

Sage grouse conservation campaign gets financial boost

Baker County receives \$100,000 from last year's federal infrastructure bill

By **CLAYTON FRANKE**
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Emmy Tyrrell calls sage grouse the “mountain men” of birds. That’s because they don’t like to be around people. Unfortunately for the chicken-size birds, many of the places they live — tracts of land dominated by sagebrush, including Eastern Oregon — are popular with people, too.

But a Baker County program coordinated by Tyrrell that aims to improve conditions for sage grouse on private lands recently received an influx of dollars.

Baker County is among five Eastern Oregon counties to receive \$100,000 from last year’s federal infrastructure bill. The others are Crook, Harney, Malheur and Lake counties.

The three latter counties harbor the large majority of Oregon’s sage grouse habitat, most of which is on public land.

Baker County is at the northern fringe of the sage grouse’s range in Eastern Oregon, and the county’s sage grouse population accounts for less than 10% of Oregon’s total. Much of the county’s sage grouse habitat, unlike in those three other counties, is on private property.



Nick Myatt/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, File

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The federal dollars augment a \$6.1 million, six-year grant that Baker County received in 2019 through the lottery-funded Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. The state money is also intended to pay for sage grouse conservation projects in the county.

Oregon projects

Among the projects planned in Baker County are deterring ravens, which prey on sage grouse eggs, and building an ATV wash station at the Virtue Flat OHV Area east of Baker City to reduce the spread of noxious weeds and invasive grasses that can degrade sage grouse habitat.

Another key part of the effort is the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances. These are agreements between the federal government and private landowners whose proper-

ties include sage grouse habitat, in which the landowners agree to take actions, such as altering cattle grazing schedules, to benefit sage grouse. Landowners don’t receive payments through the agreements.

Tyrrell said the federal money will partially pay for her position as CCAA coordinator with the Powder Basin Watershed Council. She said she’s also working on an application for another grant through the Watershed Enhancement Board after the current grant ends in 2025.

Tyrrell’s job is to act as a liaison between landowners and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help start — or continue — conservation measures and ranching practices that benefit sage grouse.

To ensure that conservation projects are consistent across

counties, CCAs usually follow a specific outline — what’s called a “programmatic” CCA — with a basic formula for how the agreements work. The fish and wildlife service established the formula in 2015.

“These programmatic (CCAs) have these really fantastic plans laid out and we can tailor these plans very specific to whatever the landowners’ goals are (and) what exists on the landscape instead of the one size fits all,” Tyrrell said.

Besides crafting these agreements, Tyrrell works to recruit new landowners into the program. Statewide, 500,000 acres of private land are enrolled under CCAA agreements for sage grouse, Tyrrell said. That includes 42,000 acres — among eight different property owners — in Baker County, with a small portion just across the border with Union County.

Any property that contains habitat accessible to the Baker sage grouse population — which inhabits an area northeast of Interstate 84 and south of the Willowa Mountains, as well as a few other places in southern Baker County — can be enrolled in the program. Tyrrell said she’s in the process of enrolling 9,000 more acres divided among three properties.

What makes the agreements enticing for ranchers is that they won’t be burdened with additional conservation requirements or land use restrictions should the sage grouse ever be listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Number of birds

A 2020 report from the U.S. Geological Survey found that sage grouse populations across their range, which covers 11 western states, had decreased by 80% since 1965 and by 40% since 2002.

According to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s 2021 sage grouse report, the estimated population of the birds in Baker County (and a small part of southern Union County) in the spring of that year was 704, a 42.6% increase from the estimate of 494 birds in the spring of 2020.

The report states that sage grouse populations in the county have risen since 2014, including an average annual increase of 1.7% in the number of male grouse at “leks” — the open areas where the birds gather each spring and where the males perform the species’ elaborate courting ritual, which includes inflating air sacs in their breasts and fanning their tail feathers.

However, between 2005 and 2021, among leks that were surveyed in both years, the number of males present declined by 81%.

Declining populations — which are tied to the loss of sagebrush habitat from housing, oil and natural gas exploration, mining and other developments — have prompted environmental groups to petition the federal government to protect sage grouse.

The bird became a candidate for an ESA listing in 2010, prompting a movement from landowners to enroll in CCAs or similar agreements in CCAs or elsewhere.

Tribes provide update on fish hatchery

Work started prior to flooding in spring 2020

By **ANTONIO ARREDONDO**
East Oregonian

MILTON-FREEWATER — Native fish are coming back to the Walla Walla River.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation on Wednesday, July 13, shared additional information about its fish hatchery on the South Fork of the Walla Walla River.

The hatchery, 9 miles southwest of Milton-Freewater, was originally completed in 1996 as an adult fish facility. Built with the intention to add on to the original project, that finally came to fruition in July 2021.

During the past two years, CTUIR has added incubation facilities, early rearing and grow-out buildings, and research and feed storage rooms. It also includes a new visitor center where those coming can see the fish.

“It took a lot of painstaking time to work through (permitting) issues, funding issues, and contractual issues,” CTUIR artificial production supervisor Jon Lovrak said.

Construction began on the hatchery in January 2020 but was quickly halted due to extreme flooding one month later. That flooding that was a blessing in disguise: The original plan was not prepared for floods of that nature.

“If the flood would have come later, we would’ve had to start over,” Lovrak said.



Jon Lovrak/Contributed Photo

The Walla Walla Hatchery sits next to the South Fork Walla Walla River 9 miles southwest of Milton-Freewater. The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation recently completed a host of upgrades to the facilities, which are open to the public on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

After the building was completed more than a year later, it was time for fish to come in. The facility is programmed to produce 500,000 spring chinook salmon, but in its first year received only 165,000 partially reared fish, which were released in April. Lovrak said the hatchery will be closer to capacity in 2022 with 485,000 fish, all of which have been reared from the egg stage.

Approximately 80% of the fish are released in the South Fork and Walla Walla rivers, with the remaining fish released in the Touchet River. Lovrak said reintegrating chinook into the ecosystem will be a great help not only to the tribe but the entire area.

“The ecosystem will thrive better with salmon back in it,” Lovrak said.

For those interested in touring the hatchery, visiting hours at the new visitor center are from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

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