

## **Hellyer Limited Partnership Rangeland and Wildlife Habitat Project Overview – USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program**

### Project Wildlife Goals:

Improve sage-grouse nesting, early and late brood –rearing habitat, plus realized benefits for numerous sage steppe species.

### Objectives:

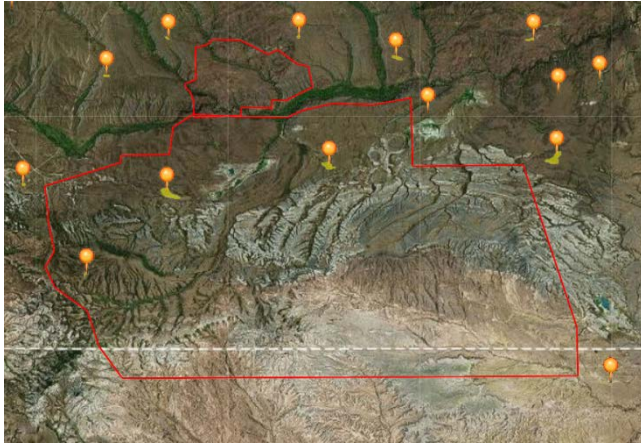
- maintain forb density and diversity by implementing rotational grazing strategy
- Improve key wet meadow and riparian habitats by implementing practices to manage livestock within these resource areas of concern
- maintain perennial grass plant density and diversity by implementing rotational grazing strategy
- maintain a mosaic of vegetation communities through grazing management and treatments

### Background:

The project encompasses Continental Peak Allotment which falls within the greater South Pass Core Area and stepped down local sage grouse working group Wind River/Sweetwater River Conservation Area (WRSRCA). Due to the diversity of geography, hydrology, soils, and plant communities on site, more than 20 ecological sites have been identified. Sagebrush is the key shrub on the allotment. Local climatic conditions govern growth forms ranging from widely spaced, low height (black sage) on the wind swept ridges to protected draws and river bottom containing taller and denser communities of mountain/basin and Wyoming big sage. Varying levels of sagebrush on the allotment are a source of diversity and wildlife habitat. Cool season bunchgrasses dominate the allotment including needle and thread, bluebunch wheatgrass, Columbia needlegrass, Idaho fescue, needleleaf sedge, prairie junegrass and mutton bluegrass. Broadleaf forbs such as common dandelion, fleabane, hawksbeard, sweetclover and penstemon are of key importance for the diversity they provide to the plant community and for sage grouse.

The allotment contain all necessary seasonal habitats to support both migratory and possibly non-migratory sage grouse populations. Seasonal habitats found on location include, winter, breeding (lek), nesting, early brood rearing, and late brood rearing. Quantity, condition and spatial arrangement of seasonal habitats vary across the allotment. The dominant population is of migratory nature utilizing crucial seasonal habitats and moving down slope to winter at lower elevation. However, during certain winter conditions as many as 200 birds have been documented utilizing exposed sagebrush and willow bottoms. Currently, no winter sage grouse habitat has been designated within the WRSRCA.

Three active leks are known to exist on location with several others in close proximity. These locations are characterized by containing less shrub cover than surrounding areas with lower herbaceous height. Interesting, leks in the area have a tendency to be in close proximity of local water courses containing more mesic habitats (see photo below). Adjacent nesting habitat contains sagebrush of varying heights with good residual grass understory. The diverse vegetation mosaic is conducive for early brood-rearing, the succulent forb community providing an abundance of insects and green growth in close proximity to dense sagebrush offering protection from weather and predators. As summer progresses and the upland plants mature and dry, sage grouse utilize the numerous acres of wet meadow, springs and riparian areas found within the enrolled lands. As a consequence of lek and nesting occurring within close vicinity of the Sweetwater, it is common to see sage grouse broods using wet meadow, riparian and irrigated fields along the river course during both early and late brood rearing seasons.



Pins denote active leks in 2015 within the allotment and adjacent lands.

#### Project Overview:

A grazing strategy was developed which focused on maintaining and improving overall range condition with special emphasis on enhancing wetland and riparian areas of the allotment and associated lands enrolled in the CCAA, such as Oregon slough, Long slough, Sweetwater riparian and Dickie Springs. Range improvement projects primarily electric wildlife friendly fence and water developments were constructed to provide land managers/owners the necessary tools to manage livestock on these key riparian and wet meadow areas, especially during the hot season. Livestock like grouse would move out of the uplands as they mature and concentrate on the green actively growing wet meadow and riparian areas. The physical presence of these sites impair distribution of livestock so much in late summer that upland vegetation cannot be utilized. The improvements are designed to restrict access to these areas providing use of the uplands during the hot season and on a larger scale once the overall project is completed, grazing management will employ a two upland and two riparian pasture prescribed grazing rotation to meet livestock and wildlife goals.

A component of a larger grazing management strategy, the Sweetwater River restoration project reconnected 12,104 feet of stream channel, elevating the local water table, re-wetting adjacent floodplain and associated wet meadow habitat benefitting many fish and wildlife species. The enrolled lands along the Sweetwater and associated tributaries contribute greatly to available seasonal brood rearing habitat. Typical of early settler homesteading patterns of securing water, the majority of the brood rearing habitat within the project area is within private ownership. Current land uses of irrigation increases available brood rearing habitat while managed livestock grazing enhances plant diversity and density throughout the project area.



Channel restoration and irrigation of the floodplain along the south channel effectively increasing available wet meadow/riparian habitat for sage grouse brood rearing.