

***Conserving the Greater Sage Grouse:
A Compilation of Efforts Underway on
State, Tribal, Provincial and Private Lands***

Executive Summary

In the West, we are witnessing an unprecedented conservation effort. Eleven states are working together to protect the Greater Sage Grouse, a bird whose habitat covers most of the Western United States. Given the scope of the area, which stretches from Colorado to California and north from Utah to Montana, this coordinated conservation effort is nothing short of remarkable.

Hundreds of stakeholders representing a cross section of Western interests – ranchers, environmental organizations, industry groups and government agencies – have joined together to form 64 local working groups. These groups are busy collecting new scientific data about the grouse, identifying key conservation priorities and forging partnerships with local landowners for conservation purposes.

To demonstrate the extent of the effort underway in the West, the Western Governors' Association has compiled two reports: ***Conserving the Greater Sage Grouse — Examples of Partnerships and Strategies at Work Across the West***; and this document, ***Conserving the Greater Sage Grouse — A Compilation of Efforts Underway on State, Tribal, Provincial and Private Lands***. The latter document is a compilation of state and local conservation efforts across the Greater Sage Grouse range comprising portions of 11 Western states and two Canadian provinces.

The voluntary and significant efforts documented in these publications demonstrate a strong, locally driven commitment to conserve the Greater Sage Grouse by all parties involved, from private landowners to federal partners. These efforts are gaining momentum. The Western governors believe the efforts documented in these publications is sufficient and demonstrate the commitment of all parties involved, from the private landowner to the federal partner, to ensure the conservation and preservation of the Greater Sage Grouse and the enhancement of its habitat.

Data released by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in its recent report, ***Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats***, shows populations in most areas have stabilized or declined only slightly in the last 15 to 20 years. In many areas, numbers actually increased between 1995 and 2003.

Potential threats to the Sage Grouse prompted many of the collaborative efforts by local, state and federal entities to promote land management programs that conserve and restore Sage Grouse populations. Potential threats to the Sage Grouse also have prompted multiple petitions for protecting it under the Endangered Species Act. The Western governors believe that the initiative of the local working groups is vital to the implementation of projects that will protect habitat and address other needs of the Sage Grouse.

Sage Grouse are landscape birds, meaning large expanses of land are required to provide all the habitat components for their annual life-cycle. Sage Grouse populations have very specific requirements for particular habitat types, such as wintering and early brood-rearing areas. If one of the life-cycle habitats is degraded, limited or missing, the entire population in that area may be compromised. Sage Grouse often find essential parts of their habitat needs on state and/or private lands. The private lands in the West are often mixed with public lands in a mosaic pattern. If the critical private land habitat is lost, the sage-grouse habitat values for large expanses of adjacent public lands may be severely reduced.

Approximately 28 percent of the bird's habitat is in private ownership and another five percent is under state management, which makes these lands essential to conserving the Sage Grouse. In the state of Washington alone, there are 974,020 acres of habitat currently occupied by Sage Grouse, 44 percent (427,538 acres) of which is private land. Private lands provide key components of the Sage Grouse life-cycle habitats. Water, increased overall production, security and intense stewardship make those acres resource rich and more productive than surrounding public lands. Listing of the Sage Grouse would threaten the cooperation that the private landowners are now willing to provide. In addition, high percentages of streamside lands are typically in private ownership in the Western states. Streamside lands are extremely important as late, brood-rearing habitat for grouse, especially during periods of drought.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's private-lands conservation programs provide many opportunities for accomplishing the goals developed for Sage Grouse conservation. The programs provide incentives for private landowners to develop or set aside lands that can be utilized to create or enhance Sage Grouse habitat.

These programs include the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), and the Farmland Protection Program (FPP).

In the West, CRP lands are locally important to Sage Grouse and sharp-tailed grouse conservation. For example, on one study site in Washington state, over 50 percent of Sage Grouse nests were located within CRP fields and significant Sage Grouse winter use was observed in CRP fields. Loss of the CRP acres could be detrimental to numerous Sage Grouse populations throughout the West. Acres already enrolled in CRP in the Western states are as follows.

Acres enrolled in CRP in Sage Grouse Range*

California	17,079
Colorado	391,352
Idaho	760,207
Montana	3,377,712
N. Dakota	569,735
Nevada	151
Oregon	443,892
S. Dakota	194,818
Utah	197,162

Washington	1,254,327
Wyoming	279,684

***Includes some buffer area near existing populations**

Many states are implementing their own conservation programs for private lands. These programs can play a substantial roll in conserving Sage Grouse populations as they are developed locally using the best management practices identified for that particular part of the Sage Grouse range.

Other important efforts are underway. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management are cooperatively developing a vital range-wide conservation assessment. The Bureau of Land Management has completed its draft, "Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy," which will be finalized in 2004. The North American Grouse Partnership is developing a conservation plan for all grouse species in North America.

These efforts are critical because they are good for the species. A climate of trust and cooperation, where landowners work in good faith with government agencies is the only sure course toward long-term Greater Sage Grouse conservation. If the health and viability of the Greater Sage Grouse is a primary concern, then we should look first to local, cooperative measures like those detailed in this report to ensure our success.