

Oregon

States adopt sage grouse protection plans

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

If greater sage grouse are listed as threatened or endangered later this year, it won't be for lack of expensive conservation efforts in the 11 Western states where the bird lives.

Since 2010, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service alone has spent nearly \$300 million and worked with private landowners to conserve sage grouse habitat on 4.4 million acres. A total of 1,129 ranches have signed on through the NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative.

Other public agencies and private partners have spent an additional \$128 million in that time, according to an NRCS report, and the 2014 Farm Bill contains \$200 million more to continue the work into 2018. All across the West, landowners and management agencies are cutting intrusive conifer trees, marking fences to prevent in-flight collisions and doing other work to protect a bird whose potential Endangered Species Act listing has been described as the "spotted owl on steroids."

In fact, it was the bitter northern spotted owl legacy of lawsuits, timber sale protests, mill closures and steep reduction in federal timber harvests that prodded private and public collaboration regarding sage grouse.

Tim Griffiths, national coordinator of the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative in Bozeman, Mont., said the intent is to achieve non-regulatory wildlife conservation while sustaining a

working landscape. He said the public-private collaboration has been "nothing short of historic."

Whether it staves off an ESA listing, however, is an open question. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded in 2010 that greater sage grouse warranted ESA protection, but held off implementation because other species needed more immediate attention. The service will decide by September 2015 whether to list sage grouse as threatened or endangered.

Western partners must be able to tell USFWS what has changed since it made its initial conclusion, Griffiths said. A March report from the Sage Grouse Initiative documents the work that's been done: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/usda-report-demonstrates-positive-impact-300-million-investment-sage-grouse-conservation-working-lands-west/>

Oregon, where voluntary conservation agreements on private and public land now cover nearly all critical sage grouse habitat in the state, is seen as a model of inter-agency and landowner cooperation. Ranchers represented by soil and water conservation districts have signed Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, or CCAA, with the Fish and Wildlife Service. In return for taking basic steps to improve or preserve sage grouse habitat, landowners get 30 years of protection from additional regulation even if the bird is listed.

Meanwhile, the Sage Grouse Initiative has spent \$18.4 million helping Oregon landowners remove western junipers



AP Photo/Rawlins Daily Times, Jerret Raffety, File
This file photo shows a male sage grouse performing his "strut" near Rawlins, Wyo. States have been formulating plans to help recovery of the bird across its range.

and other early-stage conifers, which crowd out sage and grasses, suck up water and provide perches for predators. More than 405,000 acres in the West have been reclaimed by cutting juniper, with nearly half in Oregon. The work has cleared conifers from an estimated 68 percent of the grouse nesting, brood-rearing and winter habitat on private land, according to the SGI.

Griffiths, the SGI coordinator, said voluntary acceptance by ranchers was crucial.

"That would almost be the understatement of the century," he said. "The ranching community not only opened up their gates and their kitchen tables for us to sit down and discuss this, they opened their pockets and brought their neighbors over," he said.

One of the early signers, rancher Tom Sharp of Southeast Oregon's Harney County, coined an expression for the agreements: "What's good for the bird is good for the herd."

Harney County spent three years drawing up conservation

agreements on private land, Sharp said. After they'd been approved, seven other Oregon counties adopted similar plans within three months. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and Oregon Gov. Kate Brown presided over a celebration of the agreements last month in Bend.

Marty Suter Goold, director of the county's Soil and Water Conservation District, was invited to Denver in March to explain the county's work to officials from the 11 Western states where greater sage grouse live.

"Regardless of what happens with the listing decision, I feel landowners wanted to demonstrate their dedication to these kind of habitat improvements on private lands," she said. "We're pioneering a way of the future that can be modeled to any kind of species."

Goold said a timber owner who'd been through the endangered species wars told her ranchers were far more organized than the timber industry was when the spotted owl listing hit.

New OSU ag admins assess department

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press



Eric Mortenson/Capital Press
OSU College of Ag Assistant Dean Sam Angima, left, and Associate Dean Dan Edge are touring extension and research centers.

AURORA, Ore. — One of the first tasks Oregon State University's two new agricultural college administrators set for themselves was a tour of research and extension stations. Associate Dean Dan Edge and Sam Angima, assistant dean for outreach and engagement, wanted to hear from OSU staff and the producers who rely on the statewide network of stations for advice and information.

"You don't want to come into a new office and assume everything's fine," Angima said during a stop April 1 at the North Willamette Research and Extension Center in Aurora.

Edge and Angima visited OSU's Mid-Columbia station in Hood River and the Food Innovation Center in Portland before stopping at North Willamette. The center, about 20 miles south of Portland, is a key contact point for berry farmers, nursery operators, hazelnut orchardists and Christmas tree growers, among others.

Angima said OSU staff quickly made one thing very clear: "They are spread too thin," he said.

"There are huge demands across all our units," Edge agreed.

The statewide, as they're called, haven't regained full staffing from cuts imposed during the recession, but OSU officials believe they've now got the Legislature's attention and may receive budget help. Edge, noting OSU's ag and forestry programs were ranked seventh best in the world,

said the university provides the best "pound for pound" return on the state's investment.

Edge was head of OSU's Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Science before moving to the associate dean position Feb. 1. Angima was regional administrator of OSU Extension on the North Coast, based in Newport. He moved to the Corvallis campus job March 1.

Angima said one of his goals is to break down barriers between the College of Ag and other departments. In some cases, researchers from other OSU departments do field outreach that the Extension program can help with. "We can't sit in an ivory tower and expect things to happen," he said.

A group meeting with Angima and Edge offered some thoughts on their interaction with the North Willamette and other extension and research centers.

One of them, Bill Sabol of Arbor Grove Nursery in St. Paul, said on-line advice and information has its place, but personal interaction with Extension experts is more valuable. Without it, "You lose contact with your customers," he said.

Controversy over federal land transfer potentially moot

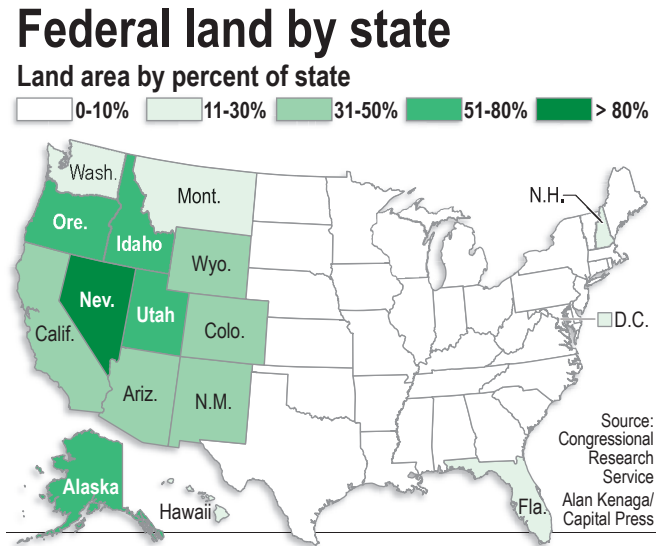
By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — The prospect of transferring federal land to state ownership roused sharply differing opinions in the Oregon Capitol recently, but the controversy may be legally moot.

Concerns over federal mismanagement of forest and range lands in Oregon serve as the impetus for House Bill 3444, which would require the U.S. government to cede most of its public lands to the state.

Oregon lawmakers are also considering House Bill 3240, which would form a task force on the subject, as well as House Joint Memorial 13, which would urge the U.S. President and Congress to make such a transfer.

However, legal experts say that Oregon and other states



likely face insurmountable challenges in trying to gain ownership of federal property.

Such proposals generally reflect dissatisfaction with federal agencies but don't have solid legal footing, said Robert Keiter, a law professor and director of the University of Utah's Wallace Stegner Center

of Land, Resources and the Environment.

"My guess is it has much more political salience given antipathy toward the federal government rather than any serious legal credibility," he said.

During an April 2 hearing on the legislation, Sen. Doug Whitsett, R-Klamath Falls, blasted the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management for sequestering employees in cubicles while forests grow overstocked and weeds overtake the landscape.

"The bloated bureaucracies that control these lands seem incapable of change," Whitsett testified before the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water.

Supporters of the bills claimed that the U.S. government's ownership of more than half of Oregon's land mass effectively starves county governments of property tax revenues, leading to insufficient funds for law enforcement and other crucial services.

Federal agencies are also hindered by environmental laws that prevent logging and other practices that generate revenues and mitigate fire risks, proponents said.

"Rather than focusing on the symptoms, we should be concentrating on the root of the problem," said Tootie Smith, a Clackamas County commissioner.

Environmental groups testified against the legislation, arguing that federal management is necessary to protect species and water quality.

Federal lands belong to the public and should be valued for wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities, not just "extractive purposes" such as logging, mining and grazing, said Rhett Lawrence, conservation director for the Oregon Chapter Sierra Club.

If federal land were transferred to state ownership, the property would still be subject to the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, Lawrence said.

The National Environmental Policy Act would no longer apply to the lands, however, which would shut out the public from decisions on how it's managed, he said.

NEPA requires federal agencies to study the environmental consequences of their actions and is frequently the basis for lawsuits seeking to block graz-

ing and logging.

Representatives of Trout Unlimited and the Native Fish Society also spoke against the bills, arguing that the state would face a huge burden in maintaining the ecological work that's currently done by federal scientists.

The committee hearing focused on the merits of the legislation, but the state's authority to require the transfer of federal land likely poses a major obstacle for supporters.

Lawmakers in Utah successfully passed similar legislation in 2012, but the state's own legislative attorneys came to the conclusion that it has a "high probability of being declared unconstitutional."

Under legal precedent established by the U.S. Supreme Court, the federal government has broad authority to retain ownership of public lands, said Keiter of the University of Utah.

Land transfer proponents rely on language in state enabling laws that refer to the disposal of federal lands, but these provisions are taken out of context since the U.S. government retains discretion whether to actually sell property, he said.

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