

# **Tanner Family Improves Habitat For Cattle and Sage Grouse in Prime Habitat Area: NW Utah's Box Elder County**

By Steve Stuebner

At the Tanner family's Della Ranch, they run about 1,000 head of Angus cattle on a mix of private and public lands in the heart of prime sage grouse habitat in Northwest Utah, due west of the Great Salt Lake. During the summer months, they also run a guest ranch. People come from all over the world for a chance to ride horseback in a cattle drive, participate in daily ranch chores and soak up the vast views from the top of the Grouse Creek Mountains.

The Tanners recently entertained several Swedish women who had traveled to Yellowstone National Park to research a story about wolves prior to their arrival. Knowing the women enjoyed seeing wildlife, Jay Tanner said, "Let me show you our sage grouse."

It was springtime, and a bunch of male sage grouse were strutting their stuff on a lek located on the Tanner's private land. Tanner took the women out in the wee hours of the morning in hopes of seeing female sage grouse fly in to mate with the males.

"We had a good morning," Tanner recalls. "We saw deer and elk on the way to the lek, and there were 40 to 50 males strutting away on the lek. The gals set up their cameras, and then here come three elk right up to us. They got some really neat pictures of the elk walking right up to the lek. It was a unique experience for them, and they were really excited."

The Tanners are cattle ranchers, but they also enjoy improving habitat on the ranch for sage grouse, wildlife and livestock. "What's good for sage grouse is good for cattle and other wildlife, too," says Jay Tanner.

"It's interesting that the habitat we create for our cows also is the same habitat that the wildlife need," adds his brother, Brent, in a video produced by the National Cattlemen's Foundation Environmental Stewardship Program in Colorado, an organization that honored Della Ranches with a stewardship award in 2011.

The Tanners have been working on improving their ranch over seven generations dating back to the days when their ancestors homesteaded the ranch in the 1870s. Over the last five years, Della Ranches

have teamed up with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to make voluntary cost-share improvements on their private land to benefit sage grouse. The NRCS-led Sage Grouse Initiative funded the projects since that program launched in in 2010.

The Sage Grouse Initiative is a national partnership that aims to proactively conserve sage grouse and habitat on private ranch lands in 11 western states. Sage grouse are considered a candidate species for protection under the Endangered Species Act; a final decision on listing is expected in September of next year.

Improvements for sage grouse on Della Ranches include the removal of approximately 9,000 acres of junipers, tweaking grazing management to make room for sage grouse nesting and raising their broods during the spring and early summer, and installing water developments for cattle and wildlife.

The Tanners also provide access to their property to Utah State University graduate students, who are working with Utah State professor Terry Messmer to study the area's sage grouse populations on private and public lands. Contacted about the habitat work that the Tanners are working on, Messmer was decidedly upbeat.

"Our goal is to create the most space and habitat as possible for sage grouse, and this would not happen without folks like Jay Tanner," Messmer says. "Jay and his wife Diane are really committed to this work."

So are Tanner's two brothers, Blaine and Brent, who operate the ranch together with Jay as a close family unit.

Messmer was happy because sage grouse populations increased by 40 percent in Utah statewide in 2014, and counts were up by 20 percent in Box Elder County. He postulates that all of the conifer removal projects in the county are making a difference.

"There are lots of landowners doing conifer removal in Box Elder County," says Jeff Schick, District Conservationist for NRCS in Tremonton, Utah. "We've treated tens of thousands of acres out there. That's where the sage grouse populations are concentrated the most. The work we've done has had real positive impacts out there."

Schick notes that more SGI funds have been spent in Box Elder County in Utah than any other county because of the concentration of sage grouse populations in that northwest corner of the state.

Through SGI and the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Tanner has removed juniper stands that were encroaching rapidly on uplands and meadows. By removing the trees and burning the limbs, the Tanners have opened up the sagebrush habitat for native grasses and forbs to recolonize.

Jay Tanner likes what he's seeing so far. "I've been thrilled, just very pleased with the response," he says. "It's almost unbelievable how the native species are coming back."

"We know the sage grouse are using those areas -- our students have documented that," Messmer says. "Now we're looking at production rates. Populations are tied to productivity and weather. We're still a couple of years away from any confirmed results."

Conifer (juniper) treatments help open up more grazing areas on Tanner's private land that lie above meadows that sage grouse like to use when raising their young in the spring and early summer.

"Some of my property is really prime nesting habitat and brood-rearing habitat for sage grouse," Tanner says. "It's nice to have new feed in the juniper control areas. My cattle can use that until later in the summer when the sage grouse broods have moved on. It's OK to give them room."

Tanner notes that sage grouse also like to hang out in areas that have been grazed by livestock. "They like to feed on the bugs," he says.

Under EQIP, Tanner made some improvements to his pasture-management system on private lands prior to the advent of the SGI program. He created a three-pasture system with his fencing, and then wildlife volunteers later installed fence markers on the top strand of the fences to prevent sage grouse collisions. The reflective fence markers are part of many SGI projects across the west, following research by University of Idaho graduate student Bryan Stevens, who found that the low-flying sage grouse had trouble seeing barbed wire fence when flying into leks (their breeding grounds).

As part of a grazing improvement program with the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, the Tanners also have installed water pipelines and water troughs in upland areas to help distribute cattle on the open range.

"We have buried about two miles of pipe and put in three troughs so far, and by next spring, we'll have an additional three or four more water troughs," Tanner says. "This will help distribute the cattle better on the range, and we can get more full utilization of our pastures."

Conifer-removal projects also have allowed some historic springs to produce water, springs that were dried up for years. "The springs are producing much better," he says. "If we get out of this drought pattern we've been in, I'm expecting to see the springs do much better."

Jay and Diane Tanner stay involved in local committees to stay abreast of natural resource issues. Jay is the chair of the local sage grouse working group and he's on the board of the Box Elder Conservation District. Diane chairs the West Box Elder Coordinated Resource Management Group. It tackles issues spanning from conifer removal to noxious weed control, water quality issues and economic development.

Clearly, the Tanner family puts in the extra time and care to work toward an enduring future. "My family has been here since the 1870s," says Jay Tanner. "Our goal is to conserve our natural resources so we make things sustainable for the long-term. It's always a learning process. We're always learning as we go along."

"Jay's one of those guys who sees the vision, sees the future," says Messmer. "They want to do what's right for the resource. It's a proactive attitude that's embedded in the culture of this part of Utah."

"They really are proactive," adds Schick, who nominated the Tanners for the Environmental Stewardship award. "They are really advanced ranchers -- they're trying to anticipate the issues and stay ahead of the curve."

Plus, through running the guest ranch, the Tanner family teaches visitors about ranching and wildlife conservation at the ground level. After staying at the ranch for a week, people gain a new perspective about land stewardship.

"We share a little piece of heaven with those who come here," says Diane Tanner.

(End)