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Working with Sage-Grouse Local Working Groups. A Practical Guide for NRCS Staff.

Lorien Belton
Utah State University Extension

Douglas B. Jackson-Smith
Utah State University

Terry Messmer
Utah State University Extension

United States Department of Agriculture

NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service

Agricultural Wildlife Conservation Center

Utah State University

Wildlife Insight

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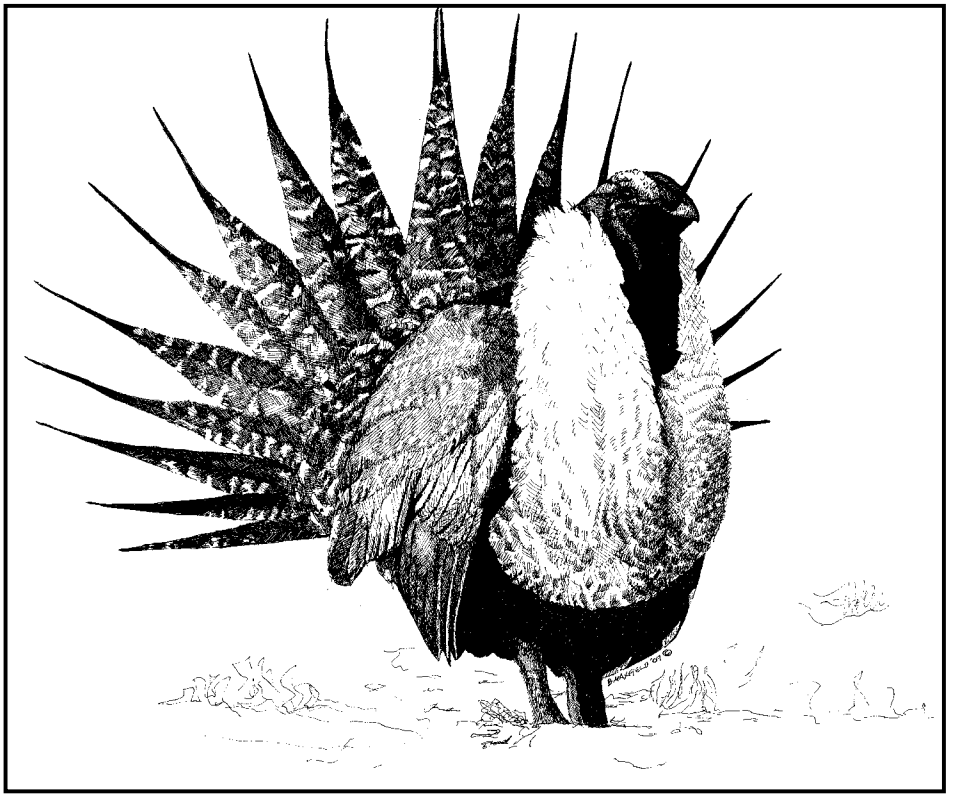

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This Wildlife Insight was authored by and based on research conducted by **Lorien Belton**, M.S. working under the direction of **Dr. Douglas Jackson-Smith** and **Dr. Terry Messmer**, Utah State University.

More information on local working groups can be found at http://greatbasin.wr.usgs.gov/LWG, or by visiting individual States' wildlife agency Web sites. Questions about the research presented here can be directed to Lorien.Belton@usu.edu. The final technical report from this project can be downloaded from http://sswa.usu.edu/reports.html.

For more information, contact:

Douglas Jackson-Smith, Ph.D.
Institute for Social Science Research on Natural Resources
Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology
Utah State University
0730 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-0730
Phone: (435)797-0582
E-mail: doug.jackson-smith@usu.edu

Terry Messmer, Ph.D.
Department of Wildland Resources
Utah State University
5230 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-5230
Phone: (435) 797-3975
E-mail: terry.messmer@usu.edu

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Why sage-grouse local working groups?

Sage-grouse are a landscape level species (fig. 1). They depend on sagebrush habitats on private and public land in 11 Western States and two Canadian provinces. Sage-grouse populations across this range have been declining over the last several decades due to habitat loss, development, and other factors. In response to these declines, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has been petitioned to list them under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A listing under the ESA could affect how public and private lands are managed in this region. To address these concerns, State wildlife agencies and others have organized more than 60 sage-grouse local working groups (LWG) across the West (fig. 2). These multi-stakeholder groups typically have representatives from State and Federal agencies, private landowners, and other interest groups. LWGs have been tasked with planning and implementing conservation actions, such as habitat improvements, to help maintain or increase sage-grouse numbers. Most groups have written a conservation plan containing locally relevant knowledge, best practices, and actions that, once implemented, have the potential to help reverse population declines.

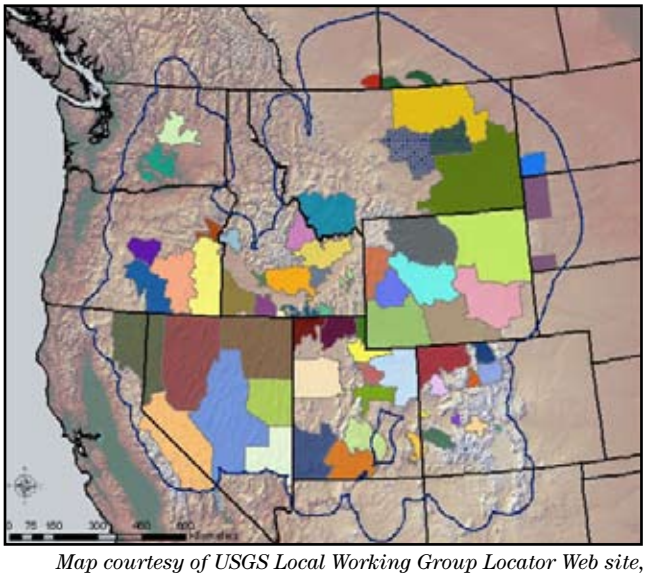
How to help LWGs succeed

Many NRCS employees already participate in sage-grouse local working groups. However, recent research suggests that these groups will need more assistance to achieve their full potential. With the support of a USDA NRCS Fish and Wildlife Conservation Grant, researchers from Utah State University conducted a comprehensive needs assessment and evaluation of the LWGs across the sage-grouse range. In 2007, more than 700 working group participants returned a mail survey that asked respondents about LWG effectiveness, needs, and challenges. In 2008, researchers interviewed key members of four LWGs to gain a greater understanding of their groups and the role NRCS has played—or could play—in them. The information presented in here is based on this research. This document is designed to provide NRCS staff with guidance on how to best assist LWGs achieve their full potential.

Figure 1 Male sage-grouse

Photo courtesy of Todd Black

Figure 2 Sage-grouse local working group boundaries, 2008



Map courtesy of USGS Local Working Group Locator Web site, http://greatbasin.wr.usgs.gov/LWG

Learn

- *Become familiar with the LWG conservation plan*—The plan likely has descriptions of seasonal sage-grouse habitat needs, populations, and movements, as well as descriptions of threats to grouse locally. Most plans are available online. The USGS Sage-Grouse Local Working Group Locator Web site (http://greatbasin.wr.usgs.gov/LWG/) is a good place to start. Most plans are also available through State wildlife agencies.
- *Talk to farmers, ranchers and other landowners about sage-grouse on their land*—Many may have sage-grouse populations on their land but feel reluctant to discuss it with local wildlife biologists. Knowing who has grouse on their property or grazing leases will help you incorporate conservation-practice specifications that consider sage-grouse habitat needs. Landowner knowledge of leks (strutting grounds) (fig. 3) and seasonal habitat use can be invaluable in project planning.
- *Become more familiar with conservation practices that can benefit sage-grouse*—Find out how rangeland practices, like brush management, can be designed to optimize sage-grouse habitat as well as forage production.
- *Recognize that there is much we still do not know about sage-grouse*—While there is a well documented long-term decline in the sagebrush habitat upon which sage-grouse rely, the impacts of various land management actions on local sage-grouse populations needs more research and monitoring. The LWG is a good place to learn about areas of disagreement or uncertainty regarding how best to manage lands to benefit the species. Research projects designed with NRCS involvement may be the ideal place to begin answering these questions.
- *Learn the basics of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA)*—This is a formal option through the USFWS that can provide ESA assurances to private landowners who take voluntary actions to protect and conserve sage-grouse or other potential candidate species. CCAA ensure that landowners who take actions to benefit known populations of potentially endangered species will not have further restrictions placed on them in the event of an ESA listing for that species. In essence, a CCAA can be viewed as an insurance policy, and local landowners may be interested in learning more.

Figure 3 Sage-grouse on lek

Photo courtesy of Todd Black

Inform internally

- *Share information about sage-grouse with range conservationists, district conservationists, and others in your office*—Everyone, not just the wildlife biologist in an NRCS office, should be aware of sage-grouse issues and how best to balance grouse conservation with other rangeland management goals. Many recommendations from NRCS staff for managing sagebrush rangelands are likely to affect sage-grouse habitat. Depending on the site, there may be a need to incorporate sage-grouse habitat considerations into conservation practice specifications. The more information we share, the better the our decisions will be.
- *Become an advocate for well-designed wildlife habitat improvement projects that are funded through NRCS programs*—Private working lands provide critical habitat to sage-grouse populations in the West. Once sage-grouse and other wildlife species considerations are integrated into working lands conservation projects, advocate for the necessary monitoring needed to ensure the benefits are realized.
- *Let the landowners you work with know you can help them design and implement projects that benefit sage-grouse*—Initially, NRCS may not be considered a resource for wildlife habitat management expertise, but research indicates that the NRCS local staff is trusted more than many other agencies.

Inform externally

- *Share local sage-grouse plans with landowners who may not regularly attend LWG meetings*—When visiting with landowners in the office or field about conservation projects, ask the landowners if they know about the LWG efforts (fig. 4). It may help the LWG to know of questions of concerns landowners may have.
- *Encourage local landowner participation in LWG*—Encourage them to learn more about sage-grouse populations and habitat by participating in their LWG. Also, invite them to share their knowledge. Many times a landowner's knowledge and experiences with sage-grouse will prove invaluable to designing and evaluating management actions to benefit sage-grouse populations on their land.

Participate

- *Attend a LWG-sponsored field tour*—Encourage landowners and others in the office to join you as the groups visit past rangeland treatment sites and discuss future projects or threats to sage-grouse (fig. 5). If already involved in the LWG, consider offering to plan or host a tour.
- *Make contact with the local working group chairperson, leader, or facilitator*—Learn more about the current state of the group and its goals. Find out when the next meeting is and share this with landowners.
- *Attend a LWG meeting*—Share information about opportunities through NRCS that can help the group achieve its goals. If the group hasn't been active recently, offer to plan a meeting or host an open house, and advertise the meeting in the community. All LWG meetings are open to the public.
- *Build LWG participation into your annual plan of work*—Consult with the supervisor to include LWG work formally in the work plan. Research conducted recently by researchers from Utah State University has identified that NRCS field staffs have unique skills and perspectives that have been under utilized in many LWGs to date.

Take action

- *Encourage landowners to apply for cost-share funding for wildlife conservation projects that can help both livestock and sage-grouse*—The 2008 Farm Bill contains many provisions designed to encourage wildlife conservation on working lands, both on individual properties and through the work of collaborative local groups of landowners.
- *Integrate sage-grouse habitat needs when designing and implementing conservation plans with farmers, ranchers, and landowners*—Be aware of habitat treatments that might be detrimental for sage-grouse if implemented in certain areas (such as winter or nesting habitat) or at particular times of year. Use what is known to prevent negative impacts to sage-grouse from rangeland treatments.

Figure 4 LWG participants discuss local plan development

Photo courtesy of Todd Black

Figure 5 LWG field tours visit habitat manipulation sites

Photo courtesy of Lorien Belton

- *Encourage increased monitoring of sage-grouse habitat and populations in response to management actions*—Every rangeland treatment project in sage-grouse habitat is a potential opportunity to learn more about how the species responds to various treatments. The LWG in the area may be able to help design simple before-and-after monitoring associated with projects that can add to the body of knowledge about effective sage-grouse management. Additional discussions with agency biologists, university research faculty, and landowners can facilitate the design and implementation of projects that can provide information needed to guide future management.
- *Use all available planning tools to better understand and improve sage-grouse habitat*—Incorporate ecological site descriptions (ESD) and state-and-transition models when designing projects, if they are available. Using these tools will enhance the ability to select the right management actions and communicate project benefits to Federal, State, and private land managers.
- *Communicate with contractors*—Do not let good planning be waylaid by contractors who may unintentionally override sage-grouse friendly conservation practices, such as mosaic treatments in sagebrush, in the name of expediency.
- *Coordinate with other agencies*—Sage-grouse are a landscape-scale species. Wintering grounds, breeding/lekking/nesting habitat, brood-rearing habitat (fig. 6), and the migration corridors between them likely cross multiple land ownership boundaries. Coordination of management actions, particularly rangeland treatments, can dramatically improve the ability to address landscape-level sage-grouse habitat needs. Call the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, or others to learn what land management counterparts are doing on adjacent land.

Figure 6 Wildfire rehabilitation site in sage-grouse habitat

Photo courtesy of Lorien Belton