

Sage Grouse offers win-win conservation partnership

By Sarah Gonzalez

Given the uncertain situation and virtually guaranteed reduced funding in the current farm bill debate, the conservation community needs win-win partnerships that use minimal federal dollars to enlist maximum acres and landowners.

Enter the sage grouse. These funny-looking birds need large expanses of functioning rangeland to survive, which is why proponents of a public-private initiative to preserve the species' habitat say their efforts might serve the best interests of both conservationists and ranchers.

"What's good for rangelands is good for grouse," said Dave Naugle of the Sage Grouse Initiative. Naugle said those who view cattle grazing as part of the threat to conserving natural land areas are incorrect. "The tapestry of public and private lands is largely held together because we've got cows on the landscape," he said.

In its third year since its launch by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Sage Grouse Initiative provides voluntary enrollment for producers to participate in grazing improvements, conservation easements and conifer removal projects across 11 western states.



The Sage Grouse Initiative's
Dave Naugle

As of 2012, more than 700 ranchers had enrolled in the program, which is intended to conserve a species that has lost half of its historic range.

"Most participate because conservation practices offered are good for their ranch long-term and they are able to make improvements they otherwise might not be able to afford themselves," Naugle said.

About 40 percent of sage grouse habitat can be found on privately owned lands. Through the NRCS program and the help of various conservation partners, farmers and ranchers could improve their land while also working to conserve the bird and keep it off the federal endangered

species list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will ultimately decide if the sage grouse should be formally listed under the Endangered Species Act in September of 2015.

In 2012, NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced a partnership to provide regulatory certainty to landowners after they enter the program. The program partnership “took the fangs out of the Endangered Species Act” by improving the prognosis for the sage grouse, according to former NRCS Chief Dave White.

In fact, Naugle said the future of the farm bill conservation title might lie in the format of the Sage Grouse Initiative. Particularly, he means “voluntary, incentive-based and highly collaborative” programs that involve several partners to decide how farmers and ranchers can benefit from conservation projects that leverage resources and target high-risk areas. “We can take some of that conservation title and do it in a new way that addresses the big topics of national concern. That’s where I think the farm bill is going in the future,” Naugle said.

Another benefit the Sage Grouse Initiative’s format is the targeting of resource-rich areas that might assist 400 or 500 birds instead of just one small group. “By focusing those resource dollars, we pick high priority watersheds. We try to sign up landowners in the entire watershed to deliver landscape-scale benefits,” Naugle explained.

The Midwest’s Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative had made similar efforts to target specific resources by encouraging landowners in those birds’ habitats to incorporate certain conservation measures or enroll easements.

But others believe such initiatives aren’t sufficient. Although the programs provide a collaborative way to encourage conservation, market-driven, for-profit options need to be on the market to compete with rangeland conversion to cropland and energy development, according to Wayne Walker, president of the conservation banking company Common Ground Capital.

“We know [the Conservation Reserve Program] is going to have a cut” in the next farm bill, Walker said. “We have to use these dollars wisely.”

“[Conservation Reserve Program] and NRCS money can’t compete with corn,” he continued. “That’s where mitigation and conservation banking can help.”

Conservation banking asks landowners to exchange a promise to permanently protect the land for a specified number of habitat or species credits approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) that bank owners may then sell. Developers or other landowners who need to compensate for the adverse impacts projects have on species may purchase the credits from conservation bank owners to mitigate their impacts, according to the National Mitigation Banking Association. Walker’s company anticipates threatened and endangered species’ habitats will overlap with energy development in the Southern Plains Region of the United States.

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