



NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
**CONSERVATION
SHOWCASE**



Producer Profile:
Mike Greeley

Programs:
Sage Grouse Initiative

Location:
Rockville, Oregon

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Oregon Ranch Enhances Mahogany Mountain Habitat for the Bird and the Herd

RANCHER MIKE GREELEY USES CONSERVATION-MINDED MANAGEMENT TO SUSTAIN HIS WORKING LANDS FOR WILDLIFE AND LIVESTOCK.

Looking out across the Greeley Ranch from atop Oregon's Mahogany Mountain yields a grand view of sagebrush country, dotted with lava rock outcroppings, groves of aspen, and mountain mahogany. The Owyhee Reservoir shimmers to the north of the ranch and the Steens Mountains jut up like desert sentinels to the southwest. This landscape is the heart of core habitat for greater sage grouse in Oregon.



As Mike Greeley peers across the ranch's expanse from the mountaintop, he explains his family has ranched these lands on and around Mahogany Mountain for close to four generations. His great-grandfather homesteaded along the Owyhee around 1900. When construction began on the Owyhee Reservoir Dam in the 1920s and 30s, the family made the move to its present-day location on Mahogany Mountain.

Mike is the third generation to manage the nearly 5,000-acre family operation and calls the tiny town of Rockville, Oregon home base with his wife and their two grown children. During

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landowner

the week, Mike works as a woodshop teacher for a local high school across state lines in nearby Homedale, Idaho. During evenings and weekends, he’s apt to be found outdoors, handling ranch chores, caring for his 500 head of beef cattle, hunting with family and friends, or just simply enjoying the natural beauty of the mountains and surrounding landscape.

Growing up, Mike explains, he was more interested in the wildlife aspect of ranching than caring for cattle. He spent nearly two decades away from the ranch working as a teacher, and briefly as an outfitter, before returning to take over management of the family operation a decade ago.

“It was after I came back that I was able to fully appreciate the values, work ethic, and ability to work outdoors that ranching provides,” says Mike. “That’s a pretty big thing.”

Upon returning, this renewed appreciation for the ranching way of life combined with Mike’s conservation ethic led him to seek out avenues to make improvements to his ranch that would benefit both the

cattle and wildlife. He heard from a neighbor about conservation incentives offered through the Natural Resource Conservation Service-led Sage Grouse Initiative for practices designed to boost sage grouse habitat.

“At the time, we had a lot of juniper trees on our property that had encroached quite a bit in the last 30 years. I knew they were known for sucking water out of basins and drying up springs,” says Mike. “My neighbor said NRCS would help pay to cut the trees, so I thought to myself, that’s a no-brainer.”

After visiting the NRCS office in Ontario to learn more, Mike soon signed up for the NRCS programs available through SGI. He worked closely with SGI Habitat Conservationist Laura Schnapp on planning a variety of projects across the ranch.

The first step Mike took was eliminating juniper trees that had expanded into sagebrush range. So far, he’s cut 1,209 acres and plans to remove conifers

Mike and NRCS District Conservationist Lynn Larsen discuss how removing junipers have benefited his ranch for wildlife





Since cutting the expanding juniper trees from his ranch Mike has seen more sage grouse nesting in the spring.
Photo Rick McEwan

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”
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from another 360 acres by the end of 2017, says Laura.

While water has yet to return to the area, Mike notes that he can already see some positive change from enhancing the wildlife habitat on the ranch by removing the trees. For instance, without conifers providing perches for raptors and other predators to prey on sage grouse, he is noticing more birds moving back into the area.

“The spring after we cut the trees, there were two sets of sage grouse nesting along the edge of the meadow where there used to be conifers,” says Mike. “I hadn't seen birds in that area for nearly 30 years! It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that what we had done was working and making a difference.”

Along with removing juniper, Mike is also enrolled in NRCS's Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a five-year contract that includes a number of important management practices that benefit rangeland health. As part of this contract, Mike adopted a prescribed grazing plan. He waits to graze his cattle on pastures until after grasses have set seed and rotates pastures frequently throughout the grazing season. This prevents overgrazing and keeps pastures healthy.

Mike also changes the time of year cattle begin grazing pastures annually. Plus, he uses his cattle as a tool to help control invasive weeds like medusahead and cheatgrass by targeting problem areas with grazing early in the season when young growth of the weeds is most palatable to cattle. Grazing in this fashion gives a competitive advantage for growing the desirable deep-rooted perennial bunchgrasses, which are typically dormant this time of year and critical for sage grouse food sources and habitat requirements.

“We've also established monitoring sites so we can compare grazing from

one year to the next,” says Mike. “We want to track the weather, precipitation, and stocking rates, so we don't overuse pastures and maintain good utilization, while leaving grass for the habitat needs of birds to nest successfully in the spring.”

Additionally, Mike has also begun rotating areas where he places salt and mineral supplement and feeds hay for livestock across all of his acres to improve animal distribution. In addition, he uses hay harvesting methods that allow wildlife to flush and escape safely when he mows his fields.

Unfortunately, some of the other SGI-sponsored conservation enhancement projects planned for the Greeley Ranch have been delayed due to Oregon's severe drought.

“Due to the fire hazard earlier this summer, we just couldn't get out there when the grass was dry because one spark would ignite the whole country,” says Mike, who is also an active member of his local Rangeland Fire Protection Association.

Now that drought conditions are improving, Mike hopes to begin working on two of the three spring developments he is slated to install with NRCS's assistance before year's end. As part of his 5-year CSP contract, he also plans to complete work this fall on restoring a windbreak that had previously burnt. When re-established, it will serve as a shelterbelt for wildlife.

With NRCS's help, Mike plans to implement the rest of his projects by the end of 2017. Still on the docket to be completed include two new water wells, a solar pumping plant, and several associated livestock watering facilities. “The intent is to put livestock water on the range that can double as water supply in order to fight wildfires and improve rangeland health,” says Laura. Next year, Mike will carry out a post-fire

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—Laura Schnapp
SGI Habitat Conservationist

reseeding of native plants on approximately 60 acres of his property that burnt during the 2015 Leslie Gulch fire. To allow the new plants to establish, Mike will also defer grazing of this area for two years. After native range plants have returned, the area will once again provide necessary habitat for upland birds such as sage grouse, Hungarian partridge, and quail, as well as wildlife like deer, elk, and antelope. While it's an ongoing process, says Mike, he's making progress.

“We're doing a better job on the range than we did in the past by rotating pastures and working with federal agencies to come up with better plans, instead of sticking to how we always did things before,” says Mike. “Through progressive thinking and a willingness to try new things, we work together as a team.”

Laura agrees, noting, “Mike is a rancher who has a deep understanding of the history of this region, including how changes in the land and relationships between people, cattle, and wildlife occur in the sagebrush steppe.” Mike is committed to sustainable, conservation-minded management. His passion for creating a ranch that is sustainable for all species shows that he and his family are devoted advocates for wildlife on working lands in Oregon.

“Sage grouse have been a part of my life ever since my first hunting experience when I was 12 years old,” says Mike. “They're an iconic bird and they've always had a special place in my heart. The best I can make my ranch for wildlife, the better it is for me and my future generations.”