

2005 ANNUAL REPORT

SAGE-GROUSE RESTORATION PROJECT

Cooperators

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service
Utah State University
Utah State University, College of Natural Resources
Utah State University Extension Services
Jack H. Berryman Institute
Western Governors' Association
Western States Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee
North American Grouse Partnership
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources

Prepared by

Terry A. Messmer, Sage-grouse Restoration Project Principal Investigator
Leslie W. Elmore, Sage-grouse Restoration Project Coordinator
Utah State University Extension Service

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Executive Summary

The purpose of Sage-grouse Restoration Project (SGRP) is the identification, integration, evaluation, and documentation of effects of 2002 Farm Bill conservation technologies and strategies on sage-grouse and other sagebrush-steppe obligates. To address this need, the SGRP includes a grants-in-aid program to provide funds for the design and implementation of research and demonstration projects that will evaluate and communicate the effectiveness of 2002 Farm Bill conservation practices and technology in restoring or enhancing sage-grouse habitat on private lands.

Information gained will be used to assist private landowners and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Soil Conservation Districts, and state wildlife agency field staff in the planning and implementation of habitat projects and practices on private lands to benefit sage-grouse and other sagebrush-steppe obligate species. The projects implemented also will contribute to range-wide sage-grouse conservation efforts. SGRP will provide current information on the role of existing conservation practices and technologies relative to conserving sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species. The information gained from the multi-state experiments also will assist local sage-grouse working groups in complying with the conservation plan reporting requirements set forth in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE) When Making Listing Decisions.

Other anticipated benefits of the SGRP are 1.) a web-based project library that will provide NRCS staff, wildlife biologists and managers, and farmers and ranchers with visual information and data regarding the role of conservation practices in increasing their productivity and natural resource conservation and 2.) the identification of private lands conservation planning needs to a much wider research audience while bringing in the best researchers in the field to address field-level technology needs.

Summary of 2005 Activities

The agreement between NRCS and Utah State University (USU) was finalized September 1, 2005. The following activities have been completed to date.

SGRP Guidance Committee and Technical Panel Member Identified

Members of the SGRP Guidance Committee and Technical Review Panel have been identified. These groups are comprised of experts in the field. Guidance Committee members include Sylvia Gillen, Randall Gray, Pete Heard, Jim Mosher, Jack Payne, San Stiver, Billy Teels, and John Wrede. Technical Review Panel members include Chad Boyd, Fee Busby, Jack Connelly, Karen Fullen, Wendell Gilgert, Ed Hackett, Jeremy Maestas, Kent McAdoo, and Dean Mitchell. Biographies for the committee and panel can be found on the SGRP web site.

SGRP Partners

During the fall of 2005 SGRP recruited additional partners to assist in our efforts. Our partners list in addition to the U.S. Department of Agriculture; Natural Resources Conservation Service;

USU; USU, College of Natural Resources; USU Extension Services, and Jack H. Berryman Institute now includes the Western Governors' Association; Western States Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee; North American Grouse Partnership; and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

SGRP Publicity

Web Site

A web page was developed specifically for SGRP. The web site address is www.sgrp.usu.edu. The web site contains the SGRP Mission Statement, History, Technical Review Panel, Guidance Committee, Grants-in-Aid, Research Priorities, Proposal Submission, Project Library, Funded Projects, News and Updates, Annual Reports, Publications, Web Links, and Personnel. Using these links, visitors may learn more about the SGRP personnel and research funded through SGRP.

Grants-in-aid proposals can be submitted on-line. Because the on-line submission form was not available until mid-November, the deadline for proposal submission has been extended from December 31, 2005 to January 31, 2006.

We are in the process of assembling information from projects in Utah that were funded by 2002 Farm Bill monies. This information will be placed under the "Project Library" link and will include project proposals, pictures, and video footage of work conducted. These projects will serve as prototypes and examples of projects SGRP may fund.

News Release

On October 19, 2005 NRCS distributed the SGRP news release (Appendix 1). It was widely distributed and has generated interest from researchers in Utah and neighboring states. The new release was disseminated to representatives of the following groups: livestock associations, Farm Bureaus, Utah Farm Bureau Federation, Utah's congressional delegation, western states NRCS public affairs and state conservationists, western states extension state directors, state media, Western Technical Support Center, national NRCS headquarters, western states' Agricultural Experiment Stations, Western States Technical Committee, SGRP members, Cooperative Conservation, Environmental Defense, and the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development Council. Announcements regarding the program have appeared in partner monthly member magazines and in The Wildlife Society publications.

Future Plans

Assembly of information for the web-based project library will continue. As proposals are submitted, they will be reviewed and rated by the Technical Review Panel and approved by the Guidance Committee. A news release will be issued announcing projects that will be funded through SGRP.

Appendix

Appendix 1

NRCS NEWS RELEASE

United States Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service
125 S State St, Salt Lake City, UT 84138 - Phone (801) 524-4557 - www.ut.nrcs.usda.gov

For Immediate Release

Contact: Ron Francis, NRCS (801) 524-4557
Dennis Hinkamp USU (435) 797-1392

NRCS AND USU FORGE SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT RESTORATION AGREEMENT

The 2002 Farm Bill includes the most aggressive private land conservation programs in history—all aimed at a healthy landscape that benefits both people and wildlife. Finding out how well those Farm Bill programs have worked, especially for sensitive wildlife species such as sage-grouse, is the purpose of a cooperative study agreement between the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Utah State University.

The cooperative agreement provides federal funds to establish a Sage-grouse Restoration Project (SGRP). The SGRP will support research in the western U.S. to evaluate the effects of conservation provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill on sage-grouse and other wildlife that depend on sagebrush-steppe ecosystems.

Sylvia Gillen, NRCS State Conservationist, said her agency and USU Extension will take the lead roles in establishing and overseeing the Sage-grouse Restoration Project. “We will be coordinating closely with USU Extension to implement this exciting new research initiative that will ultimately help all our partners do the right thing for sage-grouse,” she said.

“Putting conservation decisions in the hands of rural communities is the best thing for both wildlife and the rural economies,” said Jack Payne, vice president for USU Extension. “This is a great partnership for us because of Extension’s applied research approach and community based faculty.”

According to Terry Messmer, a professor and Extension specialist in the Department of Forest, Range, and Wildlife Science and the project’s principle investigator, the results generated by SGRP will be used to assist NRCS, soil conservation districts, state wildlife agencies, and private landowners in planning and implementing wildlife habitat projects on private lands.

“In addition to reviewing past projects, the SGRP will evaluate multi-state experiments in cooperation with local sage-grouse working groups,” Messmer said. “We are hopeful the combined information should help the US Fish and Wildlife Service, state wildlife agencies and other policy makers better evaluate decisions relating to Endangered Species Act determinations.”

Current research indicates sage-grouse are dependent on large expanses of sagebrush, however little information is available regarding the appropriate sagebrush patch sizes needed to sustain a healthy sage-grouse population, he explains. By evaluating these projects, researchers hope to identify the types of treatments that can be implemented to provide optimum sage-grouse habitat and benefit to local communities.

“A major goal of the SGRP,” said Messmer, “is to create greater awareness of private land conservation planning needs among researchers. To help attract the best researchers in this field, we will develop an “SGRP library” that will provide visual information and data regarding the role of NRCS conservation programs that improve productivity and conservation of natural resources.”

Another incentive to local working groups is a grants-in-aid program that will provide funds for design and implementation of research and demonstration projects that highlight the benefits of NRCS conservation practices that improve sage-grouse habitat. These funds can be applied for on-line.

Partners in this project include the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, USU Extension, USU College of Natural Resources, the Western Governors’ Association, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee, the North American Grouse Partnership, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and the Jack H. Berryman Institute. The project will offer support to the USU Extension Community-Based Conservation Program and other local working groups throughout the West. The web site address for the program is <http://www.sgrp.usu.edu>.