



BY ANDREW MCKEAN

# MULTI-SPECIES PARTNERSHIPS DEFINE THE WEST

From sage grouse to grizzly bears, Pheasants Forever staff works across western jurisdictions and landscapes



Mike Kemp



# WEST

**A**l Eiden consults his weekly calendar and sighs with a mixture of anticipation and fatigue. He has upcoming meetings with state wildlife agencies over workplans for shared employees, political strategy sessions with volunteers who are working on a California water initiative that went to voters in November, and conference calls with federal agencies to discuss the mechanics of habitat-project contracts that will be sent to bid later in the year.

In the course of these meetings, the common noun “pheasant” isn’t uttered once. But the proper nouns “Pheasants Forever” are part of most resolutions.

“I see a lot of growth potential in the West,” says Eiden, who has been on the job as West Region Director for Pheasants Forever for less than a year, joining PF after a career with Arizona Game and Fish Department.

“That growth is all going to be around not-pheasants,” he says. “We have lots of opportunities that are in line with our core mission, which is habitat for all wildlife. We are at our best when we think about the wider benefits of upland habitat, things like improving the landscape for both scaled quail as well as pronghorns. Or Mearns quail and mule deer. Or, in the case of a project we’re working on in Montana, grizzly bears and grain farmers.”

Eiden, whose territory extends from the Pacific Ocean to the eastern plains of Colorado and Montana, ticks off a number of what he calls “dirt-on-the-ground”

projects that benefit a variety of species by compounding the resources of numerous partners.

“Pheasants Forever is well established in the West, but I’m trying to expand the awareness of our ability to improve partnerships,” he says. “The best thing our organization does, whether it’s volunteers contributing to a project or putting Farm Bill programs to work, is we turn dirt. We change habitat on the ground. There are a lot of conservation groups that have a presence in the West, but you don’t always see tangible evidence of their work. We’re the implementers, and the great potential of the West is that we have a lot more work we can do to implement habitat programs on the ground.”

Much of that potential revolves around the region’s conservation priorities — shoring up species that are edging close to federal protection, or ensuring that working landscapes function for the widest possible variety of beneficiaries, both human and non-human.

In some cases, the work is defined by the federal Farm Bill, in other cases by priorities of governmental partners such as state or federal wildlife agencies. And in other cases, because it’s a long-term investment in a project that could pay dividends for generations.

The California water infrastructure project is an example of that. Codified as California Proposition 3, the citizens’

initiative would have authorized the state to issue up to \$8.8 billion in bonds for water infrastructure, water storage and habitat restoration. The ballot issue, which was defeated in November, was a holistic way to address the state’s chronic water shortages that have resulted in municipal and agricultural rationing, increased wildfire severity, and compromised wildlife habitat.

“While we’re disappointed in the [election] results, we are still committed to the scope and scale of the project, though obviously without the bonding authority we have some funding issues to resolve,” says Eiden, who says PF volunteers were on the initiative’s steering committee.

“But it was a project that puts dollars into upland habitat restoration and wetland restoration,” he explains. “It’s conservation folks saying that if you do good habitat work, you get more water. And that’s not just a California issue. It’s a West issue. We’re dry. We have more people moving into our region all the time and we need to find a way to ensure that pheasants and quail and upland habitat are at the start of a system-wide benefit that ends at your kitchen faucet.”

Eiden notes that the most sustainable Pheasants Forever work around the West isn’t particularly sexy or headline-making, but it’s the catalyst for cooperation with agencies and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

“We have found that we are

well-positioned to be project coordinators for these big, multi-agency, multi-faceted habitat projects,” says Eiden. “Our field staff serve as contract administrators. We write the project description, evaluate and award bids, line out contractors, then evaluate the work to ensure it was done properly and completely.”

“A partner like the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) might not have the administrative capacity to follow through,” he continues, “but by taking on that work we allow the agencies to expand their capacity for even

more projects. Plus, we’re not the government, so we have fewer layers of bureaucracies to manage and we can typically get projects done faster and more cost-effectively than the federal government can.”

The cooperative work that PF has honed elsewhere in the country over the last decades is paying dividends out West.

“If producers don’t want to work with the federal government, for whatever reason, they don’t have to,” says Michael Brown, Sage Grouse Initiative coordinator based in eastern Washington.

Brown is a PF employee whose position is funded by the multi-agency grouse conservation effort.

“In my experience,” Brown says, “we’ve found that people are more willing to work with Pheasants Forever at the beginning because we’re not the government, even though the work might be funded by federal dollars. Then they choose to work with us on subsequent phases of a project because they see that we get work done efficiently and comprehensively.”

Eiden says that one of the themes that unifies his sprawling

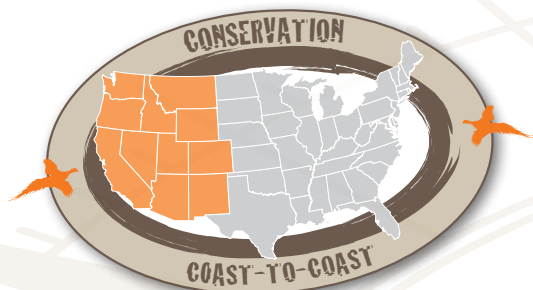
*In the West, pinyon pine and juniper encroachment threatens sagebrush habitat. PF led a partnership to remove the culprits from 28,000 acres near Burley, Idaho, with another 47,000 acres slated to be cleared over the next 15 years.*

## BEFORE



## AFTER





# WEST

region is maintaining access to public lands.

"The issue isn't unique to the West, but it's really become a mantra here, especially among backcountry hunters," says Eiden. "It's important to note that PF has been creating public access for the past 30 years, buying properties and turning them into public hunting areas. They're not all backcountry, but what they have in common is their wildlife value, their public recreation value and their accessibility. That's an issue and a goal that we'll continue to prioritize."

### 3 KEY INITIATIVES: WEST

#### YUMA DOVE HUNTING PROJECT

Banners that say "Welcome Hunters" are frequent sights in small towns across the country. But how often do you hear of a city that promotes hunting as a fundamental part of its visitation economy?

With more than 100,000 inhabitants, Yuma is Arizona's third-largest city. And it wants to be known as the dove hunting capital of the United States.

"Traditionally, Yuma has gotten a pile of annual visitors for its dove hunting, which is world-class," says Eiden. "But participation in the hunt has been declining, and we've lost some prime dove habitat over the years, as grain has transitioned to more leafy vegetables for the retail produce market. So a number of partners decided to not only improve the hunting, but do a better job of promoting it."

The Yuma Dove Plot program starts with paying local farmers — with hunting-license dollars — to

produce grain crops as part of their planting mix, then to time the maturity of the grain stand to ensure some crop is ripening just as white-winged doves pour into the lower Colorado River.

"We work with producers to leave some standing grain and to ensure access to their properties, and then the local tourism board actively promotes the hunting in the area," says Eiden. The local tourism board works with hotels to promote the hunt but also to welcome visitors who might have dogs or want to process game.

The visitors are coming. Thousands of dove hunters from around the country descend on Yuma for the September 1 opener. Many more return for late-season hunting. The licenses and hunting gear they buy generates funds that go back into payments to farmers to produce grain and provide access that in turn attracts more doves and hunters.

"All the partners embrace hunting as a tool to build a sustainable economy," says Eiden. "Here's a city that says hunting is going to be the future of their economy. That's pretty cool."

#### IDAHO JUNIPER REMOVAL

On dry uplands across the West, oceans of sagebrush are being fragmented by disruptive islands of green: stands of pinyon pine and juniper trees that are native to much of the area but traditionally have limited their distribution to waterways or higher-elevation slopes.

"Every one of those trees can use between 30 and 35 gallons of water a day," says Michael Brown, a

PF employee based in Wenatchee, Washington, and the coordinator of the 11-state Sage Grouse Initiative. "It's a bunch of straws stuck into a dry system making it even drier."

To ground-dwelling sage grouse, these invasive trees represent danger.

"Sage grouse hate tall objects on the landscape," says Brown, because trees offer convenient perches for raptors and cover for terrestrial predators.

Sage grouse are in steep decline across much of their range, and are perennial candidates for federal threatened-species protection. Any work that makes ground more conducive for grouse is a leading priority on western public lands.

On the steep arid slopes above the Snake River near the south-central Idaho town of Burley, crews have removed encroaching trees on some 15,000 acres of grazing land managed by the local BLM office. Brown wrangled the paperwork that, in most landscape-scale conservation projects, funnels the funds to do the work.

"Land ownership across the West is a mosaic of federal, state and private, and boundaries can get in the way of large-scale habitat projects," says Brown. "We helped get a big partnership together that allowed us to work across jurisdictions seamlessly and accomplish a 15-year project in 8 years."

Crews removed junipers from about 28,000 acres of sagebrush. The project was so well-received that participants are considering tackling an additional 47,000 acres over the next 15 years. Brown hopes to accomplish the work in far less time



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# WEST

*Irrigation circle corners are creating thousands of acres of upland habitat in the West. Here, Bruce Rosenbach of the Phillips County, Colorado, chapter shows off a Corners for Conservation tract near Holyoke.*



Joshua Hardin / Colorado Life Magazine

than that, and to replicate this sort of cooperative project in sage grouse habitat across the West.

## CORNERS FOR CONSERVATION

Picture a circle inside a square box. According to the rigid laws of geometry, no matter how large the shapes, the circle will never cover the corners of the box.

Now picture the Great Plains, especially that immense swath of the grain belt where irrigation water is delivered by center-pivot sprinklers. You've seen these fields, whether you knew what you were looking at or not, during flights over the Plains: the vivid green or golden circles inside linear boxes of square-mile section lines.

Did you notice the corners of the boxes?

Probably not. They are unremarkable little snippets of land that exist between the arcs of high-value commodity agriculture.

Because they're not cultivated or irrigated, these irregular triangles — usually 7 to 8 acres in size — typically don't have a lot of value for farmers either.

But a visionary group of conservationists thinks these corners have abundant value to pheasants and other wildlife — as small plots of native vegetation, as little parcels that can be hunted, and as field-side gardens that can sustain the pollinators that service the crops.

Over years, and field by field, hundreds of these triangles have been enrolled in Corners for Conservation, a program cooperatively managed by Pheasants Forever and Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife with help from a number of partners.

The program, nicknamed C4C, began in 2015 after thousands of acres of grassland in eastern Colorado was removed from the

CRP program and returned to irrigated agriculture, says Bob Hix, PF's regional representative for Colorado.

Working with interested landowners, the partnership gathered funds to pay landowners for 5-year contracts that plant the corners to a mix of wildlife- and pollinator-benefitting plants. Cooperating landowners receive additional payment by enrolling in Colorado's walk-in hunter access program.

By working with neighboring landowners, those little 7-acre corners can quadruple in size. To date, the program has enrolled about 300 corners. The goal is to enroll 1,000 corners — totaling nearly 20,000 acres — by 2020. 🦋

*Andrew McKean writes about the outdoors, conservation and hunting from his home near Glasgow, Montana.*

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