

Conserving Sage Grouse Across International Boundaries: Canadian ranchers tour conservation projects in Phillips and Valley County, Montana

By Kelsey Molloy, Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Range Conservationist, NRCS Malta Field Office (partnership position with the Montana Association of Conservation Districts)



The longest sage grouse migration known in the world links Canada's struggling population of birds in Saskatchewan to wintering habitat as far south as the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge – a 100 mile journey. Recently, groups from both sides of the border met in Montana with a goal of sharing ideas and keeping the habitat corridor intact.

The Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, based out of Saskatchewan, Canada organized a tour of conservation and land management efforts taking place in north central Montana in September. The group consisted primarily of ranchers from Saskatchewan and Alberta, as well as a researcher from MSU, staff from Grasslands National Park in Canada, and staff from the NRCS office in Malta. They visited both Phillips and Valley County September 22-23, 2014.

The first day of the tour took place in Valley County, where John Fahlgren, SGI Range Conservationist (partner position with Montana Association of Conservation Districts), and Tracy Cumber, NRCS District Conservationist both from the Glasgow office, highlighted projects that are being worked on through the NRCS-led Sage Grouse Initiative in north Valley County. The core area in north Valley County is primarily grassland and silver sagebrush habitat, similar to habitat in Canada. The Canadian group was interested to see what prime silver sagebrush grouse habitat looked like south of the border. The Sage Grouse Initiative works with ranchers to implement NRCS practices, such as prescribed grazing, to improve habitat for sage grouse. Since the Canadian sage grouse population migrates south into Montana in the winter this core

area is particularly important for maintaining the viability of the sage grouse population in Saskatchewan.

As part of the day, the group also met with two Bureau of Land Management employees, who discussed the agencies efforts to convert a crested wheatgrass pasture back to native range. The location was chosen because it is close to a sage grouse lek and data from collared sage grouse in the area indicated they were avoiding the crested wheatgrass pasture.

The second day of the tour, the group visited The Nature Conservancy's Matador ranch and learned about how it is operated as a grass bank. Brian Martin, Director of Science with the Nature Conservancy and Charlie Messerly, ranch manager, led the tour and explained their management practices. The day began with an explanation of how a grass bank works. Local producers lease AUMs on TNC land and can receive reduced rates for AUMs by implementing conservation practices on their own ranches, such as protecting prairie dog colonies on their private land. This means that conservation practices are extended beyond the Matador's borders to those surrounding ranches. The Canadian group wanted to see how the grass bank was run to see if it was an option for conservation in Canada.