



O’Keeffe Ranch, Warner Valley, Oregon

John O’Keeffe grazes beef cattle in prime sage grouse habitat near the small town of Adel in southeast Oregon. His family’s fourth generation ranch sits in the Warner Valley, surrounded by peaks of over 7,000 feet. The O’Keeffes have access to 120,000 acres of permitted federal grazing land in addition to their own 18,000-acre property. “It’s regular high desert—sagebrush, bunch grass community to the east, and ponderosa pine forests to the west.” This variety

of habitats allows him to keep his animals happy throughout the year. As grass becomes dry by June and July, he brings his cattle to the higher elevation forested land. As the early winter winds arrive in October he moves them to the family’s deeded land.

The O’Keeffe ranch originally began as a sheep operation in the early 1900s before the family converted it to cattle in the 1950s. John O’Keeffe took over the business from his father in the early



1980s and has since assumed several leadership roles. These include stints as chairman of the Public Lands Committee, Oregon's Director of the Public Land Council, and his current position as President-Elect of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association.

Jeremy Maestas, state biologist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), notes that O'Keeffe has been a key part of an innovative sage grouse conservation project involving multiple partners. According to Maestas, O'Keeffe saw the value of restoring habitat for both sage grouse and livestock and convinced several neighbors to join the partnership through his on-the-ground actions removing juniper trees. In the Warner uplands, juniper crowds out sagebrush and is a primary threat to sage grouse, mule deer, and other species dependent

on sagebrush. To counteract this trend, habitat improvements on private lands are matched with juniper removal on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In all, about 50,000 acres are being improved by treating all of the encroaching trees in this 100,000-acre landscape.

In an unusual opportunity, the BLM started monitoring seasonal bird use well before the project's habitat restoration phase began. They were able to collect data from before and after the restoration, which is one of the strongest designs for field studies. "We had all the right ingredients for us to invest in the science." The project involved multiple partners, including the BLM, the state of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, universities, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI).

Partners first established a plan for long-term collaboration through research agreements with the University of Idaho and Oregon State University. The five-year University of Idaho study of sage grouse response to juniper removal involved wildlife biologist Dr. Kerry Reese and John Severson, a Ph.D. candidate in Reese's lab. Maestas makes a case for sustained research studies, cautioning that achieving an increase in grouse populations requires a long-term commitment. "Getting to actual population change is going to take time. We wouldn't expect population-level effects for at least a decade."

Through its research, the group has identified factors that hurt sage grouse populations. Severson and project partners published a paper examining the relationship between tree cover and mating grounds,

referred to as leks. Out of 152 leks in their study, not a single one remained active when there was more than four percent tree cover surrounding it. “That was an early indication that they’re particularly sensitive. That’s not a lot of trees out there, but this species really doesn’t like that type of structure in its habitat. And that is a population level parameter that we pay attention to. When we remove trees we can improve the amount of habitat and potentially make it a more successful place for them to make a living.”

The tight-knit ranching community around Warner Valley keeps a watchful eye on other factors that can irrevocably alter grazing areas and sage grouse habitat. Invasive species like Medusa Head Rye, Russian Knapweed, and Mediterranean Sagebrush, for example, form monocultures unpalatable to wildlife and livestock. “I have found medusa head patches the size of a saddle blanket out there,” O’Keeffe observes. “They’re not there anymore. There’s not medusa head within 10 miles of those sites. That’s what you get with ranchers that are covering the ground looking for cattle and doing their day-to-day work.”

O’Keeffe and his neighbors also monitor each other’s land to ensure that their sage-steppe habitat is protected from abnormally hot fires. While fire once renewed such ecosystems, it now poses a challenge because of modern development patterns, introduced species that ignite more easily, and accumulated juniper brush that burns at higher temperatures. These intense fires threaten sage grouse and grazing habitat by sterilizing soil and encouraging colonization by invasive plant species following a burn.



Grazing animals, O’Keeffe explains, are part of the solution to limit fire size and severity because they reduce the amount of fuel on the landscape. “This is an environment that evolved in fire. But now that we have exotic grasses and the fact that we put out fires to protect highways and schools and dwellings—fire just isn’t working like it was pre-settlement. So we manage fire, and part of that is grazing. The other part of that is that we’ve got to keep the fires from getting big.” For this they rely on rural fire associations. By putting out fires before they become a major conflagration, the group saves millions in federal fire fighting dollars and keeps the sagebrush system intact.

Ranchers as well as project partners at all levels of government are thus working hard to protect sage-

steppe habitat for wildlife and livestock. The ranching community in Warner Valley remains concerned, however, about the impacts of an Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing of the sage grouse. O’Keeffe explains that each loss of access to grazing allotments reduces the viability of his operation.

If a ranch goes out of business, O’Keeffe contends, it’s not just about one operation being replaced by a similar one. “When these places sell, they don’t sell to another rancher who does it just a little different. They’ll sell to somebody that wants to ranch, but he’s got to chop off several parcels at development prices to make his ranch cash flow. So habitats that are up in these mountain meadows are going to have a hunting lodge, a couple dirt bikes and some dogs, a power line going in, and another road. It’ll take away from the intact landscape needed for ranching and wildlife.”

All of this points to the importance of a balanced approach to conservation that includes voluntary conservation partnerships working toward tangible outcomes. Maestas notes that the Warner Valley ranchers have definitely made an impression on those involved in a decision about listing sage grouse. “In our conversations with the Fish and Wildlife Service and others, they’re very impressed with the level of engagement, the level of actual on-the-ground conservation that’s going on. And half the battle’s not just proving that you’re right, but ensuring that you have a structural change in how you implement and monitor and evaluate your actions. What we’re trying to do is demonstrate that we’re invested not only in strategic implementation but in the science to measure it over time.”

Referring to balancing regulation with voluntary conservation, Maestas believes that there’s room for more partnership building. “It’s definitely a complex issue in terms of whether we can change the model of conservation from more of a regulatory approach to a proactive and voluntary approach as really having equal footing.” He asserts that the formation of the SGI in 2010 is an example of that new model. “I get a little philosophical about this because I think we’re in the midst of a paradigm shift in how we can deal with at-risk species challenges. Prior to 2010 I would say most of what we did was random acts of kindness. Met with ranchers who were willing, did good things on those parcels. But you know, there really wasn’t the collective will among all the partners to cooperatively do enough. The scale really changed in 2010. We have engaged people to care and to recognize that when we do good things for sage grouse, it isn’t just about sage grouse. It’s about rangeland health. It’s about the future of the rural west. When ranchers like John O’Keeffe work with us, they know that it’s for that future generation that they want to pass the ranch on to.”