

Research breakthrough aids sage grouse

Bryan Stevens finds putting markers on fences decreases birds' mortality

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

MOSCOW, Idaho — Natural Resources Conservation Service officials in 11 Western states are well versed in Bryan Stevens' research, which they routinely use to help ranchers protect sage grouse populations on private range.

Stevens, 31, conducted the first scientific study documenting sage grouse mortality due to collisions with livestock fencing for his University of Idaho master's thesis in wildlife biology. He also identified a simple method to protect the native birds — placing vinyl markers covered with reflective tape every 3 feet along fences in high-risk areas.

Leaders with the NRCS-led Sage Grouse Initiative found Stevens' work so useful they covered his tuition for a second UI master's degree in statistics. NRCS provided Stevens data from several Western states on known sage grouse leks — areas where males perform elaborate mating dances and females stay to nest — which he used to create color-coded maps quantifying the risk posed by fencing.

In 2013, Stevens said NRCS, working with willing landowners to help avert an endangered species listing, used his maps to remove or mark more than 500 miles of fencing in high-risk sage grouse habitat.

Dave Naugle, a University of Montana wildlife biology professor and SGI's national science advisor, said the tool should also play a role in man-



Photos courtesy of Bryan Stevens
Bryan Stevens sits at an overlook of Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir in Twin Falls County. Stevens hiked throughout Idaho studying sage grouse collisions with livestock fencing and learned birds can be protected by placing tags on fences.

Western Innovator

Bryan Stevens

Age: 31

Family: Wife, Char

Hometown: Originally from Shelby, Ohio

Occupation: Research assistant at Michigan State University and certified wildlife biologist

Education: Bachelor's degree in wildlife resources and master's degree in wildlife biology and statistics, University of Idaho; pursuing a doctorate in wildlife, Michigan State University



agement plans to benefit the bird on public grazing allotments.

"He wasn't just doing science. He was doing science and also had the ability to see the application and how it could be used," Naugle said.

Stevens' UI master's degree advisor, Kerry Reese, and Idaho Department of Fish and Game biologist Jack Connelly were troubled by discoveries of dead sage grouse near fencing and

saw a need to study the issue.

"I think we were surprised at how many birds flew into fences. We didn't have any idea of the magnitude of it," Reese said.

They hypothesized markers would be effective based on prairie chicken research in Oklahoma.

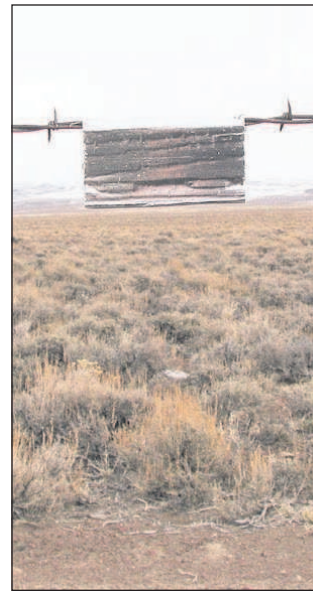
Stevens started work in the summer of 2008, hiring technicians to help him walk hundreds of miles of fence lines in

sage grouse habitat in southeast and southcentral Idaho. He discovered the vast majority of collisions occurred within 0.6 mile of a lek, and seldom were strikes found beyond 1.2 miles. Furthermore, birds were far more likely to strike fencing on flat terrain, where they tend to fly closer to the ground, than in hilly areas. Based on those discoveries, he estimated 6-14 percent of sage grouse habitat lies within a high-risk area.

In his second year of field work, he tested the use of markers to make fencing more visible and found they reduced sage grouse collisions by 83 percent.

"A relatively small proportion of the overall landscape seemed to be high risk," said Stevens, who is now researching wild turkeys for a Ph.D. project at Michigan State University. "Maybe a targeted investment could be effective at eliminating the problem."

Production of his tags has



A tag designed by Bryan Stevens marks a barbed-wire fence to protect sage grouse from collisions.

also provided work for seven employees with mental or physical disabilities at the COR Enterprises wood shop in Billings, Mont. Woodshop manager Tony Braunstadter said his workers have cut more than 100,000 sage grouse markers from vinyl siding during the past few years.

Sage grouse



The greater sage grouse is the largest grouse in North America, ranging throughout western U.S. sagebrush country into southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada. This species is classified as Proposed Threatened and Candidate, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Binomial name: *Centrocercus urophasianus*

Appearance: Large, ground dwelling bird, as much as 30 inches long, weighing up to 7 pounds.

Habitat: Sagebrush-dominated regions at elevations of 4-9,000 feet.

Diet: Sagebrush leaves, buds, and associated insects.

Life span: 1 1/2 years on average

Greatest threat: Habitat loss

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Capital Press graphic

NPC has clout to operate within Capitol Hill circles

HARDY from Page 1

Hardy was elected president of the NPC, a grower-funded organization that works to protect growers' best interests. He has also served in several other leadership roles, including chairman of the U.S. Potato Board, whose mission is to promote potato consumption.

"I heard a long time ago the world is run by those who show up," he said.

The two organizations are "absolutely" important for potato growers and the industry, he said.

With their help, U.S. potato exports have grown from 10 percent of production in 2000 to 17 percent today, and there's plenty of potential for more growth, he said.

That takes not only promotion but work in the regulatory and trade arenas as

well, and the latter is where NPC comes in.

With a staff and presence in Washington, D.C., NPC is able to respond quickly to any legislative, regulatory or trade issues that arise, he said.

"Those who don't have a voice are going to be controlled by those who want to control them," he said.

NPC has the clout to operate within Capitol Hill circles and get things accomplished, he said.

"The grower sitting back here at home has no voice in that, but through the Council they do," he said.

NPC was successful in keeping potatoes in the school lunch program, derailing an effort to limit potatoes to one serving a week. It continued to work on getting white potatoes approved for the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program and

to gain access to all of Mexico for U.S. fresh potatoes, he said.

Gaining more access to Mexico, with its 100 million people, was important, especially for Idaho, he said.

Through NPC, the potato industry is well positioned to have an impact on agricultural policy, but more growers need to be involved. Agriculture as a whole needs to be more involved, he said.

"We have a positive story to tell, and we better start telling it," he said.

As the ag and rural population wanes, so does agriculture's political voice, he said.

"If we have issues, legislation or regulation, we better be

speaking up because no one else is going to," he said.

He encourages growers to stay abreast of the issues, voice their support for their industry, and be proactive with the public.

While grower presence at the national level is important, growers at home can also be involved through petitions to Congress available on NPC's website, donations to the organizations fighting on their behalf, writing blogs and editorials, hosting tours of their farm or speaking to grocery retailers, consumers and neighbors, he said.

The future for U.S. potatoes is bright, especially where exports are concerned.

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