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NRCS & USU Enter into a Cooperative Agreement to Evaluate Sage-grouse Habitat Restoration on Private Lands

By Terry Messmer, Leslie Elmore, and Sarah Lupis, CBCP

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has the legal mandate to assist farmers and ranchers in identifying and implementing management actions on their property that sustain or enhance economic viability, conserve natural resources, and contribute to species conservation. Additionally, NRCS is responsible for evaluating the effects of Farm Bill conservation practices designed to

benefit wildlife species such as sage-grouse (*Centrocercus* spp.). To address this need and comply with Title II, Subtitle A, Paragraph 7 of the 2002 Farm Bill, NRCS has entered into a cooperative agreement with Utah State University (USU) to launch the Sage-grouse Restoration Project (SGRP). The SGRP is a cooperative effort involving private landowners, public and private conservation agencies and organizations, and universities in a process to evaluate and document the effects of NRCS conservation practices in restoring sage-grouse habitat and populations. As a partner in this effort, USU will commit expertise towards monitoring and evaluation of projects conducted through the SGRP program.

Although research clearly indicates that sage-grouse are dependent on large expanses of



NRCS employees provide technical assistance to clients to help them plan and install conservation practices to their land (above, Photo: Rich Gribble).

sagebrush, little information is available regarding the appropriate sagebrush patch sizes that are needed to provide for seasonal habitat requirements. In 2001, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in a memorandum of understanding among its members regarding sage-grouse conservation

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SGRP will evaluate the use of conservation practices, including brush management, to manage sage-grouse habitat.

Box Elder County a Model for Farm Bill Projects

By Troy Forrest, NRCS

Improving sage-grouse habitat on private land is a priority this year in Box Elder County. Approximately 15 projects on roughly 15,000 acres have been funded through Farm Bill programs including the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP). Many of these projects

have been specifically tailored to improve sage-grouse habitat. Several are geared towards regenerating old, decadent stands of sagebrush using a variety of methods.

Treatments will create diversity in the age classes of sagebrush across the landscape. Treatment areas will be reseeded with a mix rich in forbs and

grasses to enhance habitat for sage-grouse.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) is cooperating on many projects by providing equipment and seed and USU Extension is monitoring one project to learn how different treatment methods affect sage-grouse. This information will be used to design other projects throughout the state.



Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns with Patriot the American Bald Eagle at the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation.

(Photo: USDA Press Release No. 0334.05)

White House Conference Inspires Cooperative Conservation

By Sarah Lupis, CBCP

In late August, landowners representing 3 Adaptive Resource Management Local Working Groups in Utah traveled to St. Louis, MO, to participate in the White House Conference on Cooperative Conservation. They were joined by other Utahns including representatives from USU Extension, the NRCS, and the UDWR.

The 3-day conference was designed to promote coopera-

tive conservation efforts nationwide by bringing together key players from state, tribal, and local governments, stakeholders from the community, and private for and not for profit organizations.

Allen Smith, a Duchesne County landowner and new member of the Strawberry Valley Adaptive Resource Management Local Working Group, was impressed with the Conference organization and content. "The conference was extremely well organized from

keeping us all on schedule, providing ample time to mingle with other participants, view the informative booths, and listen to interesting speakers including three presidential cabinet level secretaries to simple ranchers who want to foster good conservation," he said. In general, conference attendees felt like they learned a lot. According to Smith, "One could not leave the conference without making lasting contacts and taking home new ideas on how to make cooperative conservation a part of

"The SGRP will result in new technology that will assist NRCS field staff and other partners in their conservation planning efforts."

NRCS, USU Cooperative Agreement continued

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recognized a need to conduct experiments that demonstrate how habitats can be managed to stabilize and enhance sage-grouse distribution and abundance.

The SGRP includes a grants-in-aid program that will provide funds for the design and implementation of research and demonstration projects that will evaluate and communicate

the effectiveness of NRCS conservation practices and technology in restoring or enhancing sage-grouse habitat on private lands.

The SGRP results will be reported through a web-based "landscape library" that will provide NRCS conservation planners, farmers and ranchers, and wildlife managers with visual information regarding the effects of 2002 Farm Bill conservation practices on increas-

ing agricultural productivity and enhancing sage-grouse habitat and populations. This information will optimize the benefits of conservation planning. In addition SGRP will result in new technology that will assist NRCS field staff and other partners in their conservation planning efforts.

For more information about the SGRP visit our web site at: www.cnr.usu.edu/cbc.



Rick Woodard, SVARM Co-chair and newest member of the Utah Wildlife Board.

Local Working Group Co-Chair Appointed to Wildlife Board

By Mark Hadley, UDWR

Gov. Jon Huntsman recently appointed Rick Woodard of Provo to the Utah Wildlife Board, a seven-member board that approves all of Utah's hunting, fishing and wildlife-related rules.

Division of Wildlife Resources Director Jim Karpowitz says he is looking forward to working with the new board members. "I've known...Rick for many

years and know him to be extremely competent and knowledgeable about wildlife management and issues."

A former chairman of the citizen regional wildlife advisory council in central Utah, Woodard is an avid hunter and angler. In addition to his new board assignment, Woodard is co-chair of the Strawberry Valley Adaptive Resource Management (SVARM) Local Working Group, which is

working to protect sage-grouse in the Strawberry Valley in central Utah.

In 1999, Woodard started a push to lengthen the amount of time a person can have their hunting license privileges suspended for wildlife poaching violations. That push led to the passage in 2001 of House Bill 318, which increased the length of time for hunting license suspensions.



Perspective on Success: Extension Agent, Verl Bagley, on Parker Mountain

By Verl Bagley, Wayne and Piute County Extension Agent

Community-based conservation can be a lot like a good marriage. When partners trust each other and are jointly committed to a successful union, the greater are the rewards.

The Parker Mountain Adaptive Resource Management (PARM) Local Working Group has been successful because the professional managers, scientists, and ranchers were able to put aside their early perceptions about the motives of other members of the coalition. Ingrained bi-

ases toward and among the different partners were recognized and dealt with.

Ranchers had concerns with issues of sage-grouse conservation: 1) what will happen to our grazing on public land if the sage-grouse is listed as an endangered species; and 2) can we trust the land and wildlife agencies to work cooperatively for the success of ranching and sage-grouse habitat?

Livestock producers in Wayne and Piute Counties are now willing to give resource managers opportunities to explain why sage-grouse are still hunted and why, sometimes, the birds are trapped and then released to other locations in Utah.

Ranchers were, at first, critical of continued hunting and especially of the translocation efforts since the ranchers had not been part of the decision process to move grouse from Parker Mountain to other areas of the state.

Wildlife managers and scientists seem to be gaining an appreciation of how livestock management has and can continue to enhance sage-grouse habitat. It's been several years since wildlife professionals in PARM have publicly charged that livestock grazing is responsible for declines in sage-grouse numbers on Parker Mountain. Like newlyweds, members of PARM are learning to trust each other, work together as a team, and not let ego stand in the way of a successful effort.

“Like newlyweds, members of PARM are learning to trust each other, work together as a team, and not let ego stand in the way of a successful effort.”

Community Takes on Sage-grouse Research in Utah's West Desert

By Jason Robinson, USU

Studying sage-grouse in Utah's West Desert takes a lot; a lot of time, driving, patience, and help. I put 2,000 miles a week on the truck going back and forth across the old Pony Express Trail, now a dirt road that stretches across the bottom of old Lake Bonneville. I'm tracking 35 Greater Sage-grouse in Vernon and Ibapah to learn more about where they move, their nesting success, brood-rearing success, mortality, and much more.

I've had a lot of help. Without volunteers from the local community and my family this project would have had a hard time getting off the ground. Area residents and family like Boyd White, Paul Carl, Sam

Mitchell, Ryan Nelson, Lans Stavast, Emily Robinson, and Kylie Thomas spent long, cold nights in the back of a truck or frozen to a 4-wheeler to catch and radio-collar enough sage-grouse to make the study worthwhile.

There has also been a lot of cooperation. This research is part of an ongoing, community-driven effort by the West Desert Adaptive Resource Management (WDARM) Local Working Group to manage and conserve sage-grouse at a local level. The support from local and agency partners has been tremendous.

A new addition to the group, the Goshute Tribe has been very helpful and accommodated with the research. The

radio-collared sage-grouse in Ibapah spend a lot of time on the Goshute tribal lands and access has been vitally important to collecting good data. Vernon area residents have also been great—providing information on when and where they see sage-grouse.

Sage-grouse are a beautiful and fascinating bird. Male sage-grouse strutting in the open with inflated chests and flared tail feathers is one of the most spectacular displays nature has to offer. Continued research and management will help to assure that future generations will be able to share in the excitement and enjoyment that I have felt during my research.



Sam Mitchell (above), was among those who volunteered to help capture sage-grouse.

A sage-grouse chick (below); brood habitat was monitored throughout the summer.



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

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University.

Utah State University Extension Community-Based Conservation Program's Mission

The Utah State University Community-Based Conservation Program consists of Extension faculty and staff who are committed to public service and dedicated to promoting resource management education and facilitating dialogue and cooperation between representatives of local communities and public and private natural resources management organizations and agencies. The goals of the program are:

- ◆ To implement an interactive, dynamic local working group process that promotes education and enhances coordination and communication between representatives of local communities and public and private natural resources management organizations and agencies.
- ◆ To work with local working groups to develop "seamless" conservation plans for designated Utah geographic areas that contribute to the conservation of sage-grouse and other wildlife species that inhabit Utah's shrub and sagebrush-steppe ecosystems while enhancing the economic sustainability of local communities.
- ◆ To work with communities, local working groups, and other partners to implement, evaluate, and report the contributions of range and habitat improvements and other wildlife management projects toward achieving the goals and objectives stated in conservation plans.

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