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by Michael Brown, Pheasants Forever Sage Grouse Initiative biologist, Ephrata, Washington

Landowner & Agencies Secure Major Grants To Protect And Restore A Sage Grouse Oasis In Douglas County

Traveling across the Mansfield Plateau in Northern Douglas County, Washington looks a lot different than it did 200 years ago. An area that would have been a sea of sagebrush is now fragmented and dominated by agriculture. One would not consider the area good habitat for one of the west's most iconic bird, the greater sage-grouse. Sage grouse require large uninterrupted expanses of sagebrush habitat with little or no disturbance, a description that would not fit Douglas County.

Today, however, a forward-looking landowner working with several partners has \$300,000 in grants to enhance habitat on a precious parcel of approximately 900 acres for sage grouse in Douglas County. To appreciate the value of Ferdi Businger's conservation efforts with partners, it's important to step back for a look at how sage grouse are holding on in a landscape that seems unlikely for their survival.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is offered through the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). CRP pays landowners to take marginal agricultural lands out of production and restore them to wildlife habitat and in Douglas County sage grouse absolutely love CRP fields. However, CRP contracts are short in duration and changing crop prices can drive farmers to remove prime sage grouse habitat for crops with high financial gains.

Yet, in addition to the CRP lands, pieces of native sagebrush-steppe remain nestled in this fragmented and changing landscape. Landowner Ferdi Businger owns one of them and is thrilled to have a sage grouse oasis on his property to care for and protect.

"It felt like I won the lottery when I found this property" says Businger.

Almost two years ago when Businger first came to this property in Northern Douglas County, he had no intention of actually buying the land; he was just looking. That changed once he stepped foot on the ranch.

From the road, the property looks like the rest of the county. You see agricultural lands planted in wheat. However, take a short walk and you instantly realize this is no ordinary piece of property. Walking through a rolling terrain of sagebrush and native grasses you are greeted by a small pond that seems almost out of place set against the high desert landscape. The pond by itself would probably be enough to sell most people, but turning to the west reveals not one, but two wet meadows.

These wet areas in a dry landscape provide both beauty to the property and critical brood-rearing habitat for sage grouse. In Washington, less than 50% of the historic sage-steppe landscape remains and most of that is degraded, fragmented or isolated from other sage-steppe habitat, limiting sage grouse populations to about 8% of their historical range. Between 1970 and 2003, the birds have declined by an estimated 62% and in 2014 the state population estimate was less than a 1,000 birds, with 70% of the birds located in Douglas County.

Businger did not buy the property for the sage grouse. Rather, he bought the property because he has had a lifelong relationship with nature and the outdoors and would like to protect a small piece of the land that has brought him so much joy. As he puts it, "nothing is going to stand in my way of protecting this land." With this goal in mind, Businger has been talking to just about everybody in the Douglas County conservation community.

"It is inspiring to see someone who is so enamored with the uniqueness of this landscape and whose strongest desire is to make it better for the wildlife that inhabit it" says Partners for Fish and Wildlife biologist Gregg Kurz. "Ferd's property is a shrub-steppe oasis in a sea of wheat fields and sits at a location that is like to provide an important linkage for the movement of sage and sharp-tailed grouse."

Kurz has been working with Pheasants Forever Sage Grouse Initiative Biologist, Michael Brown, and Jon Merz of Foster Creek Conservation District (CD) to secure a grant for \$50,000 to enhance sage grouse habitat on the property. That successful effort helped Foster Creek CD to secure another \$250,000 grant from the Washington Department of Ecology to enhance and restore the riparian habitat downstream from the three wet meadows and further increase the habitat for sage grouse, as well as Columbian sharp-tailed grouse that inhabit the area too.

Pheasants Forever, as a habitat organization, works on the front line of conservation for many kinds of wildlife, beyond pheasants. The organization has strongly supported sage grouse conservation and currently administers eight SGI field staff partnership positions in Washington, South Dakota, Nevada, California, and Idaho.

The first phase of the project started this spring with habitat assessments to ensure enhancement efforts are targeted to areas that will provide the best homes for wildlife. Over the next five years, Brown, Foster Creek CD, and BFI Native Seeds are going to remove Russian olive trees, and mow and burn unwanted vegetation as well as plant native grasses, shrubs, and forbs to increase plant diversity and promote high quality habitat for sage and sharp-tailed grouse.

This is just the beginning of something bigger as Brown and Merz turned in an application this May to purchase a conservation easement on the property that would ensure there is wildlife habitat for generations to come. An easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or agency to permanently limit uses of the land to protect conservation values, allowing the landowner to continue to own and use the land, or sell it or pass it on to heirs.

“It is beyond my wildest dreams” say Businger about the projects, “I had no idea when I bought the property that all of this would be happening. I am just so happy for all the help I am getting.”

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