjXzqP-yY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLbQnrJD6rX93RSwdyoGIKaxI9yZ_xYIGK&v=SadjXzqP-yY;); NRCS, February 2015, Outcomes in Sage Grouse Conservation.

² NRCS, February 2015, Outcomes in Sage Grouse Conservation. Some of these data may differ from data presented in a later NRCS report: NRCS, August 2015, Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0, Investment Strategy, FY 2015-2018, which we also report on

State	Improved Grazing Systems (acres) and Percent in PAC	Conservation Easements (acres) and Percent in PAC	Invasive Conifer Removal (acres) and Percent in PAC	Seedings/Re-Vegetation (acres) and Percent in PAC	Fences Marked or Removed (miles) and Percent in PAC
California	64,204 (56%)	15,187 (71%)	63,299 (65%)	987 (96%)	65 (72%)
Colorado	79,077 (56)	68,988 (86)	1,185 (19)	3,483 (72)	11 (85)
Idaho	249,653 (87)	69,606 (94)	47,830 (77)	5,235 (43)	79 (94)
Montana	409,594 (85)	70,111 (75)	168 (0)	5,442 (14)	104 (96)
Nevada	26,173 (90)	18,272 (100)	22,266 (75)	1,855 (62)	21 (66)
North Dakota	20,173 (100)			2,475 (88)	<1 (100)
Oregon	26,571 (100)	6,701 (1)	199,203 (81)	296 (93)	11 (82)
South Dakota	312,295 (85)				5 (83)
Utah	173,733 (95)	17,229 (100)	70,011 (99)	27,666 (96)	11 (100)
Washington	83,073 (86)	4,369 (100)		677 (41)	29 (10)
Wyoming	993,100 (63)	181,418 (71)	1,280 (80)	4 (100)	14 (36)
Total	2,437,645 (75)	451,884 (79)	405,241 (81)	48,120 (76)	350 (79)

In addition, there were 15,509 acres of weed management and 179 acres of wet meadow restoration range wide that are not shown. Overall rangeland health has been improved on 1.7 million acres since 2010, which reduces the threat from invasive grasses (i.e., cheatgrass, and other species). Large areas have not been converted to cropland in Montana and North and South Dakota due to Farm Bill programs.

These benefits have been achieved on 1,129 working ranches in 11 western states, thus supporting local western ranching economies. There have been 11,149 field visits with landowners. These privately-owned lands represent 40 percent of sage-grouse range. A number of Farm Bill programs have allowed for these conservation measures to be used, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Here are some examples of the type of work funded by these programs:

Colorado: Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust: Viewing Sage Grouse on Conserved Ranch Inspires Staff. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/colorado-cattlemens-agricultural-land-trust-viewing-sage-grouse-on-conserved-ranch-inspires-staff/>

Idaho: Helmick Family Conserves Vital Habitat For Sage Grouse In Idaho: To this multi-generational family, conservation and ranching are one and the same. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/helmick-family-conserves-vital-habitat-sage-grouse-in-idaho/>

Montana: “It’s About Working Lands For Agriculture And Working Lands For Wildlife”: A Montana ranching family uses grazing management to improve rangeland for cattle and habitat for wildlife. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/grazing-management-benefits-montana-ranching-family/>

Nevada: Stewardship With Vision | David Spicer Conserves Habitat In Nevada: Nevada rancher and miner shares his story of why he believes in conserving working lands in Nevada’s Oasis Valley. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/stewardship-vision-david-spicer-conserves-habitat-nevada/>

Oregon: Oregon Rancher Mike Greeley Enhances Mahogany Mountain For The Bird And The Herd: Mike Greeley works with the NRCS-led Sage Grouse Initiative on conservation-minded management to sustain his working lands for wildlife and livestock. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/oregon-rancher-enhances-mahogany-mountain-bird-herd/>

South Dakota: South Dakota rancher adds value to his operation and improves wildlife habitat: Rancher Ron Steineke makes water delivery and grazing improvements that benefit his cattle along with sage grouse and other wildlife. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/south-dakota-rancher-adds-value-operation-improves-wildlife-habitat/>

Utah: Kennedy Ranch Conservation Improvements Benefit Both Livestock And Wildlife In Utah: “Our family is tied to the land and if we do a good job of tending it, it will take care of us,” says Utah rancher Bill Kennedy. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/kennedy-ranch-conservation-improvements-benefit-livestock-wildlife-utah/>

Washington: Rancher K.D. Leander Leaves A Conservation Legacy in Eastern Washington: Rancher’s early adoption of range conservation practices encouraged his neighbors to also enroll in Sage Grouse Initiative programs. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/leander-rancher-success-story/>

Wyoming: Conservation Integral At O’Toole’s Ladder Ranch in Wyoming: Habitat on O’Toole ranch is as good as it gets for antelope, deer, elk and grouse. <https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/conservation-integral-otooles-ladder-ranch-wyoming/>

The SGI, which has been crucial in helping to develop these programs and distribute these funds, was launched in 2010 as a voluntary means to reduce threats facing the sage-grouse on private lands. It has become the primary catalyst for sagebrush landscape conservation in the West, bringing a wide range of local and regional partners together. The SGI effort is part of the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) program.

Eighty-six percent of SGI funding efforts are invested in areas in western states that contain 83 percent of the sage-grouse, with a focus in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, which together comprise 69 percent of the grouse population range-wide. Most of the conservation easements are found in southwest Wyoming, central Idaho, northwest Colorado, and northern Montana with easement acquisition having increased 1,809 percent in four years between 2010 and 2013. It is also worth noting that not only sage-grouse are benefiting from these expenditures of funds. For example, two world class populations of migratory mule deer have benefited and many SGI investments are focused in high priority mule deer habitat, which is also in PACs. In northwest Colorado, a quarter million acres of habitat containing the largest population of sage-grouse and elk in the state was protected. And fence marking is conservatively estimated to have prevented 2,600 fence collisions, representing a population of males greater than that counted annually on leks in Washington, North and South Dakota, and Canada, combined.

These measures have been adopted to the benefit of western ranches, as well as sage-grouse. They enhance rangeland health with prescribed grazing approaches that balance forage availability with livestock demand and by adjusting the timing, frequency and duration of grazing in ways that help provide for sustainable grazing. Large, intact working ranches are being maintained. Local economies are being supported. One benefit of these practices is a reduction in fire threats as well as the threats of invasive species, which are detrimental to grouse, ranching operations, and wildlife populations. These programs have prevented the loss of 60 percent of the available forage for livestock. These practices and investments are “good for cattle, good for ranching operations, and good for America’s rural economy.” They provide predictability for ranchers.

In a 2015 report the NRCS provided additional information about its sage-grouse investments and conservation plans in fiscal year 2105.³ In fiscal year 2015 NRCS planned to invest \$ 18,062,836 million on 620,916 acres under

EQIP and \$ 6,677,625 million on 9,616 acres under ACEP, which brought the total NRCS investment to \$ 291,863,072 million since 2010. Significant expenditures were planned in each of the 11 western states. This represented 1,289 total contracts.

The committee report on the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 reports that NRCS would see an increase of \$864 million, even as overall discretionary spending for agriculture would fall by \$623 million to \$20.9 billion for the fiscal year. The omnibus would boost funding by \$10 million for written conservation plans and program delivery for USDA's conservation technical assistance.

II. Bureau of Land Management Funding

In addition, BLM and Intermountain West Joint Venture partnered in 2016 in a five-year, up to \$5 million intra-agency agreement to promote win-win solutions for wildlife and working lands. The \$5 million provided by the BLM will be matched with partner funding. The purpose of the agreement is to expand the capacity-building model and priority conservation practices pioneered through the SGI by transferring the success on private lands to this new public lands partnership. This agreement endeavors to facilitate collaboration in focal landscapes to accomplish on-the-ground projects such as: conifer removal, fire and invasive treatments, wet meadow habitat restoration, and planning and implementation of range structural improvements.

Additional Resources:

- SGI's Interactive Map on projects (<https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/our-work/science-policy/>)
- SGI's 2016 report: "Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation & the Sagebrush Ecosystem – Collaborative Conservation at Work" (<https://files.acrobat.com/a/preview/a0954eea-528a-4cbf-9cca-50d6939be300>)
- SGI Interactive Map on projects (<https://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/our-work/science-policy/>)

The committee report on the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2017 appropriates \$ 68,900,000 for sage-grouse conservation activities, including implementation of the National Seed Strategy (an increase of \$ 8,900,000 above the FY 2016 enacted level). The funds are to be used for "on-the-ground conservation measures." In addition, the committee stated that conservation is most successful when partners work together, and it expects "the Secretary and the Bureau to work collaboratively with States, communities, industry, and partners to address concerns with the Resource Management Plans and related Land Use Planning Amendments."

III. DOI's Wildland Fire Resilient Landscapes Program

In addition, in 2016 the Department of the Interior announced it would invest \$ 10 million in funding, as a pilot initiative, to improve wildfire resiliency of critical landscapes, primarily in the Great Basin. Much of this work will improve conditions for both ranchers and the sage-grouse. The program is conducted under the Wildland Fire Resilient Landscapes Program, which seeks to restore public lands (forests and rangelands) through multi-year investments. The program pursues projects that emphasize a high level of collaboration with partners, landscape-scale planning across multiple jurisdictions, lessen the risk from catastrophic wildfire, and enhance the protection of critical natural resources and watersheds. The Resilient Landscape Collaboratives (i.e., approved proposals) received funding at a scale to provide results over five to ten years that will significantly contribute to long-term outcomes.

Additional Resources:

- DOI Program's [website](https://www.doi.gov/wildlandfire/wildland-fire-resilient-landscapes-program) for Office of Wildland Fire (<https://www.doi.gov/wildlandfire/wildland-fire-resilient-landscapes-program>)
- Additional information on the projects approved for the [FY 2015 Wildland Fire Resilient Landscapes Program](https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.opengov.ibmcloud.com/files/uploads/2015_06_08_FY%202015%20WFRL%20Program%20Proposals.pdf) (https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.opengov.ibmcloud.com/files/uploads/2015_06_08_FY%202015%20WFRL%20Program%20Proposals.pdf)