

USDA Unveils New Strategy to Conserve Sage Grouse Habitat on Private Lands

Department to Invest Additional \$211 Million to Support Ranchers

PORTLAND, Ore., August 28, 2015 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced a four-year strategy that will invest approximately \$211 million through 2018 in conservation efforts that benefit the greater sage-grouse. The strategy – called [Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0](#) – provides assistance to ranchers to make conservation improvements to their land, mutually benefiting the iconic bird and agricultural operations in 11 Western states.

“The Sage Grouse Initiative is a model for how wildlife and agriculture can coexist and thrive in harmony,” said Vilsack. “The steps ranchers are taking with us to improve habitats and outcomes for sage grouse and other wildlife are also good for cattle, good for ranching operations, and good for America’s rural economy.”

Launched in 2010, the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) has conserved 4.4 million acres, an area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park, using voluntary and incentive-based approaches for conservation. Between 2010 and 2014, Under USDA leadership, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) invested \$296.5 million into SGI, and with implementation of the SGI 2.0 strategy, NRCS and partners will have invested around \$760 million by the end of 2018, conserving about 8 million acres – an area more than seven times the size of the Great Salt Lake.

NRCS leaders from California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming worked with conservation partners to develop the four-year strategy.

The wildfires devastating Western communities also impact habitat for wildlife like sage grouse. Under the SGI 2.0 strategy, NRCS will focus on reducing the threat of wildfire and spread of invasive grasses after fires to restore wildlife habitat and quality livestock forage. The strategy will also focus on removing encroaching conifers, protecting rangeland from exurban development and cultivation, protecting mesic habitats like wet meadows, and reducing fence collisions.

[Read more of the strategy.](#)

While in Oregon, Vilsack will meet with conservation partners, ranchers, and government officials who have worked through SGI to conserve sage grouse habitat.

“The Sage Grouse Initiative is making a difference because private landowners voluntarily work with us to produce results on the ground,” Vilsack said. “The decisions Western ranchers and other private landowners make every day about what to do on their land will continue to have a critical impact on sage grouse.”

Oregon has seen success in sage grouse habitat conservation, especially through the targeted removal of conifer trees that invade sagebrush habitat. Through SGI, NRCS has helped Oregon ranchers address more than two-thirds of the conifer problem on private lands in the state’s priority areas, and with SGI 2.0, anticipates 95% removal on priority private lands by 2018.

SGI conservation practices are targeted to ensure maximum benefits in the areas where they are implemented, and this focus will continue in SGI 2.0. During the past five years, SGI has increased conservation easements 18-fold and strategically located them in priority landscapes that contain the majority of the birds. These easements not only protect important lands but help stitch together the broader landscape, connecting public and private lands into a footprint of healthy habitats.

These voluntary conservation practices work. Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined the Bi-State sage-grouse, a subpopulation of the greater sage-grouse along the California-Nevada border, did not require listing because of the conservation efforts of NRCS and partners proactively working to conserve the species. This success is seen nationwide, evidenced in the recent decisions not to list the Arctic grayling in Montana, the proposed delisting of the black bear in Louisiana, and the recent delisting of the Oregon chub.

Learn more about [NRCS' sage grouse conservation efforts](#). To get started with NRCS, visit your [local USDA Service Center](#) or www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted.

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