



Vinyl siding helping to protect sage grouse



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It takes a village to protect a sage grouse — or at least the vinyl siding that would sheath the homes in a village.

Over the past three years, COR Enterprises employees in Billings have cut more than 100,000 3-inch-long pieces from 12-foot lengths of siding.

“We just shipped out a little over 28,000 pieces today,” said Tony Braunstadter, who has overseen the work at COR Enterprises.

What does vinyl siding have to do with sage grouse? Well, when the squares are clipped every 3 feet onto the top wire of barbed wire fencing, they help

keep sage grouse from flying into the wires, which can otherwise be hard for the birds to see, especially at dusk and dawn.

The markers are most effective within a half-mile of sage grouse breeding grounds, called leks.

“These birds definitely do strike fences,” said Bruce Waage, a biologist for the Sage Grouse Initiative. “My biggest challenge is to convince people that it happens.”

A Wyoming Game and Fish study showed that marking could reduce sage grouse collisions with fence wires by 70 percent. Research by the Sage Grouse Initiative showed that marking fences reduced bird strikes by 83 percent.

New partners

In November, four volunteers and a landowner attached thousands of the small white squares to 3.5 miles of new barbed wire fence on property west of Alzada, in southeastern Montana. The work was the beginning of a new partnership.

“We’re trying to accelerate what we’re doing,” Waage said. “We need to make (the markers) more accessible and available to landowners.”

To do that, SGI has partnered with the Bureau of Land Management, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Intermountain West Joint Venture, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Montana Association of Conservation Districts. American Colloid Co. donated \$7,500 for the first batches of vinyl to be purchased and cut by COR. Next year, that funding

should increase as the other partners chip in, Waage said. The cost for the markers runs \$200 to \$225 per mile of fence.

The fence-marking project near Alzada involved the Sage Grouse Initiative and the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

“We’re just getting the word out to landowners that the markers are available,” said Martin Ellenburg, a biologist for the NRCS in Miles City.

The goal is to make the markers available to landowners statewide for free. But COR Enterprises is also shipping them to other sage grouse states, including California and Colorado.

Hot-button issue

Protection of sage grouse has become a hot-button issue across the West. Landowners are worried that if the large ground-dwelling birds are listed as an endangered species, cattle ranchers could lose access to thousands of acres of public grazing lands. Oil and gas producers are worried that listing would shut down any new exploration in sensitive sage grouse areas.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has to make a decision on listing the birds by September 2015.

“Overall, all of our producers enjoy the sage grouse,” said Rebecca Wolenetz, a district conservationist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service in Ekalaka, who helped out on the Alzada-area fence-marking project. “It’s an interesting bird to have around and watch. But they feel like the emphasis on the sage grouse is a little extreme. Some see it as a way to force them off the land.”

Ellenburg said agencies like his are trying to improve the rangeland so that it is good for both sage grouse and cattle.

“We want to show them that we can work together and have a profitable business while still having habitat for sage grouse and other sagebrush species, too,” Ellenburg said.

“None of us wants to see the bird listed,” Wolenetz said. “So if we can help them in other ways, that would be good.”

To take part

If you are interested in participating or contributing to this voluntary program, contact Bruce Waage at 406-657-6135 or Pete Husby at 406-587-6902.

Grouse facts

Sage grouse range across 186 million acres in 11 Western states and two Canadian provinces. Three-quarters of the birds inhabit just 27 percent of the range. The Sage Grouse Initiative targets restoration of sagebrush habitat in the bird's core area – the places where the breeding populations are highest.

According to Fish, Wildlife and Parks, sage grouse in Montana reside in 39 counties – mainly in the eastern half and southwest corner of the state – on roughly 27 million acres of sagebrush-grassland. Sixty-four percent of sage grouse habitat is on private land.

Martin Ellenburg, a biologist for the NRCS in Miles City, said the sage grouse populations in his area of the state are steady in some places and declining in others where development is occurring. Above-average moisture this summer should provide plenty of residual cover for the grouse going into next spring's nesting season, especially compared to the drought conditions of 2012, he said.