



SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE PARTNERSHIP NEWS

www.sagegrouseinitiative.com

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Preventing sage grouse collisions:

Montana Launches First Fence Marking “Partnership Project” in Ekalaka

You don't end up in Ekalaka by accident. It's simply too far off the beaten track to stumble upon the tiny town in southeastern Montana. The state's first fence-marking partnership project started not in Ekalaka, but another hour and a half drive from there into a vast sea of sage.

Sage grouse thrive in expansive sagebrush country, but they face danger from an unlikely culprit – fences. Birds flying into their mating grounds (leks) in the darkness of early dawn can collide with barbed wire that's invisible to them. The answer is simple—mark the high-risk fences. Research from the Sage Grouse Initiative shows that strategically marking fences reduces bird strikes by 83 percent.

Martin Ellenburg, Natural Resources Conservation Service area biologist out of Miles City, took the lead in this first partnership project, designed to accelerate availability, delivery and installation of fence markers throughout Montana's sage grouse range.

Ellenburg led the group of agency staff and volunteers with their stash of 5,500 fence-markers south to a ranch near Alzada, where a landowner wanted to make a positive difference of the birds. The team worked side-by-side with the rancher, clipping the white vinyl markers on the barbed wire.

The five partners are the Bureau of Land Management, Intermountain West Joint Venture, Montana Department of Fish Wildlife & Parks, Montana Association of Conservation Districts, and the NRCS, via the Sage Grouse Initiative. American Colloid contributed to this first project to kick-start the effort.

The first objective is to make the fence markers free, easily obtainable, and locally available. That's where another key partner comes in, COR Enterprises, a workshop in Billings that provides meaningful work to people with disabilities. The workers there have cut more than 100,000 markers in the last three years, with orders rising every day.

After COR Enterprises makes the markers, the partnership takes the next step, getting the markers into the field and onto the fences, working closely with private landowners and volunteers. Sixty-four percent of Montana's sage grouse habitat occurs on private lands. Getting the work to the ranchers of the need, and availability is another key part of the project,

Fence collisions are one of many threats to sage grouse, but the acceleration of the fence-marking effort will add to the positive side of the ledger when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviews the birds listing status under Endangered Species Act, to be decided by September 2015.

If you are interested in participating or contributing to this voluntary program, please contact Bruce Waage: 406-657-6135 or Pete Husby: 406-587-6902.

For more information:

Download the fence-marking installation guide on the Sage Grouse Initiative website: http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/NRCD-SGI_FenceMarker_Instructions.pdf

Carter County Contacts for Sage Grouse Initiative & other landowner programs:

- NRCS Ekalaka Field Office, Rebecca Wolenetz, district conservationist: (406) 775-6355 ext. 105;
- Carter County Conservation District: (406) 775-6355 ext. 3

To find NRCS local contacts in your area:

<http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?agency=nrcs>

Montana NRCS version of the story:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/mt/programs/landscape/?cid=stelprdb1239967>