

WE CAN SAVE GROUSE

LIVE?

Good grazing practices are more state and federal land-use regulations are critical for keeping these endangered birds off the endangered species list.

By Tom Dickson



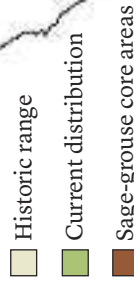
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LUMPED IN WITH REST

Sage-grouse populations have been declining throughout the West for decades. The species occupies just 56 percent of its historic range, and numbers are down 50 to 65 percent from as recently as the early 1970s to a rangewide total of just 200,000 breeding birds today. Before European settlement, sage-grouse across the West may have numbered in the millions.

Thanks to abundant habitat, in many cases kept healthy by well-managed cattle grazing, Montana populations are healthy. The state has long been a national leader in the bird’s conservation. In the mid-2000s, FWP inventoried and mapped sage-grouse

► Sage-grouse current and historic distribution



As this issue went to press, a small area in Garfield and McCone Counties, near Fort Peck Reservoir’s Dry Arm, was also being considered as a core area.

“core areas,” or critical habitats. “This allows us to zero in on the places with lots of remaining birds and intact sagebrush, so we optimize our conservation efforts,” says Catherine Wightman, the department’s sage-grouse coordinator. Since 2006, FWP has made one-time payments to private landowners who agree not to spray, plow, or burn sagebrush grasslands for 30 years. That has protected a total of nearly 200,000 acres. The state also conserves sagebrush through the hunter-funded Habitat Montana Program, which purchases permanent conservation easements on private land.

“This is bigger than just this one bird,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. “The sage-grouse is considered an ‘umbrella’ species, because it requires such large areas to survive. If we conserve sage-grouse across Montana, we also help pronghorn, mule deer, songbirds, and many other sagebrush-steppe species.”

Wyoming has similarly mapped and conserved sage-grouse, and today the two states combined contain 55 percent of the West’s sage-grouse. Yet when considering a species for listing, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) lumps all western states together. Even with the birds’ strong showing in Montana and Wyoming, habitat loss elsewhere has been so pronounced that in 2010 the USFWS determined that the sage-grouse “warranted” federal protection. The bird was “precluded” from being listed as threatened

or endangered only by the fact that other species were even worse off.

Frustrated by federal inaction, environmental groups sued. A federal judge ruled that the USFWS must reevaluate the status of sage-grouse and other “warranted but precluded” species by fall 2015.

The federal agency has since warned states and other federal agencies that its primary concerns are threefold: (1) sagebrush grassland habitat loss and “fragmentation” (caused by new roads, traffic, construction, and power lines that scare off the skittish birds); (2) new conversion of sagebrush to crops (or, in more urban states like Colorado, subdivisions); and (3) the lack of land-use regulations to safeguard the bird’s habitat in the future.

Attending to these three threats, says the USFWS, will greatly reduce the likelihood that the sage-grouse will be listed.

Few people want to see that happen. Grazing and energy development could be restricted on BLM and other federal lands. States would lose management authority, including the ability to allow hunting. Even the species itself could suffer.

“Sage-grouse need large tracts of land, and in Montana ownership is a checkerboard of public and private holdings,” says McDonald. “That requires conservation measures by all parties, and unfortunately cooperation evaporates when a species is listed. That’s why—and this may be counterintuitive to a lot of people—we believe the sage-grouse might have a better chance of long-term survival by staying off the list than being on it.”

HELP AND REQUIRE

There are two ways to convince people to conserve sage-grouse habitat: (1) help them do it voluntarily, or (2) require them.

The Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) was created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2010 in large part to help ranchers graze their cows in ways that benefit sagebrush grasslands. Because nearly 40 percent of the nation’s 186 million acres of sage-grouse habitat is on private property



IN THE THICK OF IT “What these birds need is what native grasses and forbs, and a decent amount of tall grasses,” says Lorelle Berkeley, who heads an FWP study on grazing and intensity of grazing affects the big birds’ survival.

Among the dozens of partners participating in the initiative are such unlikely bedfellows as ConocoPhillips, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, National Audubon Society, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and World Wildlife Fund. “Never before

has there been such a marshalling of diverse and influential forces to help an at-risk species,” says Tim Griffiths, national Sage-Grouse Initiative coordinator in Bozeman. So far the program has spent \$145 million to protect sage-grouse habitat on private and public land, with partners contributing another \$70 million.

“We’ve found more resilient height, so tall to be a core between we grazing an

growth. In return, they received financial help to buy fencing as well as pipelines for filling additional stock tanks.

The Downses can now move their three herds among 26 separate pastures so that the cattle never stay in one place long enough to overgraze grasses and forbs. "It's definitely working," says Stephanie. "We monitor the grass and grazing systems with the local NRCS staff in Roundup—who have been just great to work with—and we can see how each year the grass is taller and more robust."

Keeping ranches financially viable is a large part of the SGI strategy, says David Naugle, a wildlife professor at the University of Montana and science adviser for the SGI. "The problem for sage-grouse in eastern Montana isn't cattle," says Naugle. "It's ranchers giving up on cattle because it's no longer profitable, and then selling or converting their land to things that have almost

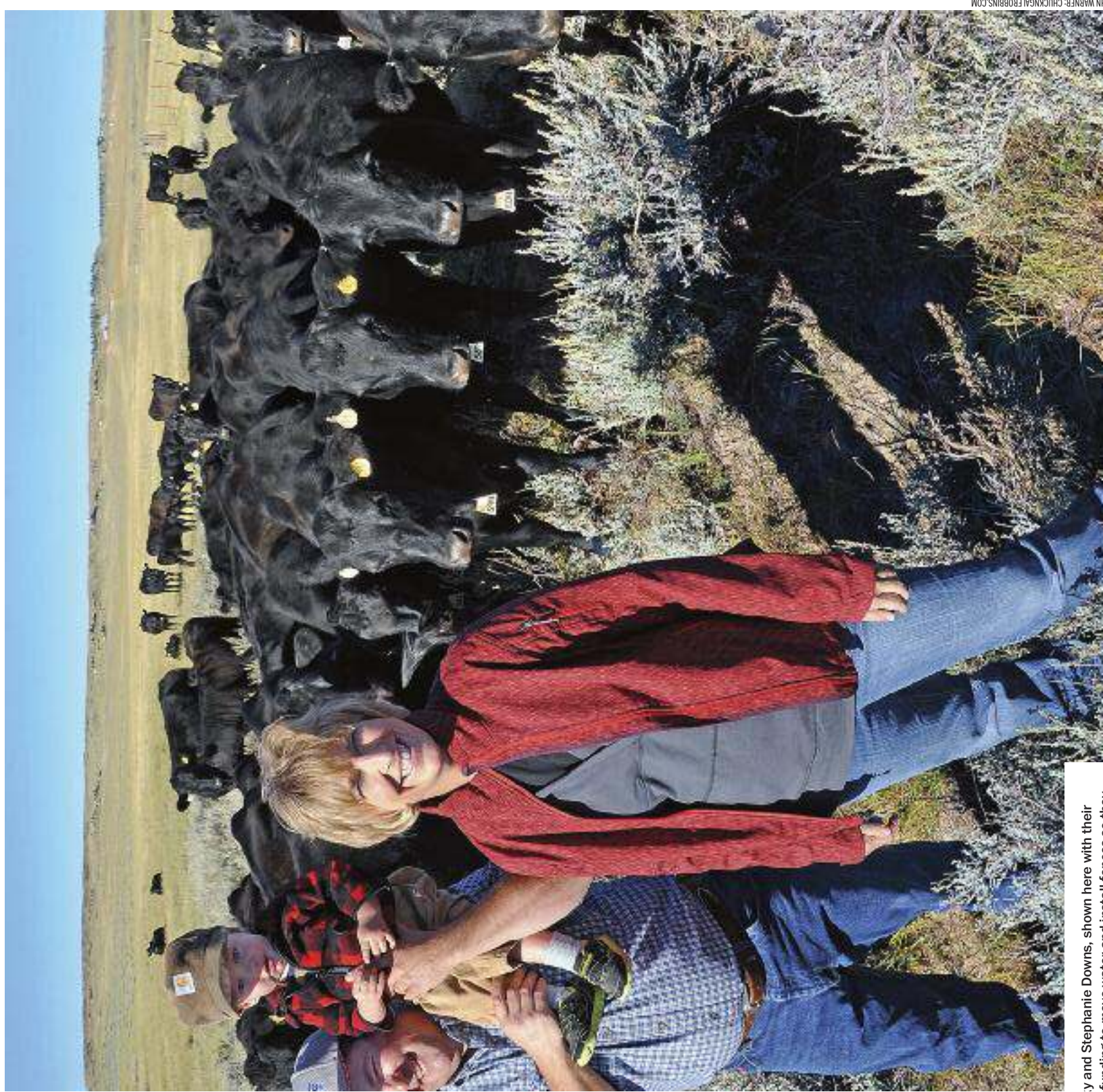
► What about hawks and

"People are asking about that," says Ken McDonald. "We understand why Montanans want to know about sage-grouse, they aren't pushing to end hunting and remove predators."

The short answer, says McDonald, is that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service identified habitat loss and lack of environmental regulations—not hunting and predation—as the major threats to sage-grouse. "If all we do is talk about hunting and predators, the service will see we are not taking its concerns seriously. We have no choice but to attend to the major threats they've identified," he says.

Studies in Montana and elsewhere have shown that hunting takes just a small fraction of the total sage-grouse population. "And by allowing hunting, Montana can use upland hunting license dollars for sage-grouse monitoring and habitat conservation. Otherwise we could lose sportsman support," McDonald says.

As for predators, there's no question that a toll on sage-grouse. "In a few places there



Stephanie and Ken Downses, shown here with their son, are part of the Sage Grouse Initiative.

WARNER; CHUCKGALE/ROBBINS.COM

TWO-PRONGED APPROACH

If the SGI is the “help them” way of convincing people to voluntarily benefit sage-grouse, soon-to-be released state and federal plans will add the “require them” prong.

One of the USFWS’s main concerns is the lack of regulatory “mechanisms”—laws, regulations, and policies—by states and federal agencies to reduce fragmentation and other threats to sage-grouse habitat. States especially are seen as lacking adequate oversight on energy development to keep grouse numbers from dwindling further. “This is hugely important,” says McDonald. “The regulatory component is what will really move the needle on a sage-grouse conservation. It has the potential to conserve millions of acres of habitat.”

Earlier this year, Montana Governor

Steve Bullock directed FWP to lead a citizens’ work group to develop a plan to help prevent the sage-grouse from being listed. The 12-person group represents agriculture, ranching, conservation, hunting, energy, mining, Indian tribes, local governments, and the Montana Legislature. By the end of 2013 it will recommend to the governor new policies and actions that address the main threats identified by the USFWS. Draft recommendations are now out for public review and comment (see note at the end of the article). “The biggest challenge facing the council is how to allow oil and gas development while still retaining the big open spaces that sage-grouse need,” says Tim Baker, the governor’s

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► What the future may hold

Three possible scenarios for sage-grouse down the road:

1 One is where sagebrush is plowed up and converted to wheat or corn, whose prices have risen sharply in recent years. In these worst-case scenarios—now increasing across Montana—the bird won’t survive.

2 The second is where oil and gas development takes place in sage-grouse habitat. If regulations can reduce habitat damage caused by new roads and other disturbances, sage-grouse may hang on.



natural resources policy advisor.

Under the new strategy, Governor Bullock could direct state agencies not to issue permits unless certain conditions are met by energy developers. Requirements might include keeping well pads and roads a certain distance from sage-grouse mating areas, restricting activities during critical times of year, such as mating season, and reducing total surface disturbance in critical habitat.

That’s Wyoming’s approach. Using a computer program developed at the University of Wyoming and available to the public online, energy developers can see, before applying for a permit, how their project will disturb sage-grouse. If the total area of proposed and existing disturbance exceeds the state’s threshold of 5 percent of the total project area, Wyoming will not issue a permit. Industry officials in Montana have told Baker they like how the Wyoming model

PLANS NEED TO MESH

The other major regulatory component to sage-grouse conservation are the Bureau of Land Management’s resource management plans, now under revision. The plans guide grazing, energy development, and other activities on BLM holdings, which in Montana comprise 30 percent of sage-grouse range.

John Carlson, BLM conservation biologist in Billings, says his agency is waiting to see Montana’s final strategy so it can adjust its plans. “For all this to work across Montana—where state, federal, and private landownership is mixed together—the state’s strategy will need to mesh with our plans, and all of them must adequately address the threats identified by the USFWS,” he says.

As Berkeley and I drive back to Roundup, concerns such as sagebrush conversion and fragmentation seem distant and theoretical. Meadowlarks sing, and a mule deer trots off in the distance. Then six sage-grouse, likely



TOP: CHRIS BOYER/REX USA; MIDDLE: JEREMY ROBERTS/CONSERVATION MEDIA; BOTTOM: TOM DICKSON/MONTANA OUTDOORS