By Martha Mintz

To lek with grazing

Proactive grazing management benefits cattle and sage grouse alike

Teetering on the edge of listing as an endangered species is a spot no rancher or land manager wants any of the creatures with which they share their vistas to be perched. Unfortunately, that's the exact position of the greater sage grouse.

Sage grouse, also called sage chickens, sage hens, and a number of other monikers, used to number in the millions but have dwindled to six-figure populations in recent years.

"We don't know 100 percent why they've declined. Certainly fragmentation of habitat and loss of sagebrush are involved, also the fact that West Nile can have a huge impact on the species," says Peter Husby, newly retired Montana NRCS state biologist.

Providing good habitat, such as large landscapes of uninterrupted sagebrush cover, will help move the sage grouse population back toward their former numbers, he says.

In April and May, early risers in sagebrush country might be lucky enough to happen upon a lek (dancing ground) full of sage grouse roosters prancing and posturing for hens. Yellow sacks on their chests inflate and deflate, letting forth a peculiar plunk that sounds a bit like a tennis ball connecting with the ground.

►**Large photo:** 30-inch tall fiberglass posts with electric wire have replaced aging high-maintenance 4-wire fences and have been used to divide Lohofs' pastures and to fence water sites straddling pastures, as seen here. ►**Below:** A male sage grouse shows off for a potential mate.

PHOTO: RICK MCEWAN FOR SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE

►**Left:** NRCS range specialist Kami Kilwine assesses vegetation with Patrick Lohof. Rotation and even grazing leaves cover for sage grouse.

►**Above:** Ranch maps crisscrossed with plans for cross fencing, water lines, water tank installations, and grazing rotations have taken up permanent residence on Patrick and Christy Lohof's kitchen table. ►**Right:** Lohofs' red Angus heifers walk fewer miles to water thanks to new tanks.

"They're entertaining," says Jim Taylor, whose decades of rest-rotation grazing management have benefited both his livestock and wildlife, including sage grouse. "They chase all around dancing and carrying on. Not everybody gets to see that."

Taylor, who runs cattle south of Laurel, Montana, used to have very large pastures. Cattle grazed bottoms and ignored corners far from water. Taylor took advantage of the Great Plains Conservation Program in the 1980s to crossfence pastures, develop water and create a rotation that left at least one pasture completely untouched for an entire year.

Though Taylor was concerned more with improving his land resource than necessarily improving wildlife habitat, it turns out the two goals aren't mutually exclusive.

A good rest rotation grazing program leaves about 50 percent of vegetation. This is good, Husby explains, because it provides litter to protect soil from erosion and gets more precipitation into the soil. It provides old growth for cattle to browse in spring instead of trying to meet nutrient needs with fast growing new growth, and, for sage grouse, it provides cover. The management style—grazing a pasture in different seasons each year—promotes plant species diversity, including more forbs. For sage grouse, it makes for more fodder and insects for chicks.

But the investment to make these changes is steep. So in 2010, the NRCS formed the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI). It uses the farm bill to develop, fund, and certify private conservation projects in 11 western states.

"Improving habitat with sustainable grazing practices could help prevent the need for listing the species," Husby says. That's something those with public land grazing leases may especially want to avoid as special interest groups could try to leverage the listing to restrict those grazing leases.

Conduit for change. Patrick and Christy Lohof who ranch near Otter, Montana, have long wanted to implement a rest-rotation grazing system but lacked the funds and the know-how. By tapping into SGI cost share programs and NRCS resources they're now making some big moves.

Between two ranches they've installed 13 miles of water line, 23 water tanks, and a lot of electric fencing—replacing aging fences and dividing large pastures. They've also tapped NRCS specialists to help plot out a long-term grazing rotation.

"It's a big project, but we'll be able to better water our cattle and use our acres more effectively," Christy says. Readily accessible water is an essential piece of the puzzle. The Lohofs developed water in a large pasture before and saw 100-pound improvements on their yearlings as compared to years prior. "That's more than genetics," Patrick laughs.

They hope to extend their grazing season and increase their sage grouse sightings as they go about their work.

"We know these changes will improve our pastures and we've talked about it for years," Patrick says. "Now, it's financially possible for us to be better land managers." ■