



Miles City Sage-grouse Local Working Group co-chair leaving

Local rancher Doug Campbell has served as co-chair of the Miles City sage-grouse Local Working Group for many years. He has provided a much appreciated landowner perspective to the group and his leadership will be greatly missed. Doug graciously volunteered his personal time and attention to natural resources, conservation and sage-grouse. He recently sold his ranch and is moving to the Columbus/Rapelje area and is therefore unable to co-chair the group. Thank you Doug and the best to you in your new adventure!

Fish and Wildlife Service Strengthens Work Plan to Restore Biological Priorities and Certainty to Endangered Species Listing Process

A Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) news release July 12, 2011 announced that it is strengthening a work plan that will allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

An agreement with a frequent plaintiff group builds on a multi-year work plan that the Service filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on May 10, 2011. The Court approved the work plan on September 9, 2011. The work plan will enable the agency to systematically, over a period of six years, review and address the needs of more than 250 candidate species to determine if they should be added to the Federal Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants. Consistent with the Service's objectives and biological priorities, the agreement includes additional scheduling commitments for a small subset of the actions in the work plan, which is available online at http://www.fws.gov/angered/improving_ESA/listing_workplan.html.

If the Service determines that listing is warranted for a species, the agency will propose that species for listing and allow the public to review and comment on the proposal before making a final determination. A

list of these candidate species is available at http://www.fws.gov/endangered/improving_ESA/listing_workplan.html.

Scheduling commitments provided in the agreement instructed the Service to submit a proposed listing rule or not-warranted finding to the *Federal Register* for a number of species no later than the end of the specified Fiscal Year (FY). Imbedded in the plan is a list of six species whose status will be determined by fiscal year 2015, the greater sage-grouse is one of the six. An environmental group has recently challenged the 2015 deadline for the greater sage-grouse and has instead, requested the U.S. District Court for the District of Idaho to order the Fish and Wildlife Service to commence a listing process immediately. The Service is currently defending its 2015 settlement date which was approved in the District of Columbia Court.

Three October Workshops

Three Sage-grouse Local Working Group (SG-LWG) workshops were hosted in October. They were all exceptionally well attended. Presenters were well received by attendees and a lot of worthwhile discussions ensued during and after the presentations. The workshops were made possible through a "Sage-grouse Opportunity Grant managed by the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) and sponsored by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The Miles City SG-LWG held two workshops, one in Miles City and the second in Decker. The Dillon SG-LWG held a workshop in Dillon.

Miles City

The Miles City workshop was held on October 17th at Fort Keogh in Miles City. One of the speakers was Rick Danvir of Deseret Land & Livestock Company in Utah. Rick is the wildlife manager for the Deseret holdings. The Deseret Company is managed for both wildlife and livestock using a holistic, adaptive approach in the sagebrush steppe habitat. He presented information on grazing systems and management that appears to be very compatible with sage-grouse. Rick was followed by Beth Dickerson, biologist with the USFWS who updated the group on the Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing status with regard to greater sage-grouse. Kent Undlin and Jesse Hankins, BLM biologists ended the session with livestock fences and stock water tank issues for sage-grouse. Following Kent and Jesse's presentation, eight stock water "ramps" were given out to people who expressed interest in using them.

A discussion period followed the end of the session with the speakers responding to questions from the audience. Attendance was exceptional with about 60 people. Some came as far away as North Dakota.



Sage-Grouse Workshop held in Decker

Article by Seanna Sparks, District Conservationist, Hardin

The Hardin NRCS field office, the Big Horn Conservation District, and the Miles City Area Sage-Grouse Local Working Group held a Sage-Grouse and Range Management workshop at the Spring Creek School north of Decker, Mont., on Oct. 18, 2011. A grant for the workshop was funded through the Sage-Grouse Opportunity Grant that is offered through the Montana Association of Conservation Districts.

There was excellent turnout for the workshop, and we couldn't have asked for a more beautiful fall day when the workshop started with a field trip out to the CX Ranch west of Decker to check out a conifer removal project. The purpose of the project was to remove conifers from sage-grouse habitat; due in part to the conifers creating a perch for predatory birds as well as the increased ground water conifers use compared to other rangeland grasses and forbs.

After the field trip, the group returned to the Spring Creek School where Rick Danvir, the wildlife manager for the Deseret Land and Livestock Company, spoke about its success with managing the ranch profitably for both livestock and wildlife. Tim Griffiths, the NRCS National Sage-Grouse Initiative coordinator, spoke about the Sage-Grouse Initiative, reiterating the fact that, "What is good for the Sage-Grouse is good for the rancher."

After the workshop, a free supper was provided, with Joe Fidel running the barbeque grill (thanks, Joe!). A special thank you goes out to the Big Horn Conservation District for sponsoring the supper, as well as a thank you to Evan Van Order, soil conservationist, Hardin FO, for letting us use his grill!



Bruce Waage, NRCS BLM liaison, speaks to the workshop attendees at the CX Ranch.



Joe Fidel, Bozeman Area resource conservationist, and Tim Griffiths, NRCS National Sage-Grouse Initiative coordinator, show a local rancher how to estimate sage brush canopy cover.



Joe Fidel, Bozeman Area resource conservationist and master grill.

Montana NRCS Fence Specification Updated

Article by Bruce Waage NRCS-BLM Liaison

Montana NRCS fence Specification Code 382 was recently updated specific to sage-grouse. It is found under the caption "Special Considerations for Sage-grouse Habitat". The content of the revised section is provided below to inform you of these changes.

A total of 35 miles of fences have been marked through NRCS' Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) in 2011 and an additional 15 miles of fence have been marked by the Montana Sage-Grouse Local Working Groups which brings the total to 45 miles of marked fence. Great work!

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FENCES IN SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT

Consult with Montana NRCS biologists and/or sage grouse coordinators for possible exceptions to the following special considerations:

- Fencing near leks (dancing grounds) should be avoided – no new fences closer than ½ mile to the lek.
- Vinyl fence markers (3-inch segments) used on fences are only needed on the top wire. White markers are recommended, but alternating white and black markers or using reflective tape on markers is optional. Use of white and black markers is recommended in areas that tend to have snow during the breeding season in March and April (white and black markers need to be adjacent to each other). Spacing between markers should be approximately 3 to 4 feet. PVC pipe strung through the top wire in one foot segments is an excellent alternative to vinyl fence markers.
- Fences that need to be marked include:

- new fences in sagebrush habitat or other identified nesting habitat
- existing fences within ½-mile from a lek
- existing or new fences in known winter habitat
- existing or new fences on ridgelines and at low saddle points where sage grouse are common
- existing or new fences in known high use movement areas (e.g., to and from alfalfa fields).
- Flat-topped wood posts provide raptor perch sites – consider having posts with cone tops (purchase after market). It is recommended that all wood posts within ¼-mile of a lek should be treated with cones placed on the top of the post or have a nail driven into the center of the post to prevent raptor perching.
- Metal posts are preferable to wooden posts as the former discourages raptor perching.
- Markers should be placed on the top wire of new fences as the fences are being installed. If a new fence is installed without simultaneously marking the fence, sage grouse losses could potentially be high due to the unfamiliarity of the new fence to the birds.

The role of the sage-grouse local working groups is to adapt the state plan to specific local areas to develop and implement strategies that will improve or maintain the sagebrush steppe and reduce or mitigate factors that may further reduce greater sage-grouse habitats or populations. (Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana 2005)



Upcoming Events

Montana Association of Conservation Districts Annual Meeting
November 16 - 18, 2011
Helena, Montana
For more information: 406-443-5711

Society for Range Management 65th Annual Meeting
Lessons from the Past, Strategies for the Future
January 29-February 3, 2012
Spokane, Washington
<http://www.rangelands.org/spokane2012>

Montana Sage-grouse Local Working groups

Dillon
Ben Deeble - Co-chair
Nate Finch - Co-chair

Miles City
Doug Campbell - Co-chair
Ron Devlin - Co-chair

Glasgow
Tracy Cumber - Co-chair
Vicki Olsen - Co-chair

If you have a sage-grouse related story or topic that you would like to share, please submit the article to: bruce.waage@mt.usda.gov

