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Sage Grouse & Mule Deer

Landscape Scale Habitat Conservation



Photo - Jeremy Houston

Part I

This is the first of a two-part series examining the plight of sage grouse and what it means to mule deer habitat conservation. This article focuses on the voluntary landscape scale conservation underway for sage grouse in response to a potential Endangered Species Act listing.

BY DAVE SMITH

The pre-dawn mist was spiked with the rich scent of sagebrush. It was early October in southern Wyoming, and Dad and I knew that the blood-red streaks in the eastern sky signaled that it was time to pick up the pace.

Soon it was daylight and the sagebrush country was alive. We entered the thigh-high sage where the meadow gave way to the ridge, taking one sure step after another. Suddenly, the sagebrush exploded! Six sage grouse erupted in a flurry of wingbeats as they thundered down the draw. I shuddered with parallel emotions...surprise in that the commotion could have been a great mule deer buck and admiration from witnessing the native birds in their native habitat under circumstances of keen awareness.

Little did I know at the time that sage grouse would become the symbol—the poster child of the sagebrush biome—and that the species would be catapulted into the national debate over public lands management and energy development. Yet, that is exactly what has happened over the last decade. Interestingly, efforts to conserve the iconic native bird will likely have a profound impact on mule deer and mule deer habitat in sagebrush country.

Shared Habitats: Sage Grouse & Mule Deer

Greater Sage-Grouse, referred to herein as sage grouse, have paid the price for a century of changes to the sagebrush landscapes of the West. According to the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), they occupy only 56% of their historic range and have been adversely affected by fire, invasive plants, energy development, grazing, conversion of sagebrush to cropland, encroachment by pinyon-juniper, West Nile virus, habitat fragmentation, and urbanization.

Sage grouse have declined dramatically over the last few decades in places such as the Devil's Garden of northeastern California and Powder River Basin of Wyoming where juniper encroachment and energy development, respectively, have resulted in major landscapes changes. Not surprisingly, mule deer populations have also declined in landscapes that have been altered by these same changes in habitat quality. The needs of the two species aren't universal but they do both require healthy sagebrush landscapes if they are to continue and thrive.

Concerns over sage grouse have been mounting for nearly a decade. The USFWS initiated a review of the species for an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing in 2004 and concluded on January 12th, 2005 that listing of the sage grouse under the ESA was not warranted. However, the decision was tainted by accusations that a former Department of Interior executive meddled in the science on behalf of the Administration, which ultimately led to court settlement for a second review. The USFWS completed the subsequent review this spring.

On March 5th, 2010, the USFWS concluded that an ESA listing for sage



According to the USFWS, sage grouse only occupy 56% of their historic range and have been adversely affected by many negative factors, including energy development.

grouse was “warranted but precluded” by higher priority listing actions. This finding sent a tremor through a wide spectrum of society. The outcome of an ESA listing has far-reaching implications for energy development, ranching, and even voluntary habitat conservation. Significant support exists from stakeholders including wildlife agencies, habitat-based conservation organizations, and private landowners to address the threats to the species, as needed to avoid an ESA listing and maintain jurisdictional responsibility for sage grouse management with the state fish and wildlife agencies.

The high-stakes debate over the proposed ESA listing immediately spurred significant action relative to habitat conservation for sage grouse, at a scale far different than anything that has happened in the past. If the current level of activity is maintained, the sage grouse conservation movement could be very important to mule deer and the habitat conservation work of MDF chapters in sagebrush country.

The Sage Grouse Initiative

On March 15th, 2010, Dave White, Chief of the Natural Resources

Conservation Service (NRCS), announced that NRCS was allocating \$16 million in Environmental Conservation Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) funding to the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), a partnership-based effort designed to spur spatially targeted, landscape-scale sage grouse habitat conservation with Farm Bill conservation programs.

The initiative was generally focused on areas surrounding sage grouse leks, the traditional strutting grounds

used by the grouse to display during the breeding season. As such, it was different than past NRCS Farm Bill program efforts in which sagebrush habitat was generally treated equally from a program eligibility perspective.

Landowner response to the SGI was extremely high, particularly considering that the timing within the federal fiscal year necessitated a short turnaround. NRCS received 525 applications during a three-week sign-up in April. The strong interest resulted in Chief White making another \$5 million available, for a total of \$21 million.

According to Tim Griffiths, NRCS National Sage Grouse Initiative Coordinator, over 250 contracts have been signed for work on private lands and public lands under the control of agricultural producers, and the results presented below are very conservative-estimated, based on preliminary data.

“We are being very strategic in an attempt to truly influence sage grouse populations,” said Griffiths. “Yet these habitat projects are also inherently good for the long-term viability of ranching. We’ve had an amazing level of interest from landowners, and great



While the needs of both mule deer and sage grouse aren't universal, they do both require healthy sagebrush landscapes if they are to continue and thrive.



The Sage Grouse Initiative is generally focused on areas surrounding sage grouse "leks", the traditional strutting grounds used by the grouse to display during the breeding season.

cooperation from the state fish and wildlife agencies and a wide range of conservation partners."

The scale of the SGI is jaw-dropping. Grazing management, a long-time core activity for MDF chapter projects in sagebrush country, was the fundamental element of most projects. NRCS contracted prescribed grazing for sage-grouse on over 640,000 acres, including rest rotation grazing systems on 423,000 acres. The rest rotation systems require 20% of the rangeland to be rested for 15 months to promote recovery of grasses and forbs important to sage grouse nest success.

Juniper removal is also being implemented at a large scale, particularly in Oregon. Over 40,000 acres are being treated, which, according to Griffiths, opens up 130,000 acres of sagebrush habitat that will benefit sage grouse and mule deer. Juniper removal is targeted within sage grouse priority areas near leks and treatments are focused in areas of Phase I and Phase II encroachment where shrubs and forbs are dominant or co-dominant

with trees. And lastly, over 18,000 acres of marginal cropland and previously burned areas are being seeded back to sagebrush and native grasses.

Work is underway to ramp up the effort even further in federal fiscal year 2011, which started on October 1st, and it will likely include a conservation easement component. "We believe that the habitat work for sage

grouse being implemented through the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative is going to be extremely beneficial to mule deer," said John Emmerich, Deputy Director of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department. "So much of the sage grouse work is occurring in winter range complexes critical to mule deer."

What Does It Mean to Mule Deer?

The Oregon version of the SGI is the Oregon Sage-Grouse Habitat Improvement Initiative, a joint effort of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and NRCS. The initiative is being delivered through a science-based implementation plan that focuses on one of the greatest threats to sage grouse and sagebrush habitats in eastern Oregon—juniper encroachment.

Sage grouse occupy about 14 to 15 million acres in Oregon but 80% of the nesting occurs on about 2 million acres that exist within three miles of a lek. ODFW has determined that about 975,000 acres of these high priority sage grouse areas have been invaded by junipers, and



Photo - Dave Peterson

Over 40,000 acres of juniper infestation are being treated, which will open up 130,000 acres of sagebrush habitat...all benefiting sage grouse and mule deer.

about 210,000 acres of that occurs on private lands. Juniper encroachment reduces sagebrush, dries up springs, and provides perch sites for raptors and ravens—all of which reduce sage grouse use and reproductive success. It is a real problem that will require some real resources to address, as juniper removal costs about \$150 per acre in Oregon. The initiative targets 53,000 acres of juniper removal—25 % of the problem on private land—by 2012, at the cost of about \$8 million in predominantly Farm Bill program funding.

Oregon mule deer hunters are likely aware that juniper encroachment has also been eating away at the state's premium mule deer habitat for years. In response to population declines, ODFW developed a Mule Deer Initiative (MDI) in 2008 to increase mule deer numbers to population



Photo - Kelby Hatch

Mule deer and sage grouse are inextricably linked by their connection to sagebrush landscapes. With Oregon's version of the SGI partnering with their Mule Deer Initiative, the future has never looked brighter for both species.

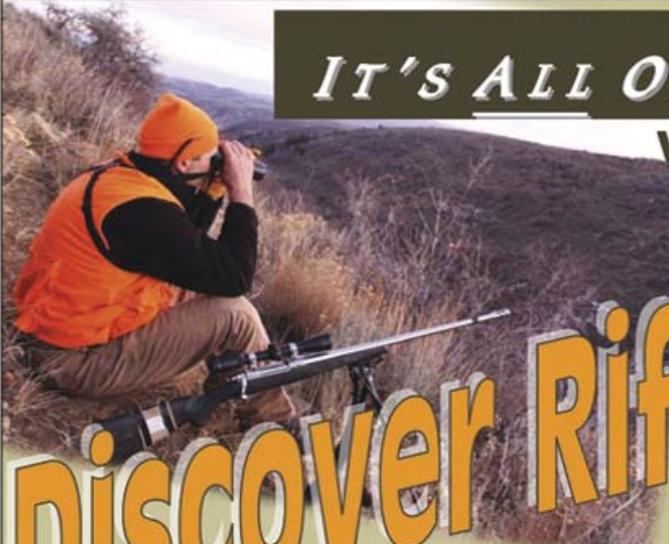
management objectives in five of its Wildlife Management Units (WMU). A primary habitat management strategy identified by the MDI is the removal

of junipers encroaching into key sagebrush habitats.

The Maury WMU, located mostly in

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Crook County between Brothers and Paulina, represents an area where sage grouse and mule deer conservation are converging. Juniper encroachment is listed as the primary source of habitat degradation for mule deer and ODFW has identified the need to treat 20,000 acres. Several significant blocks of sage grouse priority areas occur within the Maury WMU.

Armed with this information, NRCS and ODFW worked in seamless cooperation this spring to focus efforts in this landscape. NRCS provide \$2.6 million to Oregon ranchers to conduct juniper removal on 24,382 acres in five counties statewide, and 59% of that (14,451 acres) was in Crook County!

Griffiths points out that MDF could play a critical role in the SGI in the future. "We are focusing our efforts in

the intact sagebrush landscapes," said Griffiths. "The places where we still have sage grouse represent some of the best mule deer habitat in the West. We really need the help of MDF chapters in building field-level capacity, providing cost-share project funding, and helping us target our work to

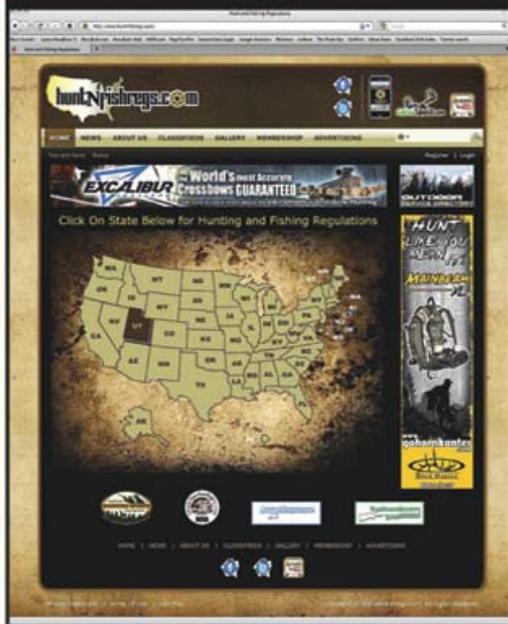


areas that also have high value to mule deer."

Mule deer and sage grouse are inextricably linked by their connection to sagebrush landscapes. It is plausible that the sage grouse habitat conservation currently underway will motivate sustained funding and policy development beneficial to mule deer conservation. If so, the flush of sage grouse from a beloved haunt may enrich the lives of mule deer hunters for many future generations.



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