

Big Creek Ranch applies "all lands management" to benefit sage grouse, other wildlife, in Central Idaho

By Steve Stuebner, for the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#)

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On a hilltop in the upper Pahsimeroi Valley, Rosana Rieth points to a large pancake-like flat. That's where about 80-100 sage grouse come to mate each spring, below the shadow of the highest mountain peaks in Idaho's Lost River Mountains. It's a perfect spot for a sage grouse lek—it's flat, surrounded by sagebrush, totally remote, and next to the Pahsimeroi (Pa-simmer-Roy) River.

Rieth, a rangeland management specialist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, knows from wildlife research that sage grouse travel from the lek on public land over to the sage-covered Donkey Hills (on federal and state land). Then, the mother hens take their broods across a dirt road into a spacious wet meadow on private ranchland to raise their young. When rancher Tom Page approached Rieth about improving the Goldberg wet meadow for wildlife, it didn't take her long to sign him up for a Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) project.

Under the SGI program, Page has made a number of changes to the livestock management and fencing of the wet meadow to benefit sage grouse, nesting curlews, mule deer, elk, antelope and songbirds.

Page supports the concept of "all lands management," where it's possible to manage cattle and wildlife on a broad scale, regardless of land ownership. Custer and Lemhi counties are over 90% public land, and home to several endangered species. Successful operators in this region have integrated land management and good working relationships with the federal and state agencies.

The Goldberg wet meadow is one of several ranch properties owned by Page and his brother that are located in the upper, middle, and lower Pahsimeroi Valley. The high habitat value puts Page in a unique position to make multiple contributions to conservation. The Big Creek Ranch works closely with The Nature Conservancy and the Lemhi Regional Land Trust to protect the working lands in perpetuity through conservation easements. The NRCS is contributing funding toward the Goldberg pending easement. Keeping lands intact and not fragmented addresses the main threat to the future of sage grouse habitat. SGI dollars through the NRCS and Farm Bill are key to both easements and range improvements.

Page also is a partner in a range-restoration revegetation project on one of his BLM allotments, again through SGI. The project awaits the completion of an environmental assessment and subsequent decision. A water-development project in the lower valley is also part of the conservation effort.

Page and his brother, who are partners in running Big Creek Ranches, "are really progressive," Rieth says. "They're always looking to see how they can make things better."

"I love working with SGI -- the flexibility is the really great thing," Page says. "The project can be about fencing; it can be about a revegetation project, or potentially it can be about funding for a conservation easement, which has more to do with the management of the property. I also like that the SGI program works effectively with other federal and state agencies."

Tom Page has a deep background in land conservation work. You might say he's a conservationist first, and a rancher second. A former resident of Colorado, Page has worked for land trusts, watershed groups and as a landowner and manager. Inheritance from his late father provided an opportunity for Page and his brother to purchase ranch properties of their own.

In the late 2000s, during the national recession, Page toured around Idaho with a friend from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). He was looking to invest in working ranches where he could improve the land through conservation activities. He had experience in the Madison River Valley in Montana, restoring a ranch from a weed patch into a productive place for livestock, fish and wildlife. He settled on the Pahsimeroi Valley because of the large amount conservation work already under way in the valley through SGI and the many partners working in the Upper Salmon River Basin such as; the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited, TNC, USFWS, NRCS, and local soil and water conservation districts --to name a few.

"I wanted to advocate for conservation from a private lands perspective," Page says. "It's a lot easier and faster to make conservation gains on private land than it is on public lands, and private property rights have been underutilized by conservationists. You can do some great things for conservation on private lands and it doesn't take years of paperwork and uncertainty to get it done."

As part of carrying out his "all lands management" principle, Page wants to keep the Goldberg wet meadow open for wildlife in the early spring. To achieve that goal, he grazes his livestock on state lands upslope from the meadow. A livestock management plan delays the time when cattle move into the meadow for several months. When the sage grouse broods go there in the spring, they share it with other wildlife raising their young.

Page has installed 10,000 feet of wildlife-friendly fence around the perimeter of the property through SGI and the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The top wire of the new fence is equipped with reflective markers spaced every three feet to prevent sage grouse from colliding with the wire.

Wildlife-friendly fence has other important components. The brace posts -- used as the primary foundation for the fencing structure -- are capped to prevent any mortality from nesting birds. The fence itself is 42 inches high. There is a 12-inch gap between the top wire and second wire, to prevent deer or elk from getting their legs caught in it as they jump over, and the bottom smooth wire is 16 inches from the ground surface, to allow antelope to crawl underneath it.

The reflective markers on the top wire are the product of a University of Idaho graduate student Bryan Stevens' work. "It's been documented that fence strikes are a significant risk to sage grouse mortality," Rieth says. "Sage grouse are a low-flying bird. These markers increase the visibility of that top wire."

Page and his ranch manager have set up 12,000 linear feet of permanent solar fencing inside the new perimeter fence in the meadow. That fencing allows for the rest-rotation grazing of seven pastures to promote the health and vigor of rangeland vegetation and to provide for control of livestock around riparian areas and Grave Springs.

"When we developed a grazing plan in here, it really integrated a lot of the way the state, the BLM, and the private lands could be used better," Page says. "So rather than having cows in here all of the time, without much of a pattern, now we go through a rest-rotation system on the state pastures, and then the cows come in here (in late July), and go through the pastures -- four get used and two get rested every year. We mainly tried to adjust the timing to get a little better control and allow those wildlife values to flourish."

As Page describes the grazing system, we see antelope running around the meadow and hear curlews calling. Suddenly, we see a sage grouse flush and fly to safety in the meadow. Just in a couple years' time, Page is already starting to see the results of improved cattle and wildlife management.

"I'm seeing more antelope here than there used to be," Page says. "The antelope didn't used to fawn here, and they do now. I've seen more and more elk show up in here, we're seeing more curlews in the meadow. It's getting a little bit better all the time."

With the completion of the SGI-sponsored fencing project, Page has kept cattle grazing in adjacent pastures from trespassing on the Goldburg property. He's slowly seeing the springs come back to life.

"The sage grouse have loved it in here in the last couple of years," he says. "This is one of the spots where you can almost always find them late in the summer. I've had days when I've seen 30 or 40 birds."

About 15 miles downstream in the broad valley, Page and Rieth worked together on an SGI project to remove 29,000 feet of old sheep fence on the 475-acre Grouse Creek ranch property, another example of the "all lands management" concept. The private parcel is surrounded by a 35,000-acre BLM grazing allotment. A sage grouse lek is located just a quarter mile from the parcel.

A fence-removal contracting crew will make short work of the project, he says. "They have a machine that pulls the posts and they roll up the wire as they go," Page says. "It'll probably take them two weeks to knock it out."

Page developed an existing well on the sagebrush-dotted Grouse Creek parcel to provide water for livestock. By removing the fence and creating the water source, Page and two other BLM permittees will be able to keep livestock on the upper slope of the valley in the fall. Before, without a water source, the cattle used to drift down to the Pahsimeroi River to drink.

He wants to keep the cattle away from the river because of its value to ocean-going salmon and steelhead. After the fence is gone, he plans to donate this BLM inholding to the Lemhi Regional Land Trust for long-term management.

Page and various partners are waiting to hear from the BLM whether they can move forward with a range plant restoration project in the valley -- a project endorsed by SGI -- and he's got a plethora of additional projects in mind to improve the plight of sage grouse and other wildlife species in the valley. But he's got his hands full with the many projects he's managing now.

"I just love being outside, that's why I like this work so much," he says. "It's a lot of opportunity, a lot of challenge, a lot of politics, but when you start to see the little gains, it makes you feel good. It's different every day, but it's all good!"

(End)

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