

Many Montana landowners are long familiar with the rhythmic strutting of the greater sage-grouse attracting mates on dancing grounds across rangelands each spring. Sage-grouse are also gaining recognition as a species that responds to activities at local and landscape-scales. This means habitat management for the conservation of sage-grouse requires coordination and investment among interest groups and private landowners across large expanses of public and private lands. Landowners play a pivotal role in implementing broad-scale strategies at local levels to conserve this iconic species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has designated the greater sage-grouse as a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act. They will make a final listing determination by fall 2015. Voluntary implementation of conservation practices by private landowners, through the NRCS Sage-grouse Initiative or other programs, can help preclude the need to list under the Endangered Species Act.



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Landowner Assistance Programs

for Conservation of Greater Sage-grouse in Montana



The following information highlights various programs available to landowners that can be leveraged for conserving sage-grouse populations while also promoting sustainable ranching operations. As our friends in Montana's Conservation Districts say, "What's good for cows is good for sage-grouse." There is a win-win out there that we hope this brochure will highlight. All the programs listed here are voluntary. Contact your local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Office, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Regional Office, or Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Field Office for more information on any of these programs.

Think Collaboratively! There are numerous opportunities in Montana to coordinate among agencies to help improve sagebrush-grasslands for livestock, sage-grouse, and other wildlife species!

Range Management

There are several working lands programs available that provide technical and financial assistance to landowners employing range practices beneficial to sage-grouse. Technical assistance is available for any of the topics listed below and many other practices not listed here.

► Fence modifications

Marking fences in high risk areas, which is only about 6-14% of the fences in sage-grouse habitat, can reduce sage-grouse collisions with fences by 83%. Fence collision risk increases closer to leks and in relatively open, flat landscapes. NRCS has developed a collision risk tool to map high risk areas. **NRCS, BLM, FWP, Montana Association of Conservation Districts and Intermountain West Joint Venture** provide free markers to landowners to mark fences in high risk areas. These agencies can assist with finding volunteers for deployment of markers.



FWP's **Private Land Technical Assistance Program** and NRCS's **EQIP** can provide recommendations and financial assistance for constructing or modifying existing fences to meet wildlife friendly guidelines. FWP's *A Landowner's Guide to Wildlife Friendly Fences* publication provides technical guidance.

► Grazing practices

Sustainable grazing practices may improve soil health and enhance vegetative communities, benefitting livestock operations and sage-grouse. Technical and financial assistance for prescribed grazing systems and associated infrastructure including fences, water tanks, and wildlife escape ramps are provided by NRCS's **Sage-grouse Initiative** and FWP's **Habitat Montana, Private Land Technical Assistance Program** and



the **Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program**. Several of Montana's Conservation Districts sell escape ramps for a minimal charge. FWP programs allow for consultation and grazing system design in addition to cost-sharing on boundary and interior fences and can be applied to grazing leases on state or federal lands.

NRCS and BLM are working cooperatively on whole ranch plans if a landowner desires that cross jurisdictional boundaries be used to facilitate landscape-scale planning. Typically one plan among agencies will simplify grazing management for the lessee.

► Restoration and enhancement

NRCS's **Sage-grouse Initiative** and FWP's **Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program** can provide financial assistance for a variety of restoration, seeding, and invasive species control activities designed to enhance sagebrush systems for sage-grouse. **County Weed Districts** often have free equipment loan programs and may provide funding as-

sistance for noxious weed control if the property is located in a Cooperative Weed Management Area.

Wetland restoration and enhancement can be beneficial to sage-grouse as brood rearing habitat in localized areas. There are a variety of assistance programs available for wetlands including **NRCS Programs, FWP Migratory Game Bird License Habitat Program, Montana Department of Transportation, North American Wetland Conservation Act** funding, and others.

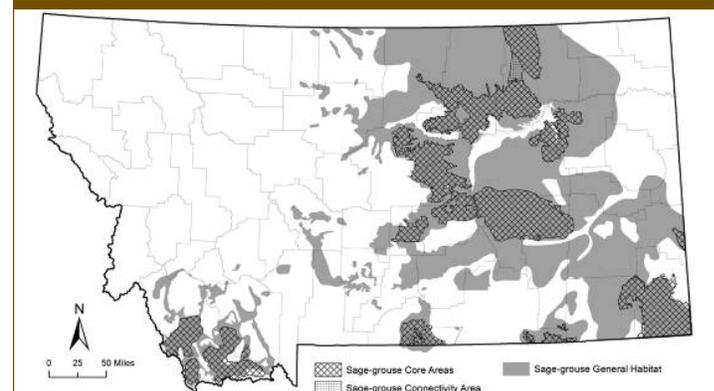
Conservation Easements

Landowners interested in protecting sage-grouse habitat have a variety of easement options. Often, partnerships can be established to leverage a combination of programs to maximize return to landowners. Local land trusts and conservation organizations can also help identify potential easement funding sources.

NRCS offers the **Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)** that provides a permanent easement option on rangelands or wetlands. ACEP requires a 1:1 match of federal to non-federal dollars for agricultural easements but there may be a waiver for portions of the match requirement on some grasslands. Partnerships can often help secure some non-federal match. Wetland easements do not require match. Reserved grazing rights are available with wetland easements but payments are decreased proportionately for the retention of that right.

FWP offers permanent conservation easements through various programs including **Habitat Montana, Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP), and Migratory Bird Habitat Program**. FWP easements typically require grazing management plans. Productive upland game bird habitats that also provide substantial bird hunting opportunities are the focus of conservation easements funded in part with UGBEP dollars. Migratory Bird Habitat Program funds are only eligible for wetlands and associated uplands.

Sage-grouse Management



FWP has designated priority areas for sage-grouse conservation called Core Areas. General habitat are areas that support sage-grouse but typically in lower densities than Core Areas. Range management practices and easements that benefit sage-grouse are encouraged throughout their range but especially in Core Areas.