

conservation SHOWCASE



“ We’ve got to be responsible with how we manage the land and our livestock, so that we have a long, sustainable future. ”

— Mark Bennett

NRCS

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Oregon Ranchers Raise Cattle with a Conservation Vision

Mark and Patti Bennett secure a healthy future for their family, operation and wildlife through multiple conservation improvements on their eastern Oregon ranch

Mark and Patti Bennett own a small slice of heaven: an 8,000-acre working ranch near Unity, Oregon. Their home and red-trimmed barn look out on a series of meadows along Camp Creek that stretch for miles in the shadow of Bull Run Mountain. A few red angus cattle munch on grass nearby, and the smoke from their fireplace rises out of the chimney as we talk about how they manage their ranch.

The Bennetts care deeply about conservation and raising quality natural beef. To them, these two things go hand in hand. Over the last decade, the Bennetts have made several improvements on their ranch that benefit water and forage quality, fish, and wildlife, including the Greater sage-grouse.

“All of the conservation work that Mark and Patti have been doing creates a real bright spot for the birds in that area,” says Nick Myatt, district manager for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) in La Grande, Oregon.

Conservation improvements on the Bennett ranch have resulted in a local upswing in sage grouse numbers. A recent count found about 40 males on a nearby lek.

Myatt nominated the Bennetts for the 2015 Riley Freeman Stewardship Award, a recognition presented to a member of the Oregon



The Bennett's ranch near Unity, Oregon is enrolled with the Sage Grouse Initiative to benefit birds and livestock.

Cattlemen's Association who best exemplifies Freeman's passion for the cattle industry, good land stewardship and avocation for partnerships. Both ODFW and the Cattlemen's Association select the honorees. The Bennetts fit the bill to a tee.

Making conservation improvements to the ranch, as well as raising cattle in a natural beef program under the Global Animal Partnership, gives rise to a sustainable operation, Mark Bennett says. The Global Animal Partnership

emphasizes animal health and welfare, including an emphasis on open-pasture settings for raising cattle.

"Patti and I look at this as our legacy to our children and grandchildren," says Mark. "We want to make sure that we're making things better."

"They do all the things you would look for in a conservation-oriented ranch operation," adds Joshua Uriarte, who worked with the Bennetts for seven years on multiple conservation projects. Uriarte is a past employee of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) and multiple soil and water conservation districts. "The Bennetts have done rest-rotation grazing, range monitoring, and other projects promoting livestock health, watershed health as well as fisheries and water quality. They want to make sure everything on the ranch is working together in harmony, from the birds to the cattle."

When SGI and sage grouse-specific programs kicked off five years ago, the scale of the Bennett's conservation work increased. They have treated more than 5,000 acres on their



Patti Bennett points out a fence marker that helps sage grouse steer clear and avoid potentially fatal fence collisions.

ranch to remove juniper trees, which were encroaching on aspen groves and other open lands on the ranch. Most of the juniper encroachment was in the early stages, Bennett says, but they were growing in fast.

The Bennetts hired local loggers to remove the juniper trees, thanks to contracts for funding through SGI. Their earlier juniper management was funded through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. As a part of these projects, loggers drop the trees and cut the limbs, pile the wood and burn it.

“It’s great that SGI helps with local jobs and economic development,” says Mark, who is also a Baker County Commissioner. “Those jobs are important in Baker County because we don’t cut much timber in the national forest anymore.”

The Bennetts list of conservation projects is long. They improved grazing management by upgrading fences in the forest, enhanced fish passage in Camp Creek, and built eight miles of water pipeline and nine water troughs to improve water quality in the creek.

“We used to do our calving along the creek, but now with the new off-site water system, the riparian area is protected,” Mark says.

With the help of SGI, they have installed nearly 7,000 feet of new wildlife-friendly fencing (where the bottom wire is smooth and 17 inches off the ground to allow antelope to pass underneath), placed reflectors on the top wire of several miles of fencing to increase visibility for low-flying sage grouse, and they’re enrolled in the Natural Resource Conservation Service’s Conservation Stewardship Program, a grazing management program that adopts additional conservation practices to address natural resource concerns.

The Bennetts have also signed a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances with



Mark Bennett shows off healthy sagebrush, a keystone plant that 350+ species--including sage grouse--depend on.



The Bennetts see their conservation practices on the ranch as a gift and a legacy for their grandchildren.

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to further protect sage grouse on their private lands. They carefully monitor grazing in 27 pastures, with monitoring transects set up for each one. All of the conservation work they do is voluntary.

Ranchers need to be proactive to stay in business nowadays, Mark says. As a community leader, he understands that it is important to ranch amicably with fish and wildlife.

“People are watching what we do out here. We’ve got to be responsible with how we manage the land and our livestock, so that we have a long, sustainable future.”

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