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Conservation
SHOWCASE



Boone Sullivan: Steward of his family's 18,000-acre ranch along Burnt River south of Baker City, Oregon.

According to USDA-NRCS District Conservationist Beau Sorenson, the sage-grouse is a ground-dwelling bird native to the sagebrush steppe ecosystem of Baker County, Oregon and much of the American West. “The sage-grouse has experienced a significant decline in population and habitat over several decades and is being considered for listing as a threatened or endangered species,” explains Beau. The birds are highly dependent on sagebrush for cover and food and historically could be found anywhere sagebrush existed. On Boone’s land and on 5 million acres around the state, the western juniper tree has been subtly invading vast acreages of rangeland that were once dominated by sagebrush, grasses and forbs—the habitat favored by sage-grouse, mule deer and other wildlife.

“Boone Sullivan is part of the strategic approach to conserving greater sage-grouse,” says Travis Bloomer, NRCS Range Management Specialist. Boone is one of many landowners in Oregon participating



Sage-grouse

*Sage-grouse:
a Precious
Natural Resource
in Baker County*

Hereford, Ore. —

Boone Sullivan is keeper of the history and caretaker of the precious natural resources on his family’s 18,000-acre ranch along Burnt River south of Baker City. Boone tells the story of logging ponderosa pines, of hunting deer and elk and of Old Sam, a reclusive hermit and prospector who mined for gold on Forest Service land near their home place in the mid-1900s. Over the years the quest for gold has died out in the valley while awareness of another precious natural resource, the sage-grouse, has emerged.



Sage-grouse Breeding Ground: Prime sage-grouse habitat has been expanded on the Sullivan Ranch through juniper removal.

“What we are doing now is a *Healthy deal for the Forest and Grasslands.*”
— Wayne Wise

in the USDA-NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative, which aims to restore sage-grouse habitat and improve ranch sustainability by targeting the threat of juniper expansion in the early stages of succession. Removing juniper before it becomes too thick preserves the grasses, forbs, and shrubs desired by sage-grouse and livestock alike. The mere presence of the invasive conifer discourages sage-grouse from using important habitats, such as “leks” or breeding grounds, for fear of predation from raptors or ravens that may be hiding in the branches.

According to Travis, although juniper is a native plant, fire suppression and other factors have allowed this tree to expand to sites it never occupied historically. As juniper expands its range, it gradually results in a number of resource problems, such as reduced forage production, increased soil

erosion, altered wildlife habitat, and reduced stream and spring flows. Boone and his brother-in-law Wayne Wise, a professional logger, have been working for ten years on their own and with NRCS and other natural resource agencies to meet the juniper problem head on. Ten years ago, they removed juniper in a pine forest they were thinning. Today, they see a marked improvement in the vitality of the native grasses that have thrived where the juniper once grew.

“What we are doing is a healthy deal for the forest and the grasslands,” says Wayne. “I am trying to pay attention now to what NRCS says, and to know what grasses are good and what are not so good.” Wayne explains how he can now identify beneficial and problematic grasses in an area, and work with Boone and NRCS to figure out the right management solutions. “I had no idea what Idaho Fescue was until I worked with Travis,” he comments.

In 2010, over 1,000 acres of juniper removal in prime sage-grouse habitat was funded on the Sullivan Ranch as part of the Sage-Grouse Initiative. Where downed trees are dense enough to cover the sagebrush, they are moved by cat to a road where they can be more easily accessed for use as firewood or biomass. “Plans are to reseed with native grasses to prevent the growth of new juniper trees,” says Boone. Wayne also sorts, selects and sells poles for fences and house lumber. The juniper removal project on the Sullivan Ranch opens up and reconnects important seasonal habitats and movement corridors for sage-grouse.

The Sullivan ranch is co-owned by Boone, his three sisters Mary, Theresa and Cathy, and his mother Eleanor. Boone's great-grandfather, A.P. Sullivan, started the Ranch in 1913. It was passed down to Boone's grandfather Ed Sullivan, and then to his father and uncle, Donald and Dwayne. Boone remembers his father managing the health of the rangeland, setting small fires to burn the grass and undesirable conifers when the lightning didn't do the job for them. Nowadays, the fire regime is more managed and the Sullivans have created a

firebreak around the perimeter of their land. "We are trying to get the land back to what it looked like in 1913," says Boone.

And that can only be good news to the sage-grouse.

NRCS

Helping People Help the Land

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— Boone Sullivan

Biomass: *Juniper logs are selected from the biomass and may be converted to fuel.*

