

Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Conservation programs for sage-grouse have been implemented by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) for many years, starting with the Conservation Reserve Program in 1985. This status review focuses on the programs authorized under the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (hereafter the 2008 Farm Bill), and continued with the Agricultural Act of 2014 (hereafter, the 2014 Farm Bill). The Farm Bill conservation programs provide both technical and financial assistance to landowners in the form of conservation planning assistance, payments to offset a portion of the cost associated with applying conservation practices, and easement or rental payments for long-term conservation.

Sage Grouse Initiative

The NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a collaborative effort across all 11 States that have sage-grouse populations that works to implement conservation practices which alleviate threats to sage-grouse while improving the sustainability of working ranches (NRCS 2015, entire document). SGI started in 2010 using programs authorized under the 2008 Farm Bill and continued with the 2014 Farm Bill to help landowners plan and implement conservation practices and Resource Management Systems to maintain and enhance sage-grouse habitat.

Although participation in SGI programs is voluntary, participants that receive financial assistance enter into binding contracts or easements to ensure that conservation practices are applied according to schedule and in compliance with NRCS standards and specifications. As part of implementation, the SGI includes a monitoring and evaluation component that measures

the response of sage-grouse populations and associated vital rates in order to gauge effectiveness and provide an adaptive management framework to SGI delivery.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP; WHIP was combined with EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill), are used to fund and implement habitat improvement practices of SGI. NRCS also works closely with the Farm Service Agency to further sage-grouse conservation through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) are critical to ensure more long-term habitat protection through rental agreements and conservation easements. The GRP, FRPP, and Wetland Reserve Program were combined to create the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) in the 2014 Farm Bill.

The SGI will result in restoration of habitat by either seeding/planting (active restoration) or by implementing grazing practices and fire prevention measures to allow the natural reestablishment of sagebrush to occur (passive restoration) during the term of the individual contracts (between 2 and 10 years). The SGI also strategically targets sage-grouse core areas, which receive the highest priority for financial and technical assistance. Participating owners are less likely to convert sage-grouse habitats to unsuitable habitat, or to subdivide their properties while enrolled in the cost-share contracts offered by NRCS through the SGI.

All conservation plans developed under the SGI have Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) as the umbrella practice and are implemented specifically to benefit sage-grouse populations and their habitats. The Upland Wildlife Habitat Management practice standard requires a habitat evaluation be conducted and limiting factors be removed or reduced in their order of significance. The purpose of the practice is to treat upland wildlife habitat

concerns identified during the conservation planning process to (1) enable movement, or (2) provide shelter, cover, and food in proper amounts, locations and times to sustain sage-grouse during a portion of its life cycle. Specific practice standards are used by NRCS to address the limiting factors to the species and are implemented to achieve that objective.

In 2010, the Service worked in collaboration with the NRCS to develop specific conservation measures for 40 conservation practice standards used in SGI and developed an ESA Section 7 Conference Report (FWS 2010, entire document). In the Conference Report, the Service concluded that implementation of the specified conservation measures in SGI would be expected to benefit sage-grouse by maintaining, enhancing, and restoring sage-grouse populations and their habitats as well as by reducing the threats of direct mortality. The SGI conservation measures are designed to maintain and enhance habitat and decrease fragmentation which is the greatest threat to sage-grouse. The Service believes that effective implementation of conservation practice standards and associated conservation measures are anticipated to result in a positive population response by the species through a reduction of habitat fragmentation and improvement of habitat conditions. This positive response is expected as threats are reduced.

Status of SGI Implementation

NRCS and their partners have made significant accomplishments under SGI for the conservation of GRSG. Conservation implementation of SGI prioritizes areas with the highest densities of sage-grouse and has been achieved through accelerated conservation easements, conifer removal, and improvements in range management. With participation in all 11 states, 1,129 ranches have participated in SGI. Table X-1 summarizes the acres of conservation implemented by Management Zone and Population.

Table X-1. Acres of certified complete or contracted in SGI by population, 2010 – 2014.

Acres certified complete or contracted by population, 2010-2014

MZ	Population	Grazing Systems acres (% in PAC)	Easements* acres (% in PAC)	Conifer Removal acres (% in PAC)	Seeding acres (% in PAC)	Fence Marked or Removed miles (% in PAC)
I	Dakotas	329,055 (89)			2,475 (89)	11 (93)
	Northern Montana	4,411 (73)	40,807 (79)			
	Powder River Basin	671,954 (54)	8,720 (60)	181 (0)		10 (98)
	Yellowstone Watershed	338,849 (83)	16,354 (97)		5,122 (15)	91 (95)
	Other	26,000 (49)				< 1 (100)
II	Middle Park	16 (100)	1,288 (100)		11 (100)	
	Jackson Hole		70 (100)			
	Wyoming Basin	327,652 (83)	166,831 (72)	1,099 (94)	4 (100)	5 (100)
	Rich-Morgan-Summit	8,596 (100)	465 (100)	455 (100)		
	Uintah	126,327 (100)		1,748 (100)		8 (100)
	North Park	12,182 (100)	6,067 (100)			< 1 (100)
	Northwest Colorado	48,677 (47)	52,039 (97)	223 (100)	2,512 (100)	10 (87)
	Other	11,000 (84)	8,450 (88)	26 (0)		< 1 (100)
III	Strawberry			7 (100)		
	Sheeprock Mountains	3,959 (100)		1,204 (100)	720 (100)	1 (100)
	Parker Mountain-Emery		93 (100)	509 (100)	226 (100)	< 1 (100)
	Panguitch	1,297 (100)	18 (100)	358 (100)	66 (100)	< 1 (100)
	Ipapah		422 (100)			
	Hamlin Valley	7,248 (100)		3,181 (100)	1,917 (100)	1 (100)
	Southern Great Basin	1,188 (33)		5,858 (83)	1,072 (100)	7 (100)
	North Mono Lake	13 (100)	6,085 (100)	2,185 (100)		1 (100)
	Pine Nut		0	963 (100)		
	Other	23,852 (63)	4,573 (100)	4,590 (77)	1,533 (19)	< 1 (100)
IV	Baker	10,295 (100)		5,795 (100)		
	East-Central ID		419 (0)			
	SW Montana	31,179 (100)	4,125 (99)			5 (100)
	Snake, Salmon, Beaverhead	198,284 (100)	64,314 (99)	290 (100)	1,730 (100)	62 (100)
	Belt Mountains	4,204		142 (0)	320 (0)	< 1 (0)
	Weiser	11,593			257 (0)	
	Northern Great Basin	38,053 (87)	2,477 (0)	137,501 (74)	2,445 (40)	27 (83)
	Box Elder	2,992 (100)	16,230 (100)	59,990 (100)	22,861 (100)	1 (100)
	Other	18,330 (33)	10,602 (4)	2,381 (100)	2,127 (73)	< 1 (0)
V	Central OR	4,522 (100)	1,690 (0)	69,291 (85)	20	6 (63)
	Klamath	12 (83)	679 (0)	11,229 (77)	535 (96)	18 (100)
	Warm Springs Valley	3 (100)	902 (100)	15		
	Western Great Basin	64,359 (78)	20,253 (81)	75,685 (76)	496 (97)	54 (56)
	Other	19,410 (27)	5,347 (23)	19,375 (72)	34 (100)	2 (78)
VI	Moses Coulee	60,037 (100)	2,127 (100)		280 (100)	3 (100)
	Crab Creek	9,515 (100)	2,242 (100)			
	Other	13,521 (15)			397 (0)	26 (37)
VII	Other	9,061	8,193	962 (0)	960 (0)	< 1 (0)
Total		2,437,645 (75)	451,884 (79)	405,241 (81)	48,120 (76)	350 (79)

Rangewide totals of 15,509 acres of weed management and 179 acres of wet meadow restoration are not shown.

*Easement numbers include all NRCS easements in occupied range or PACs acquired between FY92 and FY13

Approximately 425.5 million dollars have been invested through SGI over approximately 4.4 million acres, with 76 percent of investments made inside Priority Conservation Areas (PACs). The Chief of NRCS has committed an additional \$198 million for SGI starting in 2015, through the life of the current Farm Bill (2018). Implementation of SGI has been accomplished through NRCS' Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) since 2011, which increased the field

capacity available to work with landowners. Additionally, SGI has a science advisor to help prioritize and guide SGI science.

Conservation easements are an effective mechanism for keeping sage-grouse habitats intact by removing impacts of ex-urban development and agricultural conversion threats (FWS 2013). Most easements for sage-grouse are located inside PACs (79 percent) and 94 percent provide permanent protection. Conservation easements through SGI totaled 451,884 acres through fiscal year 2013.

Conifer removal has been implemented as a primary SGI conservation practice, allowing restoration of sage-steppe (Baruch-Mordo *et al.* 2013, p. 240). SGI has targeted mechanical removal of conifers in the early phases of woodland succession, reclaiming 405,241 acres of otherwise suitable habitat. Overall, 81 percent of cuts were located in PACs, targeting 84 percent of the removal towards populations most impacted by conifer expansion in the Great Basin.

Rangeland health inside PACs has been improved through SGI practices by applying grazing systems, re-vegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses, and controlling invasive weeds. SGI enacts a Prescribed Grazing approach, which balances forage availability with livestock demand and maintains ecosystem function by adjusting the timing, frequency, and duration of grazing. Grazing systems have been implemented on over 2.4 million acres (75 percent within PACs); seeding projects have occurred on over 48,000 acres (76 percent within PACs); and weed management projects were implemented on over 15,509 acres (83 percent within PACs).

Monitoring SGI Effectiveness

SGI employs three levels of monitoring to implement and subsequently evaluate success of conservation practices. A first level of monitoring is at the ranch-scale conducted by property owners, a second level of monitoring of vegetation changes and response of sage-grouse populations conducted by independent scientists and a third level of monitoring detects status and trends in agriculture and land use across the United States using NRCS National Resource Inventory. The documented results will inform management of ways to improve effectiveness of NRCS programs. Measuring sage-grouse response to NRCS practices is a priority in conserving sage-grouse populations on working ranches in the West.

Conservation Reserve Program

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) manages the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP provides annual rental payments to agricultural producers to establish conservation cover on ecologically significant cropland and pastureland. The 2014 Farm Bill set enrollment at 24 million acres by fiscal year 2018 (reduced from 32 million acres), and allowed for enrollment of up to two million acres of working grasslands in the CRP, similar to previous Farm Bills' contract option under the repealed Grassland Reserve Program (Stubbs 2015, p. 9). Producers enrolling in CRP can choose from a variety of CRP Conservation Practices (which are different from the NRCS National Conservation Practice Standards).

Enrollment in CRP is through the competitive General Sign-Up, the Continuous CRP (CCRP) Sign-Up, or through the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program. Under the General Sign-Up, offers for CRP contracts are ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index and cost, and each eligible offer is ranked in comparison to all other offers

nationwide. CRP contracts are generally for 10 years. General enrollment is only offered at specific times, and no general sign-up is expected for 2015 (Stubbs 2015, p. 9). Under CCRP, croplands that can provide habitat for priority wildlife can be enrolled at any time, are not subject to competitive bidding, and typically have 10-15 year contracts. CCRP contracts are selected based on the type of conservation practice the landowner chooses to install (NACBI 2015, p. 37). The SAFE program gives special consideration to wildlife in partnership with state fish and wildlife management agencies and/or tribes. SAFE is non-competitive, and typically has 10-15 year contracts (USDA 2013, p. 2). Grouse SAFE projects also prioritize enrollment of lands proximal to lek sites (Stinson and Schroeder 2014, p. 33). Generally, no more than 25 percent of a county's cropland can be enrolled in CRP any given time. However, FSA can waive this limit in order to enroll cropland in CCRP or SAFE, if the county agrees, as has occurred in Douglas County, Washington (need cite).

CRP, CCRP, and SAFE can be successful at converting agricultural lands back into shrub-steppe. The quality of habitat depends on the length of time that the land is enrolled, the initial planting regime, and the frequency, intensity, and timing of grazing and haying in the CRP and SAFE fields. In some areas across the range of sage-grouse, and particularly in Washington, CRP lands provide important habitat for the species (Schroeder and Vander Haegen, 2011, p. 529). The CRP is considered a long-term investment since sagebrush requires years to mature, so the age of the CRP affects the value of the habitat to sage-grouse (Schroeder and Vander Haegen 2011, p. 517). The non-competitive element and wildlife-specific focus of the CCRP and SAFE programs help achieve value of habitat. Some of the CRP lands in Washington, have been enrolled for more than 20 years and are beginning to resemble native shrub-steppe habitat in structure (Stinson 2014, p. 16). For CRP and SAFE lands that have been enrolled for 10 or 20

years, the sage-brush may encroach and become established even if it was not in the original planting mix (Stinson and Schroeder 2014, p 28). In 2010, a large lek (65 birds) was discovered on CRP land in Washington that was unsuitable cropland until relatively recently (Stinson and Schroeder 2014, p. 3).

However, reliance on CRP lands involves significant uncertainty as landowners may choose not to re-enroll lands in CRP, CCRP, or SAFE if there is a dramatic increase in the price of wheat or other crops (Stinson et al. 2004, p. 52). The 2014 Farm Bill also amended the emergency harvesting, grazing provisions for cases such as drought, and also permits other use of forage, in some cases, without a reduction in rental rate. The 2014 Farm Bill also allows a one time, penalty-free, early-out in Fiscal Year 2015 for contracts enrolled longer than five years and containing no environmentally sensitive practices (Stubbs 2015, p. 9). However, how this relates to greater sage-grouse conservation is not yet known.

The 2014 Farm Bill retained the BCAP, which provides financial assistance to agricultural producers to establish and produce eligible crops for the conversion to bioenergy products (USDA 2015, p. 1). As CRP contracts expire, the BCAP program could result in greater incentives to take land out of CRP and put it into production for biofuels (Walker 2009, pers. comm.). All of these changes could affect the amount of land in CRP, and in turn the habitat value provided to greater sage-grouse.

CSP Enhancement Activities

The 2014 Farm Bill also reauthorized the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), managed by NRCS. The CSP provides financial and technical assistance to promote the conservation of private working lands. Contracts (five years in length with the option of extension) are based on

meeting or exceeding a “stewardship threshold.” Payments are based on the actual costs of installing conservation measures, any foregone income, and the value of the expected environmental outcomes. Enrollment is offered through a continuous sign-up and applications are accepted year-round. The 2014 farm bill amendments reduced the enrollment cap from 12.769 million acres annually to 10 million acres annually and provided more flexible transition options for land coming out of CRP (Stubbs 2015, p. 12).

CSP practices are installed at a level of management intensity that exceeds the current level for a given resource concern, and those directly related to a conservation practice standard are applied in a manner that exceeds the minimum treatment requirements of the standard. In essence, NRCS is rewarding private landowners who are already performing good land stewardship and seeking to further enhance these resource benefits through financial incentives. The CSP is unique among Farm Bill Programs in that participants receive an annual land use payment for installing additional conservation activities: the higher the operational performance (benefits to the resource), the higher the payment. NRCS is preparing to offer CSP as part of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) for the first time 2015. SGI CSP will provide the participants financial incentives and planning assistance to maintain the highest possible quality of sage-grouse habitat on their land as well as the ability to address all outstanding threats to sage-grouse.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Created in the 2014 farm bill from four repealed programs, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is administered by NRCS and provides financial and technical assistance for multi-state or watershed-scale projects. The RCPP creates partnership

opportunities to target and leverage federal conservation funding for specific areas and resource concerns. Project areas are defined by eligible partners and are selected through a competitive state or national competition. Partnership agreements are for five years with a possible one-year extension and partners must provide a significant portion of the overall cost of the project (Stubbs 2015, p. 12).

The RCPP of significance for greater sage grouse conservation is titled, “The Oregon Model to Protect Sage-Grouse,” led by the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts. NRCS awarded a 9 million dollar RCPP grant to eight Oregon Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) with greater sage-grouse habitat. The funds will be provided to landowners who enroll in Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs) to implement conservation measures to specifically remove or reduce the identified threats to sage-grouse on their lands. It provides the resources needed to implement six Greater sage-grouse CCAAs in Oregon on 3.4 million acres of private land including all sage-grouse habitat on private lands in Baker, Cook, Deschutes, Grant, Harney, Lake, Malheur, and Union counties. This effort is tied to larger state population targets for implementing innovative comprehensive conservation across Oregon and relies on the collective efforts of many partners (need cite).

Sodsaver Provisions

The 2014 Farm Bill includes a geographically limited “Sodsaver” provision to discourage producers from converting native prairies and grasslands to annually tilled crops. Producers who break out new agricultural land from native grasslands after February 7, 2014 will be eligible only for reduced benefits on the broken out acres from the federal crop insurance and non-insured crop disaster assistance programs for four years. Although not nationally applicable, the

provision does apply to the Prairie Pothole Region states (NABCI 2015, p. 23), which could be of significance for sage-grouse populations in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

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