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WESTERN EXTENSION DIRECTORS' ASSOCIATION PRESENTS AWARD OF EXCELLENCE TO THE COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Courtesy of the the Western Extension Directors' Association

In their 2015 annual meeting, the Western Extension Directors' Association (WEDA) presented the Award of Excellence to the Utah Community-Based Conservation Program. The WEDA Award of Excellence is to recognize Extension outreach education programming that has achieved outstanding accomplishments, results and impacts in addressing contemporary issues in one or more of the 13 Western states and territories. It is anticipated that recipients of the award will include mature programs with documented impacts.

The following information was included in the WEDA Award citation. "Utah State University Extension, through the Community-Based Conservation Program (CBCP), in partnership with the Utah Governor's office, federal, state, industry, and private partners began working with stakeholders in 1996 to organize 11 community-based local



Terry Messmer and Ken White accept award on behalf of CBCP staff. Photo courtesy of Sarah Lupis.

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sage-grouse working groups (LWGs) throughout Utah. The CBCP enhanced information flow and stimulated involvement in incentive-based conservation. The CBCP assisted federal, state, and local governments, private landowners, and wildlife managers in learning more about sage-grouse ecology as they developed and implemented strategies to achieve species conservation, and community social and economic objectives. The success of the program was directly related to early involvement of local leadership, CBCP facilitation, and access to emerging ecological and sociological research. The CBCP process has translated conservation planning and research to habitat management, and habitat management to population stability. Sage-grouse population trends in the CBCP area have stabilized. The CBCP provided the basis for Utah's ongoing Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Strategy."

Terry Messmer, CBCP program director, accepted the award on behalf of the past and current CBCP staff, and all of the local working group participants. In his comments he acknowledged all the CBCP partners. "I'm honored to receive this Award of Excellence on behalf of my CBCP colleagues," says Messmer. "We will continue to engage local landowners, ranchers, agricultural producers, state and federal agencies and environmental organizations in partnerships that help protect sage-grouse and the working landscapes that are the very essence of the Western way of life." CBCP staff members recognized included: Terry Messmer, Lorien Belton, Todd Black, David Dahlgren, Leslie Elmore, Nicole Frey, Rae Ann Hart, and Sarah Lupis.

PARTNERS AND VOLUNTEERS MARK 138 MILES OF FENCES TO REDUCE SAGE-GROUSE COLLISION RISKS

By Casey Burns, NRCS Utah State Biologist

PLACING
MARKERS ON
FENCES CAN
REDUCE SAGE-
GROUSE
COLLISIONS BY
83% IN HIGH-
RISK AREAS.
IF YOU ARE
INTERESTED IN
WORKING ON A
PROJECT,
PLEASE
CONTACT YOUR
LOCAL NRCS
OFFICE.

In 2014 and 2015, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service¹ (NRCS) planned, coordinated implementation, and provided markers for over 138 miles of fence in sage-grouse habitat throughout Utah. Most of the fence markers were installed on private land to reduce the risks of sage-grouse colliding with fences while in flight. Fence marking has proved to be a very popular volunteer activity, with 291 volunteers contributing 2,415 hours over the last year. This volunteer time is equal to over one year of full time work for a single person! Private landowners, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources' Dedicated Hunter Program, and the Boy Scouts of America comprised the majority of the volunteers. Volunteers, landowners, and NRCS staff in northeastern Utah deserve special recognition for marking over 50 miles of fence with the help of 176 volunteers.

Fence marking is increasingly being applied as a simple way to reduce a threat to sage-grouse. The fence collision risk tool² was developed and is used by biologists to define areas near leks where placement of the fence markers would be most effective. The tool combined with local biologist knowledge was used to identify potential areas of high collision risks in Utah. In high collision risk areas near leks, up to 1.2 sage-grouse collisions per mile of fence have been documented. Studies have shown up to an 83 percent reduction in sage-grouse collisions following the marking of fences. Fence marking may also reduce the collision and entanglement risk for a variety of other wildlife species including sharp-tail grouse, raptors, bats, and big game.

Fences are marked with 3-inch pieces of vinyl undersill trim siding, which can be purchased pre-cut or produced at home. In areas of low vegetation, the top and third fence wire is usually marked, and in areas with taller vegetation, only the top wire is marked. In areas with winter collision risk, colored fence markers should be used to stand out against the snow.

The NRCS will be purchasing additional fence markers for future projects. The markers will be available free of charge for private land projects, with landowner permission, in sage-grouse habitat. Markers will be available for approximately 118 miles of fence marking in 2015 and 2016.

In 2010, NRCS launched the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) to voluntarily reduce threats to sage-grouse on private lands while maintaining sustainable ranching operations. Over the past five years, SGI matured into a major partner for sagebrush habitat conservation across the West. From 2010 to 2014, NRCS has worked with over 1,000 ranchers, improved grazing on almost 2.5 million acres, and removed over 400,000 acres of encroached juniper. During this time, NRCS Utah has planned 71,000 acres of removal of encroached juniper, planned prescribed grazing on over 173,000 acres, and is in the process of establishing conservation easements on over 19,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat. To date, NRCS has funded \$296.5 million nationwide to restore and conserve sage-grouse habitat and will extend efforts by another \$193 million for 2015 to 2018 through the conservation programs funded by the 2014 Farm Bill. NRCS Utah will continue to plan sage-grouse conservation with an additional \$29 million commitment of SGI funds for 2015 to 2018.

If you are interested in working with NRCS on a fence marking project or other sage-grouse conservation activities, please contact your local NRCS office³ or Casey Burns at casey.burns@ut.usda.gov. To learn more about SGI, visit the Sage Grouse Initiative⁴ website.



¹NRCS website: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/ut/home/>

²Fence Collision Risk Tool pdf can be downloaded from: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1049415.pdf

³Local NRCS office: <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?service=page/CountyMap&state=UT&stateName=Utah&stateCode=49>

⁴Sage Grouse Initiative website: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/>

*Volunteers placing markers on fence in Uintah County.
Photo courtesy of NRCS.*

SUMMER NATURAL RESOURCE AND GRAZING PARTNERSHIP TOUR ON PARKER MOUNTAIN

Courtesy of Jody Gale, Utah State University Extension

On July 1, 2015, approximately 65 people attended the Six County Association of Governments (SCAOG) Summer Natural Resource and Grazing Partnership tour. The SCACOG was organized in 1969 to provide services available through state and federal programs to the citizens of Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wayne counties. Their primary goal is to serve as a multi-purpose organization, utilizing combined resources to effectively provide a broad spectrum of services, including economic and community development, as well as essential human services. The General Board of SCAOG is comprised of all commissioners and one appointed mayor from each county. An Executive Board of one appointed commissioner and the appointed mayor from each county direct the overall programs of the agency.

Annually, SCACOG sponsors a natural resources tour for elected officials, congressional staff, and senior Utah cabinet level administrators. The purpose of the tour is to highlight emerging natural resources issues and concerns affecting the citizens of the six county area and the state of Utah. This year the tour was hosted by Wayne County and highlighted the efforts of the Parker Mountain Adaptive Resources Management Local Working Group or PARM as it is known locally and statewide. The tour was on the Parker Mountain in Wayne County and the main topic was sage-grouse conservation.

Extension specialists, David Dahlgren, Terry Messmer, and Eric Thacker presented updates on past and current research being conducted by Utah State University while showing on-the-ground vegetation treatments. This work is part of the on-going efforts by the Parker Mountain Adaptive Resource Management (PARM) Local Working Group to preserve sage-grouse. PARM member's work has been productive as numbers of males counted during spring sage-grouse lek counts have increased from less than 150 in 1996 to over 1,000 in 2015. The PARM prepared and distributed a booklet that includes research data and various papers. A copy of this booklet can be downloaded at: <http://utahcbp.org/html/groups/parkermountain>. Other USU representatives who helped to make the tour a success were myself, Kris Saunders, Trent Wilde, and Verl Bagley. We received many compliments about the tour from a diverse audience of elected officials, congressional staffers, ranchers, state and federal officials, and other interested individuals.

Photos courtesy of Jody Gale.



SAGE-GROUSE IN THE BALD HILLS: HABITAT USE IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

By Erica Hansen, Utah State University

We are now well into our second year collecting Global Positioning System (GPS) location data on sage-grouse in the Bald Hills. This population is on the very southern periphery of the entire sage-grouse distribution, and prior research indicated they may select for habitat differently than sage-grouse in the center of their range. This makes these birds particularly exciting to study in such detail. We've had our GPS transmitters out on a total of 27 birds since March 2014, collecting approximately four locations per bird/day. We have a whopping 22,000+ locations so far! Our primary objective is to quantify the impact of the Sigurd-Red Butte 345 kV transmission line, which was installed in the late summer of 2014.

The new line passes within 2.9 miles of an active lek, so it's important to closely monitor any changes that occur on the landscape. For the last two summers (pre- and post-construction), I've conducted surveys for avian predators, such as raptors and ravens, along the transmission line right-of-way (ROW). The new line parallels an older transmission line, with a separation of about 1,500 feet. We have seen numerous birds moving to the new line, with many using it as an additional perching substrate and one pair of ravens

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If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

WEST DESERT FIELD TOUR TO THE SHEEPROCKS

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University



Private landowners took a lead role in the WDARM tour. Here, the group hears about a PJ removal and reseeded project on the Ekker property. Photo courtesy of Lorien Belton.

At a recent field tour in the Sheepocks area of the West Desert, the WDARM group heard the news that the sage-grouse population in the Sheepocks has experienced a concerning decline. Jason Robinson from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources explained that, unlike all the other Sage-Grouse Management Areas (SGMAs) in Utah, the Sheepocks sage-grouse have not rebounded from their cyclical decline, and appear to still be dropping in numbers. Spurred along by this unfortunate news, the group had an excellent discussion about important next steps to help the population. These included predation management, expanded pinyon-juniper treatment plans, and the possibility of translocations of birds from other areas to augment the population. These next steps will be discussed in greater detail at the next LWG meeting on August 3rd at 1:00 p.m. This meeting will be held at the Tooele County Building at 47 S Main in Tooele (first floor auditorium).

The field tour also included a robust discussion about recreation issues. Chris Haller (from state parks) and Elizabeth Mitchell (rancher/landowner) both spoke about recreation. Recreation use in the area is a concern for a number of reasons, many of which can impact sage-grouse. Impacts from recreationists include habitat fragmentation and weed transmission from unauthorized ATV routes, disruption of birds during critical lekking and other critical periods, poaching, and vandalism to structures such as fences and water tanks that impact grazing management. The group brainstormed numerous ideas for helping the situation, including increased signage and education efforts targeted at recreationists, and co-funded law-enforcement so jurisdictional boundaries don't prevent enforcement.

The group will be working in the coming months to follow up on the many excellent ideas discussed during the tour.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

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www.utahcbcp.org

SAGE-GROUSE IN THE BALD HILLS, CONT.

already nesting on a corner tower. Part of the new line that passes near the lek was fitted with perch deterrents, and although they appear to discourage use in the exact locations where they have been installed, those always-creative ravens are still finding plenty of places to perch. We've also had trail cameras along the ROW for both summers to help monitor ground activity on the maintenance road. Although no analysis has been done yet, we are definitely seeing more non project-related traffic since the establishment of the road (in the first summer it was just mowed through the sagebrush; not a "true" road), and we've observed more terrestrial predators such as coyotes using the route as well.

I'll continue to collect locations from our sage-grouse until February 2016, which should give us a good opportunity to look at any new avoidance of the transmission line. This is particularly important because as our energy needs increase, it's possible that additional lines could be sited along the same right-of-way, multiplying both the footprint of the corridor and the number of perches available to predators.



Top and bottom photos courtesy of Erica Hansen. Middle photo courtesy of Stephanie Graham.