

NRCS NEWS RELEASE

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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.”

The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment.

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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>.

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