

Idaho Conservation Success Profile

Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration



Sheep on the Lava Lake Ranch. Photo by Glenn Oakley

Lava Lake Land and Livestock is the type of privately-owned ranch that plays a crucial role in providing wildlife habitat. Set in the Pioneer Mountains of central Idaho, the mixture of lava flows, foothills and high mountains offers abundant wildlife habitat to sage-grouse as well as pronghorn, elk, wolves, mountain lion, mountain goats, and more.

A core principle of Lava Lake’s operation is managing rangeland to improve wildlife habitat and environmental quality. The ranch employs biologist Tess O’Sullivan as Program Manager for Science & Conservation. O’Sullivan has been there since 2002 and directs ecological restoration projects for the ranch.

“In the past we concentrated on riparian restoration,” O’Sullivan related. “We talked about upland restoration, but the Sage-Grouse Initiative gave us the incentive and structure to move forward and try new things.” The ranch received funding through NRCS’s Sage-Grouse Initiative to restore over 10,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat.

One of the new things Lava Lake is undertaking is sagebrush overstory thinning in areas of overly dense sagebrush to restore the balance among sagebrush, native grasses, and forbs (herbaceous flowering plants). The ranch used a Lawson Aerator which mechanically crushes the sagebrush with a fourteen-foot wide cylinder. Over the next few years the ranch will monitor grass and forb growth and its response to the decreased sagebrush in the treated areas.



Lawson Aerator. Teeth on the cylinder aerate the soil to prepare a seedbed. A seed box attached to the aerator distributed native grass and forb seeds.

Project Quick Facts

Financial Assistance.....\$109,320

Acres Treated.....10,542

Project Location: Butte County, central Idaho

Resource concerns addressed:
Sage-grouse habitat decline addressed through sagebrush thinning and native plant seeding

NRCS Program Used:
Sage-Grouse Initiative

Project Benefits

Plants

- Restoring plants native to the sagebrush-steppe habitat

Animals

- Improving habitat for sage-grouse and other wildlife

People

- Voluntary & proactive solution to address sage-grouse population decline
- Potentially avoids regulatory actions

Visit www.id.nrcs.usda.gov for information on the Sage-Grouse Initiative



Tess O'Sullivan, Lava Lake's program manager for Science and Conservation

“Like other ranchers in the area, we have an interest in preventing the listing of sage-grouse. We care deeply about wildlife, but a sage-grouse listing would increase our management responsibilities to record compliance with another layer of rules and regulations,” said O’Sullivan. O’Sullivan

said there are two leks, or sage-grouse breeding areas, located on the ranch.

Lava Lake currently grazes about 5,500 ewes on 24,000 acres of private lands and over 875,000 acres of leased public lands. The operation produces all-natural grass-fed lamb that customers buy online, in restaurants and in grocery stores throughout the country. About 25% of their private land is certified organic. Using grazing instead of chemicals to control weeds is part of the strategy in their prescribed grazing plan.

They have a five-year Sage-Grouse Initiative contract with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to complete several conservation practices to enhance sage-grouse habitat on their private land: removing fences in specific areas, marking fences to increase visibility to sage-grouse, installing drinking water facilities for livestock and wildlife use, managing overstory brush, and prescribed grazing.



O’Sullivan noted that one of the most valuable aspects of getting involved with the Sage-grouse Initiative has been working with NRCS Area Range Conservationist, Scott Engle. “Scott has a great combination of knowledge and experience with rangeland and wildlife habitat and I’ve learned a lot working with him on this project,” said O’Sullivan. Lava Lake also consulted with Idaho Fish and Game to plan their sage-grouse habitat restoration and treatment projects.

“Lava Lake Land and Livestock’s owners are progressive, hard-working producers demonstrating there are a variety of ways to approach solving natural resource problems,” said District Conservationist Patti Hurley. “They research opportunities for learning more about their land, and they use different programs to achieve their goals for enhancing the sustainability of their ranch. They are active participants in the Pioneers Alliance.”



The Pioneers Alliance, a group of local ranchers, community members, state and federal agencies, and conservation entities, works to conserve working lands, wildlife habitat, and natural areas of the Pioneer Mountains-Craters of the Moon landscape. Much of this landscape is owned and managed by government agencies, but privately owned ranchlands provide valuable wildlife habitat linkages.

The Sage-grouse Initiative helps private landowners voluntarily conserve sage-grouse populations and habitat on working lands. The ultimate goal of the Initiative is to help ensure sustainable use of good sagebrush habitat by both ranchers and wildlife.