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Sage Grouse Initiative: Ranchers step up to prevent a listing and improve rangeland

by WLJ



Sage grouse in flight after release. Photo courtesy of Kimberly Anderson.

Touring Devil's Garden with rancher Willy Hagge near Alturas, CA, provided far more than a view of Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) projects to remove invading junipers from rangelands.

For starters, I met Louise.

She's a cow of a different color among the herds that Hagge grazes seasonally on the Modoc National Forest close to the border of Oregon. When we pulled up to a water hole in the rough lava rock country, the queenly red Hereford rested on a grassy knoll above a few black Angus.

Louise is a good cow with one exception, Hagge tells me. She bears a calf every season, but she's an escape artist who likes to head toward his Pit River home ranch where she was bottlefed as a calf. To deter her, he pastures Louise as far away as possible, which means she mixes with the Angus instead of with the other Herefords. Matching the cattle by color is his trick for divvying up herds among the four rotating fields of his allotment.

Cattle across the west stand to benefit from range improvements brought about by the recent initiative of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). While impressive to rattle off SGI statistics, like 450-plus ranchers managing nearly 2 million acres benefiting sage grouse in 11 western states, numbers can't give the personal view of daily living in far-flung sagebrush country.

Hagge is lean, tall and articulate. He sports a distinguished gray mustache and an engaging smile. A second-generation rancher, he's pleased that his son will be taking the reins next. On a fine June day, Hagge drove across rough two-track roads into the heart of a juniper removal project where the downed trees expose vigorous sagebrush and bunchgrass nudging up from the red soils between pock-marked lava rocks.

"The goal is that the bird will win and grazing protections will win, too," Hagge tells me, as we look over freshly cut trees.

That's basically the motto of SGI: to achieve sage grouse conservation through sustainable ranching. SGI funding for juniper cutting to restore sagebrush-steppe comes from Farm Bill dollars dedicated to preventing the declining bird from being listed as an endangered species.

The initiative has spent more than \$100 million and leveraged another \$60 million in partnership dollars in the two years since NRCS Chief Dave White launched the new paradigm for recovering wildlife species.

SGI came on the heels of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 2010 finding that declines in sage grouse across their range make the bird warranted for listing, but precluded by higher priority species. The service offered a window until 2015 that gives time for recovery efforts aimed at keeping the bird off the list.

"It's way better to be involved and working with the agencies and having a say in the outcomes than to be told what to do," Hagge says.

While SGI focuses on conserving and improving rangelands with high numbers of sage grouse (like in the Warner Mountains of Oregon to the north), there's flexibility, too. Here, funding supports the recovery of California birds that had dwindled to five remaining males on the last breeding ground or "lek" in 2005. The funding rewards significant grassroots momentum, strong partnerships, and encouraging signs of resurgence. Twenty males showed up on the lek this year, a four-fold increase.

Across the west, SGI projects differ depending on need. In northern California and Oregon, juniper invasion is a serious problem for cattle and for wildlife habitat. The native trees expanded into sagebrush lands over the last 150 years, after disruptions to the natural fire ecology. Historically, frequent fires swept through the range, carried by grasses and forbs, and prevented the spread of slow-growing junipers. The trees that survived clung mainly to rocky outcrops and poor soils where fire could not spread easily.

Nineteenth century unregulated livestock grazing took a toll on the fine fuels that carried fire. Then came the Smokey Bear era of putting out wildfires in forests and range alike. Without fire, junipers took hold in deeper soils. In places, juniper has become a dense forest with no value for sage grouse, little value for cattle, and not much for mule deer and a host of other wildlife, from Brewer's sparrows to pygmy rabbits.

Sage grouse and trees simply don't mix, a key reason why the population in the Modoc National Forest area plummeted from some 14,000 birds in the 1970s to a handful today.

Hagge joins private and public partners committed to a local plan that combines relocating sage grouse from Nevada and Oregon with expanding and improving habitat to meet the birds' needs for connected sagebrush-steppe, free of juniper forest barriers. Their proactive efforts are tied to their experience with the Klamath Basin water crisis of 2001. None wanted to see the sage grouse follow suit as an endangered species that could impact livelihoods.

Kimberly Anderson, Modoc National Forest supervisor, is committed to helping curb what she calls "the tide of juniper rolling across the landscape." The majority of sage grouse potential habitat lies on Forest Service lands. Tall with waist-length red hair, Anderson possesses the admirable quality of listening and leading equally well.

"We have a huge opportunity to do some change across the landscape," Anderson says. "It's the opportunity."

Since her arrival less than two years ago, Anderson has stepped up to solve what has proved to be an unexpected challenge—timing. When SGI funds go to private lands, the sound of chainsaws cutting junipers follows within months. While landowners follow a tailored prescription to benefit sage grouse habitat and leave old growth junipers, it's a straightforward approval process.

However, when the funding goes to grazing permittees to cut junipers on Forest Service allotments, the process is slower because of federal and state regulations that require archeological, botany, and wildlife surveys. Faced with lean budgets and fewer staff on the ground, Anderson has made the sage grouse recovery effort a high

priority.

One landowner known to bend Anderson's ear is Mike Byrne, who ranches on private and public lands some 30 miles west of Willy Hagge near the town of Tule Lake and closest to the one active sage grouse lek on Clear Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The friends share a common goal of a sagebrush habitat corridor through the juniper forest.

"When I was a kid, there were birds flying up from the road by the lake so thick they blocked out the sun," Byrne recalls as we head to the refuge with a group of partners.

"The birds move great distances and you have to have the habitat for them to flourish," says Byrne, who can be serious but often lapses into witty puns that keep you on your toes. He's a multi-generational rancher from one of the earliest families to settle in the Klamath Basin, back in the 1860s. On the national level, Byrne is a state director and past president of the Public Lands Council.

"SGI is putting money on the ground," Byrne says. "We got all the agencies together. We took the biologist report. We found the key areas where the birds were speaking to us, you could say, by where they were going. We're trying to improve the habitat where they want to go."

We drive up to the Clear Lake Hills where a wildlife technician waits for us, armed with radio telemetry gear, and has pinpointed three sage grouse hens that did not nest this year. Hiking down into a draw thick with sagebrush, wildflowers, grasses and a few cut junipers, the collared birds prove remarkably elusive.

At last, we flush the first and then the second and third grouse. They rise up in a flurry of wings and cackles. Within seconds, the heavy-bodied fliers have vanished back into the pungent sagebrush.

Biologist Chad Bell of Clear Lake NWR leads the research effort that has transplanted 75 females and several males over the past seven years. The newcomers are blending in well with the 23 collared resident birds, adding genetic diversity to the flock. He's reporting high nesting success, with little predation from ravens or coyotes. Sage grouse nest under sagebrush and Bell's data shows survival goes up with the added cover of medium height grasses.

Byrne has taken a personal interest in the bird's recovery as well as restoring grazing lands. He's never missed the annual release of the new birds, typically on a frigid March dawn. When we drive close to the lek, we stop to admire a section of Mowitz Creek that's vital for sage grouse hens and chicks to find bugs and waters from the safety of sheltering grasses.

"That used to be a dry, fine white powder pounded by grazing, mostly from wild horses," he says. Byrne points to the emerald grasses and clear waters that he fenced a few years earlier. Just then a cinnamon teal and her ducklings swim away from under cover.

Byrne also teams up with Clear Lake NWR Manager Bridget Nielsen to use cattle grazing as a tool to get rid of a nasty weed called Medusahead that came in after a wildfire.

Nielsen is one fireball when it comes to bringing back the birds from the brink. When SGI came along with hundreds of thousands of dollars to aid the juniper cutting effort, she was thrilled.

"We were sitting in the front in the driver's seat and we put the foot on the gas," she says.

Nielsen is quick to credit the efforts of all the partners involved, with praise for ranchers like Byrne, Hagge and Ray Ackley, another longtime rancher who lives a few miles from the town of Tule Lake.

I spent much of a day with Ackley, too, first in his home surrounded by irrigated hayfields and then driving out to see juniper projects on private lands and public grazing allotments.

He remembers waves of sage grouse lifting up in huge flocks from one of his fields where low juniper stumps are the only indicators of the trees that once were barriers to sage grouse. As he told me the story, a half-dozen pronghorn raced by to mingle briefly with his cattle. Ackley believes the grouse soon will return to the fields that lie about three miles from the Clear Lake hills. He showed me a ridge of lava rock chock full of deep cracks and high sagebrush that is ideal for sheltering the birds from winter snow.

"All the agencies and private landowners involved here are working together in the same direction," Ackley says. "That's the kind of cooperation and continuity we need."

For more on the Sage Grouse Initiative, please visit the website: www.sagegrouseinitiative.com. — **Deborah Richie, SGI Communications**

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