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for word doc/ photos as jpegs to use in articles]

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Ray Owens:

Innovative Ranch Manager Teams Up With SGI in NW Colorado

By Deborah Richie, SGI Communications Director

Ray Owens is a ranch manager of the Bord Gulch Ranch, north of Craig, Colorado, in Moffat County. He may also be one of the most vigilant observers of sagebrush land, and an innovator who constantly searches for ways to improve the ranch for wildlife and livestock. He works closely with the Sage Grouse Initiative on projects to improve brood habitat for sage grouse, to make fences wildlife-friendly for elk and other sagebrush-dependent wildlife, and to keep the native range healthy.

Last August, he gave a tour of the ranch as part of an SGI and Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust five-county, two-day ranch tour that attracted 50 partners overall, including congressional staff. The group might remember Bord Gulch Ranch as the one place the birds showed up at a time of year when they can be camouflaged, dispersed, and hard to find.

Just inside the ranch gate, a brood of four sage grouse crossed the dirt road and vanished into tall grasses, lupine wildflowers, and sagebrush.

"Historically this country was hammered," said Owens, who has longtime roots in the Craig area. "When we started in 2007 on the 10,000 acres, there were three reservoirs with water with fenced lanes for the cattle to go to water and the first three-quarters of a mile was bare dirt.

Under Owens' watchful eye, the range has improved exponentially, with 80 stock tanks that disperse the sheep and cattle and allow pastures and riparian areas to rest, and, in turn, to grow native bunchgrass needed for sage grouse cover and nutritious livestock forage. He's also experimenting with hoses that seep water into draws for sage grouse broods.

Neighbors are paying attention to a ranch that produces some of the best cows and sheep in the area. During the drought of 2012, when nearby ranches were selling cattle and hauling water, the Bord Gulch Ranch maintained their livestock numbers.

"We've also changed out miles and miles of sheep wire that once stood 54 inches tall with three strands of barbed wire and was very bad for wildlife," Owens said.

An estimated 10,000 elk migrate from the far off Black Mountain onto the sagebrush flats each fall. Before replacing the sheep wire with wildlife-friendly fencing, Owens used to see animals caught in fences or dead on roads, because they couldn't find a way through. The visibility of a white top wire that can be electrified also prevents sage grouse collisions as the birds fly in and out from their leks, the breeding grounds in spring where males gather to display for females.

"If it wasn't for Ray's willingness to change what is here and to look at things more holistically, nothing would have happened," said Justin Shirley, district conservationist for the NRCS. He works closely with range conservationist Chris Yarbrough, who led this part of the tour.

Yarbrough serves in a partnership position with the Sage Grouse Initiative and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. He's one of 23 employees who assist landowners in rural areas of the 11 western states with sage grouse. The positions

are funded by the Farm Bill and matched with partner dollars that range from the Mule Deer Foundation and Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to state wildlife agencies and conservation districts.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife is another partner for Bord Gulch Ranch restoration, a program of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that provides funding to landowners wishing to enhance habitat.

"It's important to help landowners buy down the costs for beneficial practices like here on Bord Gulch Ranch," said tour participant Bill Noonan, Colorado state coordinator of Partners for Fish and Wildlife.

Across the five counties, one rancher after another shared a philosophy of stewardship and dedication to the future of ranching for their children and for the nation's food independence. They hope to reverse a downward trend as Colorado loses 30,000 acres of viable agricultural land per year to largely to residential and recreational home development.

For sage grouse, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will make its listing decision in 2015. Northwest Colorado's contribution to the rangewide recovery of a bird that has lost half its historic range will play a significant role in that decision. At the heart of conservation partnerships is the Farm Bill. That's where Colorado's delegation works together across party lines to assure the funding continues at a critical time.

"The collaboration facilitated by the Sage Grouse Initiative and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust creates unique opportunities for shared successes," U.S. Sen. Mike Bennet said following the tour. "The conservation programs in the Farm Bill are essential for encouraging these types of voluntary, local efforts to protect native species and their habitats, strengthen our agriculture and ranching communities, and preserve the quality of land for future generations."

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