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Sage Grouse Action Plan Update
Senate Environment and Natural Resource Committee

The 2015 decision by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service(USFWL) not to list the Greater Sage Grouse was a great day for our eastern Oregon Communities, for our ranch dependent local economies, and for Sage Grouse. The reason this is good for Sage Grouse is because you can’t control the three primary threats by regulation. Fire, invasive annual grasses, and encroaching conifers do not respond to regulation, these things need active management.

This decision can be looked at in two parts. We told the USFWL what we would do so the bird would not need to be listed, now we have to go and do what we said we would do.

As we go out to do what we said we would do, a large part of that job will be building on two success stories. Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) and Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs). These efforts have stabilized our rural communities and have helped secure a future for ranching and the dependent local economies in eastern Oregon.

Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances

CCAAs are agreements between private landowners, (ranchers) and the USFWL service. In return for agreeing to implement certain management practices, landowners are assured that if the species is listed there will be no additional restrictions places on the landowner (ranching operation). The service then gets assured that the acres controlled by the landowner are managed in a manner compatible with Sage Grouse. The total acres enrolled is part of the information considered by the USFWL in deciding if a listing under the Endangered Species Act is warranted.

Currently in Oregon there are well over one million acres enrolled in CCAAs, with another 900,000 acres awaiting review to be entered into the program. Over two million acres total when all enrollment has occurred. This is significant and will be helpful to the USFWL Service in the future when reevaluation the listing decision.

Crucial to the CCAA effort is the monitoring component. The local Soil and Water Conservation Districts have stepped up to ensure that this monitoring gets done, this monitoring will go out 30 years into the future and funding will be critical to this effort. As we go forward please support efforts to fund the monitoring of CCAAs.

Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

In the great basin, habitat loss from fire is the primary threat to the Greater Sage Grouse. RFPAs are making a difference.

16 million acres covered, over 500 trained fire fighters, 500 additional support personnel, hundreds of pieces of fire equipment these are a significant force. Numbers don't tell the whole story. These people live out on the landscape, they know the terrain, they know the roads, they know the fuels, these are the kinds of things that can hold an ignition to a small event.

An example, August 11, was a smoky day in Warner Valley, there was no way to see a fire more than a quarter mile away, at 7:00 am I got a call from Lakeview BLM that satellite imagery had spotted a heat signature north of Hart Mountain, in an area with limited water sources. The BLM knew they would need water and asked the Warner Valley RFPA for assistance. Within four hours WVRFPA had delivered 18,000 gallons of water, 60 miles from Adel, 40 miles from the paved road. The Frenchglen RFPA responded with three fire engines and a tender. Lakeview and Burns BLM fire crews were there on what was named the Buffalo Fire. These four entities along with some contracted resources were able to take a fire with a 500 acre head start in gusty wind conditions and get it under control in one day.

The RFPAs started in 1964 but the real impact has been in the last several years. Fires have gotten big and more frequent and ranchers have responded. RFPAs have learned a lot in the last few years and know what they need to be more effective. Communication equipment, protective equipment, upgraded fire apparatus, investment in RFPAs at this time will yield huge savings in dollars spent on fires, in prevented property losses, and in saved Sage Grouse habitat that will help preclude the need for an ESA listing of the species.

RFPAs are proven and worthy of support. Please support this important effort.