

Bountiful Land and Livestock fish and wildlife habitat improvement ideas

Introduction

The goal of the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is to provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners who voluntarily want to conserve, enhance, or restore fish and wildlife habitat. Since 1985, the main focus of the program has been to cooperate with agricultural producers on mutually beneficial projects that provide a benefit to the agricultural operation and wildlife.

The Bountiful Land and Livestock property in Uinta County, Wyoming and Summit County, Utah is about 8,500 acres. The property has 3 major watercourses flowing through it: Spring Creek, Chicken Creek, and Thief Creek, all of which flow northeastward into Yellow Creek. The northeastern part of the property in Wyoming has about 3.2 miles of Yellow Creek flowing northward towards its confluence with the Bear River near Evanston.

Based on aerial photos: The ranch is divided into about 9 main pastures ranging from about 200 to 1800 acres each. There are at least 22 manmade reservoirs for livestock water. Each pasture has at least 1 reservoir. About 1,080 acres of sagebrush have been mowed or otherwise treated in the last 20-30 years (see attached map).

Two species that are found on the ranch, the greater sage-grouse and northern leatherside chub, have the best prospects for funding for habitat projects from the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program or other conservation entities. A lot of attention is being directed towards greater sage-grouse since the bird's population is declining across the West. The northern leatherside chub is a rare, native minnow that exists in Yellow Creek and Thief Creek. (I don't know if anyone has ever looked for it in Spring Creek, but I suspect it lives there, too.) Yellow Creek is one of the most important places in the world for northern leatherside chub. Other important wildlife species such as mule deer would benefit from projects designed to benefit the grouse or the chub.

Project ideas

Assuming this has not already been done, a basic inventory of the range resource would be a good place to start. Based on soils, slopes, vegetation, and water availability, the inventory would give us an idea of the forage that is available for livestock and wildlife. At the same time, we would get an overview of the "ecological sites" or habitat types that are available on the property. This inventory can be very detailed or basic, depending on our purpose. I can begin this inventory or we can solicit the help of the local Conservation Districts or the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Based on the resource inventory, there are several project types that might be beneficial for the livestock operation and wildlife:

Water projects such as developing springs and piping the water to a tank could provide extra reliable livestock water that might allow the pastures to be grazed in a different rotation than is otherwise possible in dry years. I am assuming there are some undeveloped springs on the ranch. The main way these types of projects would benefit mule deer and sage-grouse would be through improved plant growth in the pastures.

If there are some reservoirs that need repair, we could look into those projects.

Fortunately, the ranch seems to be fairly well divided into pastures. However, the Yellow Creek pasture is quite large (about 1400 acres) and cattle's tendency is to hang out right on the creek for most of the time they are in the pasture. If there are sufficient water sources, it might be beneficial to divide this pasture in half to graze each pasture for half the time it is currently grazed. The main objective of doing this would be to help shrubs such as willow establish on the creek. This would improve habitat for the northern leatherside chub and mule deer.

In 2011, Trout Unlimited completed an inventory of Yellow Creek and its main tributaries to locate barriers to fish movement. The ranch has one barrier on Yellow Creek and three on Thief Creek. Below is an excerpt from the Trout Unlimited report about the Yellow Creek culvert:

This **impassable** culvert is located in Yellow Creek just upstream from the confluence of Thief Creek.



A potential project here would be to replace the culvert with a bigger culvert or bridge that would facilitate fish movements, especially for the northern leatherside chub. I will try to get more information about what areas of Thief Creek might be important if you have any interest in these types of projects.

The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service has a program called the Sage-Grouse Initiative that has some fairly generous financial incentives for managing livestock grazing in ways that benefit sage-

grouse. There are incentives beyond just helping pay for projects. I can help get more information about this program if you have any interest.

Even though I only have a budget for habitat projects in Wyoming, I will work with my colleagues in Utah if you identify some projects you would like to do in Utah.

Thanks for the interest!