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Proactive Sage Grouse Conservation

Top-level Officials Tour the Bord Gulch Ranch, Colorado

When Ray Owens stood up at a town meeting and offered to give Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper a field tour of the Bord Gulch Ranch, he didn't expect his invitation to be taken that seriously.

A month later on January 22, the governor arrived in rural northwest Colorado with a who's who list of important federal agency leaders. Accompanying him was Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe, and Neil Kornze, acting director of the Bureau of Land Management, along with the partners who have helped Owens to establish a model conservation ranch that's profitable to livestock too. Of course the press came as well.

"I was tickled the governor put it together," Owens said. "The people from Washington listened and took notes and got to see our world."

From a high point on the windswept ranch of sagebrush, bunchgrasses and swales with lush wet areas, the easygoing Owens pointed to the far distant mountains. He told them they could see into Utah and Wyoming too. The

mountains to the east by Steamboat Springs are the summer home of herds that travel more than 50 miles in winter to find refuge in big sagebrush lands.

Owens is the ranch manager for Bord Gulch, and recently tied for Colorado Landowner of the Year, a prestigious award from Colorado Parks and Wildlife. He works for the Gilliland family, applying the conservation goals of the late Tom Gilliland. He has two Sage Grouse Initiative contracts, and also works closely with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, and the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.

The 10,000-acre ranch, with BLM grazing allotments of 6000 acres, lies in the heart of outstanding sage grouse country. Mule deer and pronghorn thrive here and so do elk on their winter pathways.

The secret to success, Owens told the group, is to manage for all species, and for a profitable cattle operation too, on a big rangeland in good shape. He showed them the luxurious tall bunchgrass, mixed in with sagebrush of different sizes. In summer, they'd see purple lupine and other wildflowers.

From their vantage point on the hill, the group could see the miles of new fencing that is now wildlife-friendly to prevent animals from getting caught in wires or sage grouse colliding into the strands. Owens told them about re-seeding projects, about wells that are distributing water to other parts of the ranch, and a rotational grazing system that rests and invigorates the range.

An innovator who spends hours and days observing firsthand what works and doesn't on the ranch, Owens is particularly proud of an effort he's working on through the Sage Grouse Initiative, led by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Through Owen's eyes, Secretary Jewell and others learned that sage grouse families need some special habitats in summer, specifically wet areas in the arid sagebrush. That's where the chicks can find tender lush leaves and flowers, and nutritious insects. Those wet "seeps" can be tough to come by, so Owens is creating artificial seeps with hoses in selective places that are near nesting areas.

Secretary Jewell listened, he said, and offered the support of the Department of Interior for proactive conservation that could prevent the need for listing the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service found the species warranted protection under the Act, but other wildlife were higher in priority. The Service gave a five-year window for conservation actions and policy to change enough to reverse the course for a species that has dwindled from some 16 million in pre-settlement to about 200,000 inhabiting half their historic range.

“Without the voluntary efforts of ranchers like Ray, we couldn’t turn the tide in favor of sage grouse,” said Justin Shirley, district conservationist for the NRCS out of Craig, who attended the tour.

While private lands compose about 40 percent of the sage grouse habitat, they’re an integral part of what the birds needs to survive. These are big landscape species that require ranges of multiple townships with little disturbance.

The NRCS has a long history of assisting landowners with conservation practices, using the power of the Farm Bill to leverage dollars. The agency launched the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010 to focus Farm Bill dollars to help ranchers enhance and protect their lands for sage grouse. They targeted the strongholds for the birds where habitats are intact and bird numbers highest. Since then, the Initiative has expanded to become a strong partnership of many groups and agencies.

Today, more than 700 ranchers have enrolled in the program that’s helping them achieve their own goals for sustainable ranching and caring for sage grouse, along with many other wildlife species that share the range.

Owens is appreciative of the support he receives form the Farm Bill, just passed by Congress, and of the many partners who help him with technical assistance and funding.

“I love to show people around the ranch so they get as excited as I do about all the wildlife here sharing the range with our livestock,” Owens said. “But I never thought I’d have a historic day like this one with top decision makers gathered here together.”