

Aiding Grouse

6-year, \$6.1-million project aims to improve sage grouse habitat in Baker County

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

Dallas Hall Defrees' job is to help protect populations of a Baker County bird that many people have never seen.

But the sage grouse, inconspicuous as it is, casts an immense political shadow — one that extends not only over parts of Baker County but much of the inland West, an area covering several states.

The sage grouse, which is about the size of a chicken, as its name implies needs habitat that includes healthy sagebrush.

And sagebrush, as anyone knows who has traveled extensively in Eastern Oregon, is hardly scarce in our region.

But sagebrush alone is not enough to sustain populations of sage grouse, said Hall Defrees, a Baker County native who is the sage grouse Local Implementation Team coordinator for a multiyear and multimillion-dollar project designed to reverse a significant decline in sage grouse numbers in the county.

The birds also need bunchgrass and forbs (a botanical category that includes many types of wildflowers), which are important sources of food, she said.

This type of habitat is imperiled by multiple factors, Hall Defrees

said.

The main threats in Baker County are:

- the spread of annual grasses, principally cheatgrass and medusa-head, which can crowd out beneficial grasses and forbs

"We have a lot of both in Baker County," Hall Defrees said of the annual grass species.

- encroachment by juniper, which can supplant sagebrush, in part by sucking up most of the available water in the soil

- wildfire

Cheatgrass and medusahead contribute to the fire threat because those species dry much earlier than native bunchgrasses and can form dense mats of tinder that can carry flames as readily as dry paper.

That trio constitutes the greatest danger to sage grouse in Baker County, but there are others, Hall Defrees said.

Predation by other birds — ravens, which eat sage grouse eggs, being the most common avian culprit — can also threaten sage grouse.

And human activities, including off-road vehicle travel, can potentially harm sage grouse habitat or fragment it.

Environmental groups have lobbied the federal government for more than 15 years to list sage grouse as a threatened or endan-

gered species over much of its range in the West, including in Eastern Oregon. They contend that cattle grazing also imperils sage grouse.

But in September 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the bird, although federal officials conceded that sage grouse do face multiple threats in some areas.

Sage grouse have frequently been compared, in their potential to affect land management, with the spotted owl. The owl, which lives in the western parts of Oregon, Washington and California, was listed as an endangered species in 1990. Protection for the bird contributed to a decline in logging on public land in those areas.

The most likely effect of federal protection for sage grouse would be constraints on cattle grazing, a primary use on millions of acres of public land across the inland West.

Baker County's sage grouse situation is unusual, however.

The county is on the northern fringe of the bird's range in Oregon, and accounts for less than 10% of the state's sage grouse habitat.

A 2019 report from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) estimated that 3.9% of Oregon's sage grouse live in the BLM's Baker Resource Area.

Most of Oregon's sage grouse live in the sprawling sagebrush steppe of

"It's a fun job for me. I care a lot about agriculture within Baker County because I grew up doing that."

— Dallas Hall Defrees, coordinator for a sage grouse habitat improvement project in the county



Malheur, Harney and Lake counties.

But unlike in those counties, where most of the land — and sage grouse habitat — is on public land, more than 70% of the sage grouse habitat in Baker County is privately owned.

And the birds have been faring badly on that land.

ODFW estimates that sage grouse populations in Baker County dropped by about 70% between 2004 and 2014. The numbers have been relatively steady since then. The 2019 report estimated the spring population of sage grouse in the Bureau of Land Management's Baker Resource Area at 541 birds.

The declining population, and the potential for restrictions on grazing and other activities should the sage grouse be federally protected, prompted a group of Baker County landowners and officials from county, state and federal agencies



Associated Press file photo

Three male sage grouse during the seasonal ritual designed to attract hens. The males inflate air sacs in their breasts, creating a distinctive thumping sound, and fan their tail feathers.

to form the Local Implementation Team several years ago.

Those partners applied for a grant through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board with a goal of improving sage grouse habitat and, ideally, boosting the population of the birds.

In January 2019 the Baker County Local Implementation Team was approved for a 6-year, \$6.1 million grant that extends over three of Oregon's two-year budget cycles.

The team initially received \$1.7 million for the first biennium. The money comes from the Oregon Lottery.

The team hired Hall Defrees as coordinator in November 2019.

Having grown up on her family's cattle ranch in Sumpter Valley, Hall Defrees, a 2009 Baker High School graduate, was excited about the opportunity.

"It's a fun job for me," she said. "I care a lot about agriculture within Baker County because I grew up doing that. Any way that I can help to improve the natural resources of Baker County."

Hall Defrees earned a degree in biology at Oregon State University in 2013, and a master's degree in rangeland ecology and management from OSU in 2018.