

# Removing Trees to Save Birds in Oregon

## *NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative in Action*



A sawyer removes invasive juniper trees near Brothers, Oregon. Photo by Jeremy Maestas.

**By Jeremy Maestas  
and Christian Hagen**

In the spring of 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) designed to focus Farm Bill programs on alleviating threats to sage grouse and improving the long-term sustainability of working ranches in 11 Western states that support sage grouse. The SGI is a collaborative, strategic approach to candidate species conservation that seeks to implement conservation actions in the right locations on the landscape. Through the SGI, popular Farm Bill conservation programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, are being used to help agricultural producers get conservation practices on the ground. Although the SGI is coordinated na-

tionally, state-level partnerships and state wildlife agency sage grouse plans provide the science foundation for program delivery.

The NRCS has teamed with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and other partners to significantly reduce one of the primary, large-scale threats to sage grouse: encroachment of western juniper. Juniper has increased the area it occupies ten-fold in the last 140 years, with over 2.4 million acres of potentially suitable sage grouse habitat affected by juniper expansion. As juniper invades, sagebrush declines and the plant community transitions to woodland that becomes increasingly unsuitable for sage grouse.

To further target conservation efforts geographically, telemetry and lek data from birds in Oregon were used to identify portions of the landscape most utilized by grouse. Data revealed that roughly 80 percent of sage grouse nest within three miles

of a lek. Of these areas, approximately 800,000 acres are degraded or unsuitable due to juniper invasion – 200,000 acres are privately owned and 600,000 acres are publicly owned.

SGI resources in Oregon are currently targeted to assist private landowners with juniper removal from priority areas near leks with the goal of rapidly increasing the amount and quality of habitat.

Recent “core area” analyses that map breeding sage grouse densities illustrate that 75 percent of all birds occur on one-third of the occupied range, which will allow further targeting of programs in the future. In 2010, \$2.3 million in Farm Bill funds was allocated to 28 ranchers to remove juniper from over 20,000 acres of priority habitat in Oregon.

A large-scale research study is being set up with partners in a core area in south-central Oregon to study the effectiveness of these treatments on improving sage grouse productivity. The results of this rigorous science will be vital for informing future Endangered Species Act listing decisions.

To date in the West, over \$18.5 million has been provided to landowners through the SGI to reduce a variety of threats to sage grouse, such as conifer encroachment, invasive species, wildfire risk, accidental mortality due to fence strikes, and unsustainable grazing systems. The United States Department of Agriculture has made available an additional \$30 million for fiscal year 2011, and \$3.5 million will go to further efforts in Oregon.

*Jeremy Maestas serves as the State Habitat Biologist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Christian Hagen is the Sage Grouse Conservation Coordinator for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.*