



**Natural Resources  
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# News Release

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## **NRCS Releases Technical Note on Using Fuel Breaks to Reduce Wildfire Impacts in Sagebrush Landscapes**

**BOISE, ID** – Large western wildfires remain a pressing concern for conserving the sagebrush sea and the 350+ species that depend upon it, such as the iconic sage grouse. Today, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) published a Technical Note explaining the use of strategic fuel breaks as a tool to help reduce wildfire impacts in sagebrush ecosystems. This note provides conservationists and land managers with the information they need for cooperative, proactive landscape planning efforts that minimize the impacts of large-scale wildfires on wildlife, grazing lands, and communities in the West.

This new publication provides a synthesis of technical information on establishing fuel breaks. A fuel break is a strip of land, typically along existing roads, where the plant life is managed to reduce fire risk and allow firefighters a safe anchor point from which to fight wildland fires. The Technical Note was compiled by an interdisciplinary team from the NRCS and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made up of specialists in fire/fuels management and ecology, wildlife biology, plant materials, and range management.

“Every year, wildfires take a heavy toll not only on sage grouse and other sagebrush species but also on our ranching communities whose livelihoods depend on these working rangelands,” said Curtis Elke, NRCS state conservationist for Idaho. “This new resource will help us work collaboratively with private and public land managers to get ahead of the curve and reduce risks before fires ever happen.”

Currently, large-scale wildfires represent one of the greatest threats to conserving sage grouse and sagebrush ecosystems, especially in the Great Basin. The longer, hotter and drier fire seasons and the expansion of invasive cheatgrass have resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of “megafires” – fires that exceed suppression capability and grow exceptionally large. These fires can burn hundreds of thousands of acres. While fire suppression efforts have been effective at stopping more than 97% of fires, the few that escape initial attack by firefighters can quickly become megafires, impacting sage grouse habitat at an unsustainable rate.

Fire management experts frequently recommend putting more emphasis on actions taken *before* fires occur to increase the odds of reducing impacts. Pre-suppression efforts include the proactive installation of fuel breaks in strategic locations. This Technical Note explains how, why, when, and where to use fuel breaks to mitigate impacts from large fires.

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Well-placed fuel breaks reduce fire size and frequency by improving access for firefighters and providing strategic anchor points, thereby minimizing response times. They also assist in compartmentalizing wildfires, which serves to constrain fire growth. Though fuel breaks are an important part of the toolbox to help reduce wildfire size, they are not the ultimate solution to the wildfire problem in sagebrush ecosystems. They must be created carefully, since fuel breaks can disturb vegetation, increase weeds, and fragment wildlife habitat.

“While fire managers agree that proactive fuel breaks give us the best chance at reducing impacts of large fires, the practice remains controversial. Careful planning and placement is essential,” said Jeremy Maestas, sagebrush ecosystem specialist for the NRCS. “Our goal in creating this Technical Note was to pull together information from a variety of sources into one document to help inform cooperative landscape planning efforts.”

This Technical Note draws upon practical lessons learned and other existing publications to help conservationists understand fuel break functions, set expectations for effectiveness, evaluate trade-offs, and implement fuel breaks on the ground.

“Properly designed and strategically placed fuel breaks are critical to provide firefighters safe and accessible anchor points for fire suppression,” said Lance Okeson, fuels program assistant fire management officer for the Bureau of Land Management, Boise District. “This publication will serve as an excellent reference for all partners working together in priority landscapes to manage fire risks in the sage steppe.”

The publication follows last year’s release of an Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy by the U.S. Department of Interior aimed at curbing impacts of wildfires in the sagebrush ecosystem. In part, the Strategy calls upon partners to work together to plan fuel breaks in key landscapes identified by a BLM-led regional assessment called “FIAT”, or the Fire and Invasive Assessment Tool, which prioritized potential landscapes in the Great Basin where additional fuel break planning may be most needed to reduce wildfire impacts to sage grouse.

NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) to help landowners and partners plan practices that address a wide variety of threats to sage grouse. For more information, contact your state or local USDA Service Center.

A copy of the Technical Note can be downloaded at [www.sagegrouseinitiative.com](http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com). Additional resources on fuel breaks and wildfire in sage grouse country:

- [Trial by Fire: Improving Our Ability to Reduce Wildfire Impacts to sage grouse and Sagebrush Ecosystems Through Accelerated Partner Collaboration](#)
- [Great Basin Fact Sheet No. 5: Fuel Breaks That Work](#)
- [Wildfire Management Strategies | New Video Shows Projects that Protect the Sagebrush Sea](#)
- [Rangeland Fire and sage grouse](#)
- [Fire and Invasive Assessment Tool](#)

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