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Joe Painter:

South Dakota Rancher Voluntarily Improves Prime Sage Grouse Habitat

Joe Painter credits his grandfather for his appreciation of the sage grouse, sharptails, pheasants, ducks, wild turkeys and Hungarian partridge that share his windswept cattle ranch outside of the tiny town of Buffalo, in the far northwest corner of South Dakota. "My whole life I've loved birds, and anything we can do to keep birds on the ranch, I want to do," he says.

Over the past several years, Painter has improved habitat for sage grouse on more than 13,000 acres with assistance from the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), via the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"Ranching is not very lucrative," Painter says. "We are stewards of the land and when you get a chance to get some help, you do it and see the benefits for the wildlife and for everybody."

He joins more than 700 ranchers who have voluntarily enrolled in grazing improvements, conservation easements, and conifer removal projects across 11 western states. All are part of the SGI partnership, launched in 2010 to proactively conserve a species that has lost half its historic range.

Gillian Brooks, SGI rangeland conservationist, gives high praise to Painter for the number of acres he has enrolled in a rest rotation grazing system, as well as marking barbed-wire fences to prevent sage grouse collisions close to an active sage grouse lek (breeding ground).

"Joe's done a lot for sage grouse, including resting more than 2000 acres of native range for a year and half in prime nesting and brood-rearing habitats," she says.

When Painter first heard about the new SGI funding at the local NRCS office, he was interested right away. Soon, he was meeting with Brooks and Mitch Faulkner, NRCS rangeland management specialist, who have assisted Painter with a ranch plan that benefits grouse and livestock.

"I like the concept of land use conservation and preserving a little more grass," he says, explaining his initial enthusiasm for signing up.

Painter and his son-in-law run a cow-calf operation that's mostly native range, with some hayfields. Through the SGI program, he's installed cross fences and water necessary to move his cattle from pasture to pasture, rather than grazing uniformly.

"You can already see the advantage," Painter says. "When you rest a pasture you give it a chance for it to grow back, and there's more forage available. The roots are recharged, and it's just a win-win for the birds and the livestock."

When Painter's out on his land, he's always watching for wildlife along with the cattle. Today, he passes on his passion for the birds to his daughter and his son-in-law and granddaughter who will carry on the family legacy.

"It's nice to leave enough habitat for the birds," he says. "We have two sage grouse leks and we have dancing grounds for sharp-tailed grouse, too. We get the biggest kick out of them."