

GROUSE

Continued from Page 1A

"It's really exciting," said Bennett, who also owns a ranch in the southern part of the county that harbors sage grouse.

"We will be able to make a difference, a critical difference, and primarily on private land," he said.

More than 70 percent of the sage grouse habitat in Baker County's PAC — Priority Area for Conservation — is on private property, he said.

The ultimate goal, Bennett said, is to improve the health of the county's hundreds of thousands of acres of rangeland, something that has the potential to benefit not only the sage grouse and other species but also the productivity of cattle ranches, which are a bulwark of the county's economy.

"This is going to pay dividends not only for the bird, but for the grazing community, recreation, the watershed," Bennett said.

The sage grouse has been what Bennett calls the "sentinel species" for the condition of those rangelands for more than a decade.

Baker County's sage grouse situation is unique in Oregon in that the majority of the bird's habitat here is on private property. 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 percent of Oregon's total.

Most of the bird's habitat and population in the state are in the southeastern counties of Lake, Harney and Malheur, which are predominantly public land.

Environmental groups have repeatedly asked the federal government to classify the bird as a threatened or endangered species, a decision that could curtail activities, including cattle grazing on public land, that could degrade sage grouse habitat.

In September 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the bird as threatened or endangered.

But Bennett said the federal agency is slated to review the status of the sage grouse in 2020, and federal protection for the bird, and the possible effects on how public land is managed that could result, remains a possibility.

But rather than simply wait and accept whatever fate might bring, Bennett said a local group that includes landowners and officials from county, state and federal agencies has been working for years to study why Baker County's sage grouse population has declined by about 70 percent over the past decade or so, and to consider ways to reverse that trend.

"We said if we don't get out in front of this we could have a serious problem," Bennett said.

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board grant reflects the work that has been done, he said, since

proponents had to show the Board how the Lottery dollars would be used.

Bennett said Marisa Meyer, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in La Grande, and Nick Myatt, who manages the Grande Ronde Watershed District for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), were instrumental in starting the Baker Sage Grouse Local Implementation Team that applied for the Lottery dollars.

Myatt said the grant is a "huge influx of money into the county for private landowners and livestock producers for doing the work we want to do for sage grouse habitat restoration."

Bennett said the Tri-County Cooperative Weed Management Area, which covers Baker, Union and Wallowa counties and is a core member of the local team, will be the fiscal agent for the money.

A committee from the Sage Grouse Local Implementation Team will review applications from landowners for grants and distribute the Lottery money, Bennett said. That committee includes representatives from Baker County, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, ODFW and the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, he said.

The Tri-County weed agency was a logical choice to administer the state grant, Bennett said, because invasive weeds, primarily cheatgrass and medusahead, pose a significant threat to sage grouse by displacing

the sagebrush habitat the birds depend on. Those weeds also increase the risk of range fires.

The local team's plan for sage grouse lists as its top priority treating invasive plants. A "threat reduction plan" states that biologists have identified 70,000 acres of sage grouse habitat in Baker County that is dominated by invasive species.

Jacqueline Cupples, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in La Grande, and Brian Ratliff, district wildlife biologist at the ODFW's Baker City office, wrote the threat reduction plan and also did a considerable amount of work on the application for the Watershed Enhancement Board grant, Bennett said.

"This was a big project for Baker County," he said. "What's really remarkable is that everybody participated from their own perspective and they took time from their other work to do this. There was a common vision. It's a remarkable partnership. I'm so appreciative of everyone's work."

Myatt said the threat reduction plan, which outlined how the money could be spent in Baker County, was an important part of the local team's application to the Watershed Enhancement Board.

Other partners in the Baker County Local Implementation Team include the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service, the BLM, Baker County and the Powder Basin Watershed Council.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Auditions Tuesday for 'Puss in Boots'

Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre will hold auditions for the play "Puss in Boots" at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 22.

Director Lisa Ensworth is looking for 10 young actors for this youth production.

Here's the story line: When young Guy discovers that his inheritance consists only of a cat and a pair of boots, he is highly distressed, until he gets to know the cat. Saucy and one-of-a-kind, Boots the cat vows to help Guy achieve his goal of marrying the beautiful princess from next door. Boots also helps free the town from the clutches of Ugolin, an evil ogre. Guy and Boots trick the king and queen into thinking Guy is the "Marquis of Carabas" and also trick the ogre into turning himself into an insect who meets an abrupt end, courtesy of Boots' boot. Boy gets girl, the town is freed, magical spells are broken, and much fun is had along the way.

Show dates for "Puss in Boots" are Feb. 21-24.

HEART TO HEART

Half a century of public service

Have you been around long enough to remember EOCD? What about HELP Inc.? Ever heard of Northeast Oregon Economic Planning and Development Council?



Davidson

It is hard to believe that the organization that began in the 1960s as part of the "War on Poverty" and wasn't expected to exist for very long is still a strong, vital organization 50 years later.

Its current name? Community Connection of Northeast Oregon Inc. Why would a corporation change its name so many times? To best reflect the culture of the time? To reflect the evolution of the corporation's mission? Both reasons and many more.

What was Eastern Oregon Community Development Council? A spinoff from the Northeast Oregon Economic Planning and Development Council. In 1969, EOCD was designated as the Community Action Agency for Baker, Union and Wallowa counties. As they say, the rest is history.

As we prepare to celebrate our 50-year anniversary, I've pondered the existence of this organization, an organization that I have been a part of for 37 years. "Why and how have we survived for fifty years?" Over the years, we expanded and contracted, more than once. It's a fluid organization and it has to be that way. Grant County was added in 1987. Some programs have spun off as the genesis for other organizations, some have completely disappeared, and some are stronger than ever.

Reading our scrapbooks is an amazing reflection of history. In the early years, community development

was our forte. We worked to eradicate poverty by promoting economic development activities and fostering small business start-ups in the late 1960s and early 70s. We also organized gleaning programs and demonstration gardens and started Neighbor-to-Neighbor Ministries and Wallowa County's Interfaith Caregivers. We had the old CETA program and ran the alcohol and drug program for Union County.

If you received butter and cheese in the USDA mass distributions in 1983 you got it from us, with help from the National Guard to distribute the tons of food throughout our region. Were you a part of the Blue Mountain Local Producers Market? That was us.

Our Board of Directors is unique as boards go. We are governed by a "tri-partite" board, meaning we have equal representation from three sectors — the private sector, the public sector, and the low-income sector.

Each of our four counties — Baker, Grant, Union, and Wallowa — has equal representation. Here's the interesting part. Our board believes in a practice called decentralization and we activity endorse this concept. Each county has at least one advisory council in which local citizens make local decisions about program operations. The chairperson from one council from each county has a seat on our board of directors. Each county can tailor its services to fit its needs, and they do. For those of you who study organizations, this is an unusual concept but it has been a very successful structure for Community

Connection.

I could write about all the programs we have administered over the past five decades and the building of senior centers, a public transit hub, and the many apartment complexes in which we played an integral role, but I prefer to think in terms of people, not programs. To think of the people whose lives we have changed, and the people who have been a part of "us" and helped "us" accomplish our mission.

Are you one of those people with a link to EOCD, HELP Inc. or Community Connection? Over a span of 50 years, you can imagine the number of employees, board members, advisory council members, donors and volunteers we have had. Thousands. How many people have benefited from our existence? Tens of thousands.

Fifty years ago, if you wanted your child to get a head start in school, you would have sent him or her to the EOCD preschool. Today, your grade schooler can attend Kids Club at the Riviera Activity Center in La Grande so he or she doesn't have to be home alone after school.

Don't want your sister sleeping in her car tonight? We can find a warm bed for her. Do your neighbors run out of food before the end of the month? The food bank has a box of food to see them through. Are your parents lonely? They're welcome at the senior center to join the games, dancing, exercising, meetings, and, of course, eat the delicious noon meal.

Your mother can't get out to do her grocery shopping and needs help bathing her-

self and cleaning her house? Our in-home caregiver is ready to assist. Does your father's driving scare you to death, but you can't take him out every day? Our bus driver can.

Are you getting ready to buy your first home? Attend our first time homebuyer workshop or get help paying for the down payment. Do your grandchildren need a nutritious lunch during the summer? Visit the summer lunch program in La Grande. Are you out of milk and bread, live a mile from the grocery store, have two toddlers in a stroller, it's snowy and windy outside and your car is broken down? One of our buses can take you to the grocery store.

Are your toenails bothering you? Are you worried about your blood pressure? Come to the senior center. Is that high blood pressure or other chronic disease causing pain or limiting your activity? Our six-week workshop series can help. Does your grandmother sit huddled in a blanket all day because she must choose between heating her home and buying medicine? We'll help keep her warm during the cold months of winter. Do your pipes freeze every year? We can wrap your pipes and insulate your crawl space.

Are you lonely and depressed after your wife of 52 years has passed on? I know someone who can help. Are you behind on your mortgage and facing foreclosure? Our certified housing counselor may be able to help. Do you worry about your uncle not eating right but he's homebound? We'll take him a hot lunch every day.

Do you have a doctor's appointment in Walla Walla or Boise but can't drive yourself? Give us a call. Are you struggling to keep a roof over your family while you complete job training? We'll help with the roof. Want to play bingo? Call the senior center. Do your parents need help preparing their taxes? We can help. Want to learn how to control your energy costs? We can teach you. Do you like to volunteer and make new friends? Come to the senior center. Do you like to help people? Let's talk!

Over the years our name has changed, the faces have changed, but the bottom line has always been the same — helping people and changing lives.

Please join us in celebrating all that we have collectively accomplished over the past 50 years on Tuesday, Jan. 29, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Baker County Senior Center, 2810 Cedar St. I look forward to seeing you there.

Margaret Davidson
Executive director,
Community Connection
of Northeast Oregon Inc.
La Grande

Sleeping well thanks to law enforcement

I recently had to call 911 for a prowler. I live in Haines and the State Police and Baker County Sheriff responded in under 5 minutes. I am writing to commend the professional work these officers do for our community! I am also very

grateful for their presence! These officers are serious about protecting the citizens and stopping/preventing crime. In today's world we don't often stop and take the time to thank those who do so much for us all.

Thank you Oregon State Police and Baker County Sheriff, I sleep well at night because of you!

James Camarata
Haines

Thanks to all staff at the hospital

Approximately five weeks ago I found myself in an ambulance, headed to the emergency room at Saint Alphonsus Medical Center here in Baker City. From the emergency room I moved to the medical floor. I ended up spending about 16 days there.

The care I received while I was there was nothing but exceptional! I received great care from everyone. I would like to publicly thank everyone who helped me on my road to recovery — the EMTs, nurses, doctors, CNAs, physical and occupational therapy staff, speech therapist, food service staff, housekeeping staff, discharge planning staff, radiology and lab staff, and anyone who helped me along the way that I may have forgotten to list.

The kindness and caring help I received will not be forgotten!

Francis Williamson
Baker City

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Thursday	Chicken Fried Steak.....	\$9.95
Friday	All You Can Eat Mini Shrimp.....	\$9.95
	Steak & Shrimp.....	\$10.95
	Pan Fried Oysters.....	\$10.50
	Prime Rib.....	\$13.95
Saturday	NY Steak.....	\$13.95
Sunday	Stuffed Pork Loin.....	\$9.50/8.95 sr

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