

Sage-Steppe – Moving Into the Future

Region 6 Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Within Region 6, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program has made sage-steppe a major priority habitat for over two decades, with the sagebrush obligate species as high priority focal species. These species, including greater and Gunnison sage grouse, have been focal species in the past two PFW Program Strategic Plans and will continue to be a focus as we move into the future. Over the years, we have continued to refine the focus of where we work and have strategically placed PFW program field biologists within the heart of these focus areas, in order to most effectively tie our habitat outcomes to biological outcomes for priority fish and wildlife species. Through our Work Force Plan, we have collapsed some focus areas in other landscapes in order to accomplish more habitat restoration and enhancement within key sagebrush-steppe focus areas.

To specifically address the sage-steppe habitat needs for sage grouse, as well as other sagebrush obligates, we queried the field. We were interested in knowing what the capacity was, as well as the funding needs and priorities. Each State Coordinator addressed the same specific questions, where sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration is a focus. The questions and associated responses are attached below. The information is not in alphabetic order but rather in order of the highest priority states for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration on private lands.

The total need, considering realistic funding targets with existing staff, is **\$588,000** for habitat restoration and enhancement projects annually, for the next three years. Given the average leveraging rate for the Region 6 PFW program, this could potentially put an additional **\$7,056,000** (i.e., 4:1 leverage with 3 years of funding) of habitat projects on-the-ground. If we were to increase our capacity to deliver projects, additional staff would be needed. The three highest priority positions, if the PFW program were to receive a long-term increase in funding, would be to add a position in southwestern Montana (i.e., High Divide), one in the upper Green River Basin in Wyoming and a third in northeastern Utah.

Wyoming

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

Where: Primarily Central and Southwest Wyoming Priority Areas; Bear River, Upper Green River, Upper Sweetwater/ Red Desert, Little Snake River/Upper North Platte, Laramie Plain and Wind River Focus Areas.

What: Stream and riparian restoration, wetland and wet meadow restoration, upland enhancement (grazing management practices and infrastructure, sagebrush treatments, juniper removal and conifer removal in aspen/sage steppe). Grazing management and sagebrush improvement techniques would benefit all greater sage grouse lifecycle needs (i.e., wintering, nesting, and brood rearing). Stream, riparian and wetland restoration/enhancements would specifically benefit the brood rearing stage. With Wyoming hosting the highest percentage of the current population of greater sage grouse, it is a very high priority focal species for us. In addition, many other sagebrush obligate species are priority focal species for the Wyoming PFW program and we have strategically placed field staff in the heart of these focus areas in order to

maximize efficiency with limited resources. In addition to providing financial assistance for Private Landowner Agreements, the PFW program also provides significant technical assistance to landowners and other partners, including the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Sage Grouse Initiative. Approximately 80% of all PFW program Focus Areas are quality habitat for greater sage grouse. When we can restore these key habitats, it also benefits a full suite of other high priority sagebrush obligate species, which are also Focal Species for the WY PFW program.

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

An additional \$150,000 per Fiscal Year would be possible with current staffing levels. The Wyoming PFW program could also use an additional PFW Biologist in the Upper Green River Basin, if PFW program base funds were to increase and we could make a long-term commitment.

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

The WY PFW program could restore an additional 15,000 upland acres, 10,000ft stream, 11 miles riparian and 250 acres of wetland.

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

Yes, the broad life-cycle needs of sagebrush obligate species forecasts the need for habitat restoration projects into the future. Current program focus is on improving a variety of existing habitats with a variety of partners for a variety of shared objectives – sagebrush-steppe has continued to be a priority for over 20 years and we anticipate that being the case way into the future.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Yes

- The scale of work is at a very large landscape-scale in Wyoming and will continue into the future.
- Decision support tools have allowed us to select the best habitats, in order to focus our work. These tools continue to get better every year and we are using all the available tools in project selection.
- The long-term viability strategy for sagebrush-steppe obligate species will need to take into consideration the ability to keep private landowners on the land, and profitable. At the point private landowners cannot maintain their working lands, they will need to sell. History has demonstrated that these lands often then fall into the hands of developers.

The most affordable option is to maintain existing habitats and continue to utilize voluntary incentive-based conservation tools to assist willing landowners.

6) Additional brief comments from the Wyoming PFW program.

In most cases, PFW program's first request from landowners is through stream and wetland projects. It is through these projects that relationships are often developed, trust is built, and we can then begin to have discussions about larger upland sagebrush-steppe projects. The PFW program biologists have made a long term commitment to their focus areas and they have now built that level of trust. With additional resources, these conversations can continue to take place and the ability to be extremely effective going into the future is very high.

Montana

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

There are 13 Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) or Core Areas in Montana. We would focus our efforts in five of the most important PAC's - Three in southwestern Montana in the High Divide Landscape and two on the Hi-Line in the Northern Great Plains Landscape.

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

Total = \$200,000 each year for dirt work. For the Northern Great Plains that would be \$100K for on-the-ground restoration work each year. For the High Divide = \$100k for on-the-ground work each year. In addition, the MT PFW program could use a new PFW Biologist in the High Divide. With existing staff, the team could deliver \$200,000 annually, but it would be a stretch for the existing team.

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

With current staffing, and \$200,000 annually, we could restore / enhance 10,000 – 15,000 acres each year in MT (split equally between the two large landscapes). If we had an additional PFW Biologist, we could potentially deliver 30,000 – 40,000 acres.

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

Yes, there is a minimum need of 20 - 30 years of funding for both large landscapes. We have two biologists in place in the Northern Great Plains of MT that will be consistently developing projects during this timeline. In the High Divide, we presently only have one PFW Biologist who is focusing on both sage grouse and Arctic grayling. The need is there for another biologist and with that person comes the need for additional funds over that same 20-30 year timeline to deliver sage grouse conservation.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Yes, the MT PFW program is working closely with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Service's Ecological Services Office on developing a CCAA that uses the PFW Private Landowner Agreement (PLA) as the Conservation Plan for the landowner. Within the PFW PLA, landowners will be agreeing to no new habitat fragmentation for the 20 year length of the agreement. Also, the FWS and TNC are working with each landowner that we develop PLAs with to discuss perpetual protection through conservation easements. Our goal is to have at least 50% of the landowners that sign PLAs enter into perpetual conservation easements during the life of the PLA. Also with our PLA's we will be addressing all the known threats to greater sage grouse. Therefore, this combination of addressing the threats, no habitat fragmentation for 20 years, providing regulatory assurances and seeking perpetual protection will provide the resiliency needed for sage grouse and other species (i.e., we are developing the CCAA and PLA to cover all the threats for four additional grassland / sagebrush-steppe birds in decline).

6) Additional brief comments from the Montana PFW program.

To our knowledge, this MT PFW approach is the first of its kind across the country. Additional funding will be critical to our success of delivering one-stop shopping for landowners while addressing the long-term threats for sage grouse and other declining grassland birds. Our support for this concept/program is so strong that TNC has pledged \$75,000 annually to be matched by the National Wildlife Refuge Association for \$150 annually for sage grouse conservation work.

Colorado

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

For greater sage grouse -- Northwestern Colorado and North Park.

For Gunnison sage grouse

- 1st priority is the satellite populations with a large private land component
- 2nd priority is Gunnison Basin

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

For Gunnison Sage Grouse:

\$30,000 annually

For Greater Sage Grouse:

\$33,000 annually

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

For Gunnison Sage Grouse:

Combined upland and wetland acres = 2,500 acres

For Greater Sage Grouse:

Combined upland and wetland acres = 36,000 acres

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

Yes. Our major partners are committed as well and planning for a long-term strategy. We believe the sagebrush-steppe ecosystems will remain a very high priority for our key partners and that any funds that we bring to the table will be leveraged several times over, for many years to come.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Absolutely! The Colorado PFW program projects are currently focused to provide resiliency into the future, including pinyon/juniper removal, wet meadow restoration and enhancement, grazing management and native seed plantings.

6) Additional brief comments from the Colorado PFW program.

CO PFW has developed excellent partnerships and working relationships with virtually all major partners. FWS has invested significant resources with Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory to add additional staff to deliver SGI projects in Colorado. Additional project funds will increase our ability to make this effort even more value added. The Colorado PFW program will need some flexibility to move funds from Gunnison sage grouse to greater sage grouse, depending on the needs.

Utah

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

- Northwest portion of Utah -- Juniper removal, seeding.
- Northeast portion of Utah -- seeding, grazing management.

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

- \$125,000 annually for the Utah PFW program. In addition, the Utah PFW program could use an additional PFW Biologist in the northeastern Utah.

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

- Sagebrush-steppe upland restoration and enhancement = 5,700 acres
 - Chaining
 - Juniper treatment
 - Native seed planting
 - Fencing for grazing management

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

NRCS has been spending over 2 million dollars/year for the last 3-4 years through SGI in Northwest Utah and they have had more contracts than money available. Therefore, the PFW program could assist with this backlog, if we had additional funds.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Yes. The projects that the Utah PFW program is focusing on are both long-term projects as well as landscape-scale. The program could use additional funds to continue with invasive juniper treatments, grazing management plans and sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration and enhancement through seed plantings, etc.

6) Additional brief comments from the Utah PFW program.

Flexibility with the match requirements will be necessary to accomplish the habitat restoration projects identified above, if new funding becomes available.

South Dakota

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

The primary focus will be grazing management plans and sagebrush-steppe habitat enhancement in northwestern South Dakota.

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

\$50,000 annually

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

Total of 12,000 upland acres.

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

Yes. Sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration will remain a high priority for us and our many conservation partners. Many of the projects we are working on now require a long-term commitment. We have made this commitment to our landowner cooperators and other conservation partners as we move forward into the future.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Yes. The types of projects that the SD PFW program is currently working on are designed to create resiliency into the future. We are always working to find better ways to link our habitat outcomes to biological outcomes, striving for positive population trends of greater sage grouse and other high priority sagebrush obligate species, identified within our existing Strategic Plan for the SD PFW program.

6) Additional brief comments from the South Dakota PFW program.

If funds are limited, SD would defer to other states with larger greater sage grouse populations. However, if funding is available, the SD PFW program staff is ready and able to help.

North Dakota

1) Where and what would be the focus in your state?

The primary focus will be grazing management plans and sagebrush-steppe habitat enhancement in northwestern North Dakota.

2) If additional sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds were made available to you, how much additional money could PFW use, within the next three Fiscal Years, on top of your existing base funding?

Current funding levels are adequate for the sagebrush-stepped focus area in North Dakota.

3) Approximately how many acres of private land could you restore or enhance with your estimate from Question #2 above?

N/A

4) As we move into the future with PFW program strategic planning, do you feel there is an ongoing need for sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration funds in your state?

Yes. Sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration will remain a priority for us.

5) Can PFW program sagebrush-steppe habitat restoration projects support habitat resiliency going into the future, ensuring long-term populations of sagebrush obligate species?

Yes. The types of projects that the ND PFW program is currently working on are designed to create resiliency into the future.

6) Additional brief comments from the North Dakota PFW program.

ND will defer to other states with larger greater sage grouse and sagebrush-steppe ecosystems for this next Fiscal Year. However, if significant funding becomes available, the ND PFW program staff is ready and able to help.