

Rancher Success Story

Masini Family Preserves Lush Oasis for Bi-State Sage Grouse



In Brief: Bi-State (Nevada/California) sage grouse thrive on the Masini Family's Sweetwater Ranch. The family has taken big strides to protect and preserve sage grouse habitat on more than 4,150 acres through easements and habitat management.



A sage grouse flushes in an irrigated pasture on the Sweetwater Ranch. Owner Bryan Masini said he sees 200-300 birds on the ranch throughout the summer. Photo: NRCS

The Masini family proactively conserves sage grouse and raises cattle on the Sweetwater Ranch

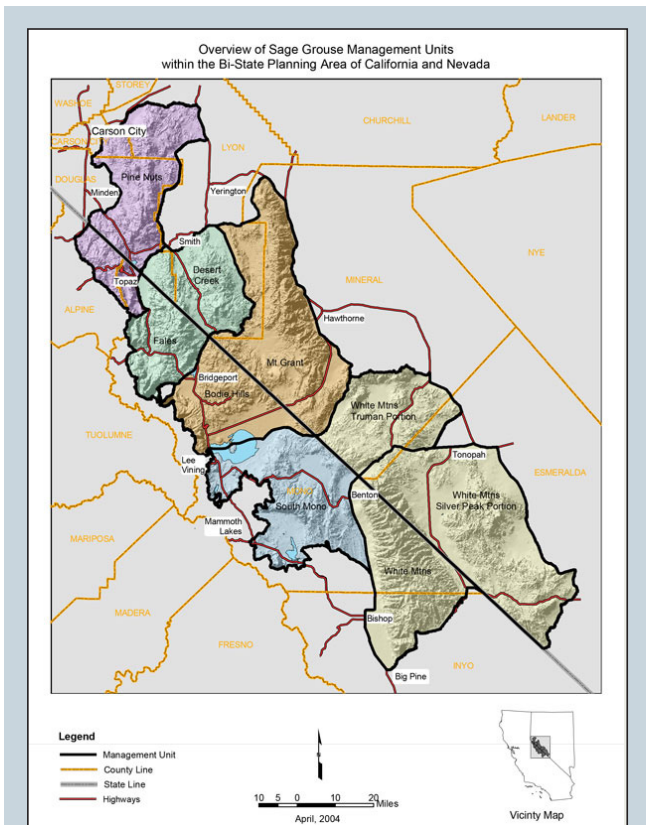
South of the Lake Tahoe region in Nevada, the Masini Family raises 2,000 yearlings on an irrigated cattle ranch under the shadow of the Sweetwater Mountains. Their property is literally an oasis in the desert, surrounded by hundreds of square miles of rangeland, meaning it's a big draw for wildlife and sage grouse. Historically, Native Americans and settlers cherished the "sweetwater" in the valley as a wonderful place to get a fresh drink, so it was only natural that the early settlers named the place the Sweetwater Ranch.

"It's extremely beautiful country," says Bryan Masini, who runs the ranch with his wife, Sheila, their four children, his mother, Patricia, and his sister, Patti. "We really enjoy seeing the deer, the sage hens, the geese ~ it all adds to our quality of life."

In recent years, the Masini family has taken big strides to protect and preserve sage grouse habitat on more than 4,150 acres of private lands via conservation easements, pinyon and juniper removal, fencing improvements and range management through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI). The SGI is a national partnership led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service that aims to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat on private ranchlands in 11 Western states. The Masini's are one of the first ranch families in the region to work with the NRCS to receive cost-share funds and expert advice to conserve sage grouse and improve the sustainability of their ranch.



The Masinis raise black angus yearling "stockers" in the irrigated meadows. The meadows are broken up into 28 pastures to keep the cattle on the move and sustain the grass resource. Photo: NRCS



The Sweetwater Ranch is located in the northern end of the Bi-State sage grouse population, near Yerington, Nevada.

Bryan Masini is a great guy. He’s all for saving the birds,” says Ed Biggs, District Conservationist for the NRCS in Yerington, Nevada.

The birds are part of the Bi-State population of sage grouse, a distinct population of birds that live on the rangelands located along the border of Nevada and California.

In June 2014, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack pledged to provide up to \$25.5 million over the next 5-10 years for sage grouse conservation efforts to be carried out through the SGI program in the Bi-State region. The BLM committed \$6.5 million for conservation measures on public lands as well. The funds that Vilsack pledged will help pay for conservation easements.

“With proactive conservation investments, we’re helping farmers and ranchers who are improving habitat through voluntary efforts to stabilize this population of sage grouse,” Vilsack said in a news release. “Through action such as this, along with the support of our partners, we can help secure this species’ future and maintain our vibrant western economies.”

The SGI projects follow recommendations of the Bi-State Action Plan, a strategy to conserve the Bi-State sage grouse population that envisions federal, state and local actions, including many projects on private land, including the Sweetwater Ranch.

“The conservation easements will allow us to pass on the ranch to the next generations of Masini’s. My grandchildren are 6th generation, and my children are 5th generation, and they’re all involved in the operation of the ranch. Now we have a tool to preserve our place as a working ranch. The easements don’t allow for any development, which is fine with us.”
~ Bryan Masini



Thanks to conservation easements, Bryan’s son Bryson Masini will be the 5th generation to steward the Sweetwater Ranch. Photo: SGI

The Masini family’s conservation easements will preserve the Sweetwater Ranch for future generations. The primary restrictions associated with the easements preclude converting the ranch property into a subdivision or selling off pieces as ranchettes.

Gregg Tanner, a consulting wildlife biologist who is retired from the Nevada Department of Wildlife, was the person who initially approached Masini about working with NRCS to enhance sage grouse habitat on his ranch. The two grew up together and played high school football together.

“I talked to him - about the potential impacts to agriculture if an endangered species listing occurs, and that got his attention. I suggested that he get involved in the conservation easements and habitat improvements through the SGI program, and he said, ‘Let’s get it done!’”

~Gregg Tanner

The Sweetwater Ranch was particularly attractive and strategic because sage grouse reside in the private irrigated pastures in June, July and August, raising their broods.

The property is extremely valuable for sage grouse,” says Tracey Wolfe, Yerington NRCS Range Management Specialist.

“Irrigated pastures provide unique and very important brood-rearing habitat and fall foraging habitat for sage-grouse. The birds are attracted to irrigated pastures in search of forbs and insects during mid-late summer. Irrigated pasture and wet meadow sites with adjacent shrub cover (sagebrush, willows and wild rose) for escape and concealment provide the most favorable sage-grouse habitat and offer fall foraging opportunities.”

A recent study published by SGI underscores the importance of wet meadows on private lands as the most favored place for sage grouse to raise their young. About 80 percent of the lands where sage grouse raise their young are located on private land, the study found. And about 85 percent of the leks ~ sage grouse breeding grounds ~ are typically located within 6 miles of the wet meadow-summer habitat areas.

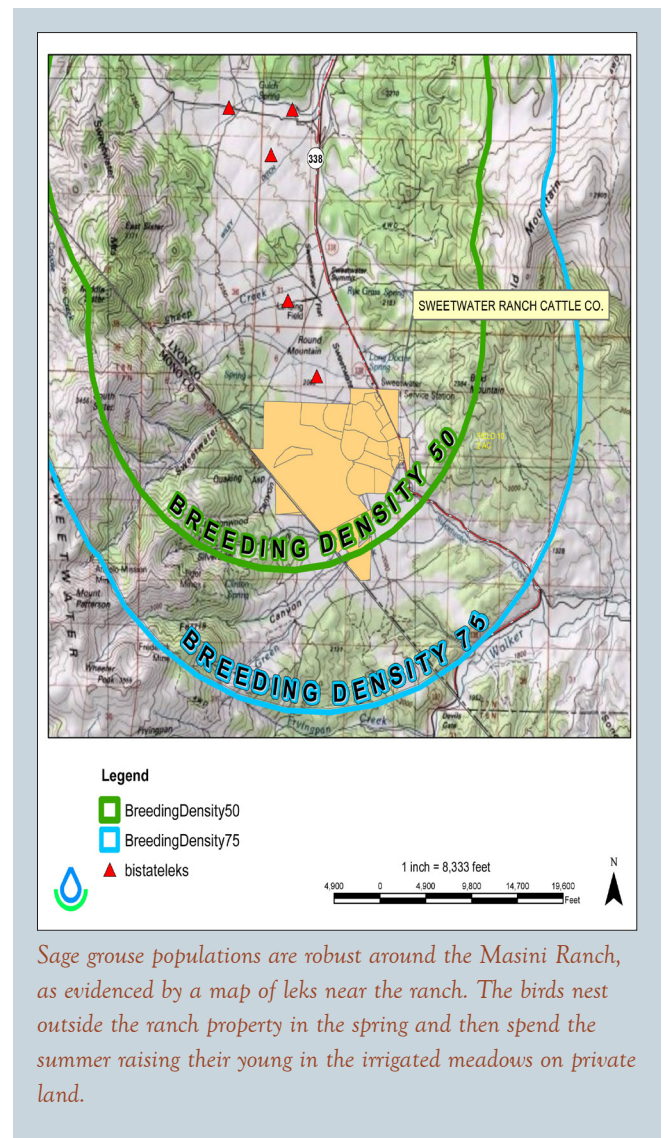
The study findings are spot-on for the Bi-State sage grouse population, Tanner says. “Nearly all of the brood-rearing habitat is on private land. If we’re going to have sage grouse conservation on these lands, private landowners have to be involved extensively.”

Plus, there are a number of sage grouse leks around the perimeter of the Sweetwater Ranch, as one might expect, knowing the birds like to mate close to their summer habitat. Leks are open areas in the sagebrush where males gather in

groups to court females during a spring mating ritual. The males puff up their chests, sound off and strut around the leks like rocks stars in hopes that a female bird will fly in and mate with them. It’s a time when the birds are most visible to humans; it’s fun and entertaining to watch the males dance on the lek in the early-morning hours.

“We see the birds all the time,” Masini says. “The first thing we see are the males ~ 20-30 of them ~ in the spring during lekking season, and then we run into the hens and the babies in our irrigated fields during the summer. The chicks grow up pretty fast, and then they head off into the rangelands in the fall. I don’t know where they go in the winter.”

All told, Masini says they see about 200-300 birds throughout the summer season.



In 2011 and 2012, Masini's first SGI project to improve sage grouse habitat involved removing about 700 acres of pinyon and juniper trees in the western foothills of the Sweetwater Ranch. This opened up large areas for perennial grasses, sagebrush and other shrubs and forbs to grow, which provide vital hiding cover, food and shelter for leks. NRCS officials followed the existing Westwide strategy of focusing on pinyon and juniper stands in Phase I and Phase II stage of development, meaning eliminating tree stands with low to medium density that are encroaching on meadow habitat and crowding out native vegetation. The trees also provide perching habitat for predators.

A private contractor used the mastication method to deal with the downed trees—grinding them up into wood chips. The work was completed in December 2012. Since that time, NRCS officials and Masini are seeing new perennial plants and shrubs return to the treated areas.

"The grass really came back nicely, and we had some timely rains in late July and August to help with that," Masini says. "We're seeing more deer using that area now, too."

No livestock grazing will be allowed for two years where the trees were removed to allow the new plants to grow without disturbance, Wolfe said. "We're hoping to get the new plants established."

Over the last couple of years, NRCS officials have worked with Masini to add new fencing on the Sweetwater Ranch to create multiple pastures for yearling "stockers" to graze. From mid-April to late September or early October, the cattle are rotated through 28 different pastures based on forage conditions and re-growth. Then, they're shipped to the market.

To make the fencing more wildlife-friendly, NRCS officials installed reflectors on the top strand of about one mile of fencing. The reflectors help sage grouse see the fence and avoid collisions. Former University of Idaho student Bryan Stevens developed the reflectors as part of a graduate study. The reflectors are now the state-of-the-art standard for SGI fencing projects west wide.

The reflectors make the fencing extremely visible, Wolfe says, adding, "I think you could see this fence from the moon. It's right on a ridgeline, so the reflectors make it really stand out."

Beyond the specific habitat improvements, the conservation easements that cover the Sweetwater Ranch bring everything



On the Sweetwater Ranch, reflectors like this one make fencing sage grouse friendly. Photo: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media

together to ensure that the conservation measures will be sustained in perpetuity. The Masini family has signed conservation easements with the NRCS, covering more than 4,150 acres.

Tanner points out that the private land is extremely valuable in the area for ranchettes or subdivisions. "The private lands down there are highly marketable and valuable," he says. "Everyone from California wants a ranchette and they have lots of money. Those lands could easily be chopped up and sold for a great profit. That is a real threat."

The Masini family has been willing to embrace the conservation easements for reasons that extend beyond their desire to preserve the ranch as a ranch for future generations. They also view the easements and the improvements for sage grouse and other wildlife as being compatible with running their yearling cattle operation.

"Everything in those easements are good practices for raising our cattle as well as for the sage grouse," Masini says. "Sustainability is where it's at. If we want to run cattle in the West, we have to be thinking about managing for all of the different critters that are out there. And we have found that we can do that while maintaining the business side of our operation. You have to remember that it is a business or you won't survive out here for very long."

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November, 2014
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