

## **Incentive Programs for Sage Grouse Habitat Enhancement on Private Lands**

Developing actions for Sage Grouse conservation on private land needs the full support of the landowner and won't work without it. The most important type of incentive for private landowners is to involve them early in the planning process, include their suggestions and interests. Ask them what they think would work for them on their land with their operation. This done early and sincerely is the first step, followed by continued involvement.

The goals for Sage Grouse conservation on private lands in the Washoe-Modoc plan are focused on landowner education and incentives, which differs from the administrative approach taken on the public lands. Regulations on public lands managed as part of an allotment could easily influence how the landowner uses the associated private lands. For instance, the landowner with restrictions on their allotments may choose to attempt more intensive agriculture on the private lands, which is likely to fail and create further habitat loss. The Washoe-Modoc plan attempts to find a workable balance for Sage Grouse conservation on both public and private lands.

Educational information is available to landowners concerning the habitat needs of Sage Grouse: The Nevada Wildlife Federation publishes a booklet entitled "*Enhancing Sage Grouse Habitat...A Nevada Landowners Guide*". A copy of the booklet is available on-line at [www.nvwf.org/sagegrouse/guide](http://www.nvwf.org/sagegrouse/guide) or by calling (775) 885-0405 or (775) 677-0927.

**Farm Bill 2000:** The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a federal agency under the United States Department of Agriculture [www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/). NRCS offers landowners financial, technical, and educational assistance to implement conservation practices on privately owned land. Using this help, farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners apply practices that reduce soil erosion, improve water quality, and enhance cropland, forestland, wetlands, grazing lands, and wildlife habitat. Conservation plans are developed with individual landowners to suit their specific situation. The landowner is the decision-maker, but conservation practices must meet NRCS standards and specifications. Participation in a cost-share program is not required to receive assistance. Landowners interested in technical assistance or cost-share programs are encouraged to contact the local NRCS field office for assistance. Contact Jim Gifford, Resource Specialist [jim.gifford@nv.usda.gov](mailto:jim.gifford@nv.usda.gov). Listed below are the two most utilized NRCS programs.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was reauthorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) to provide a voluntary conservation program for farmers and ranchers that promotes agricultural production and environmental quality as compatible national goals. EQIP offers financial and technical help to assist eligible participants install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat primarily on private land.

Through this program the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides both technical assistance and up to 75 percent cost-share assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. WHIP agreements between NRCS and the participant generally last from 5 to 10 years from the date the agreement is signed. WHIP has proven to be a highly effective and widely accepted program across the country. By targeting wildlife habitat projects on all lands and aquatic areas, WHIP provides assistance to conservation minded landowners who are unable to meet the specific eligibility requirements of other USDA conservation programs.

**County Tax Sale property:** Under certain circumstances a Nevada county, can acquire parcels of privately owned land that individuals have decided to stop paying taxes on. The property to be acquired must be within the boundaries of an adopted Open Space Plan. In Washoe County this tool for potential acquisition of Sage Grouse habitat is presently only available in the Pah-Rah Population Management Unit (PMU) and a portion of the Virginia Range PMU. Contact Bill Whitney at Washoe County Department of Community Development [bwhitney@mail.co.washoe.nv.us](mailto:bwhitney@mail.co.washoe.nv.us)

**Conservation Easements:** A conservation easement is a legal agreement a property owner makes to restrict the type and amount of development that may take place on his or her property. Each easement's restrictions are tailored to the particular property and to the interests of the individual owner. The purchaser/recipient is required to make periodic inspections to assure the conditions of the easement are being applied. For properties where long term protection is important but where private ownership and management make sense, easements can be the right tool. The easement can be donated by the landowner (usually with a tax benefit for the value of development that is precluded), or purchased by a public or non-profit entity. Presently, easements may not be a popular option for most landowners simply because there is a critical lack of information for them to feel confident in what the "fair" value of the easement actually is and any type of regulatory tool that includes a "perpetuity" clause is not likely to be popular with private landowners. Contact Roy Leach at Nevada Division of Wildlife [rleach@ndow.org](mailto:rleach@ndow.org)

The **Endangered Species Act** includes components that can be used as incentive mechanisms for landowners. Most importantly, these include contractual assurance agreements. These essentially specify what land use practices the landowner will adhere to in return for assurance that the land will continue to be used for production purposes. Getting these agreements in place assures the landowner that there will be no changes in their use of the land. These are likely to be important incentives for traditional ranchers. Their needs to be adequate support for landowners to negotiate these agreements with the U S Fish and Wildlife [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov) Service and the time to negotiate these agreements is sooner than later. Laurie Sada is the contact at (775) 861-6300.

The **United States Fish & Wildlife Service** Joint Venture programs, traditionally directed at wetlands improvement, have expanded to include all birds. Small grants of \$10,000-\$50,000 are available for habitat improvement. Applications for these funds

require partnerships and shared costs. The improvements should be tied to increased numbers of Sage Grouse. Tina Nappe is a member of the small grant Joint Venture program for Nevada; Laurie Sada is the contact for the Partnership program, phone: (775) 861-6300. Information on grants and partnerships is available at [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov).

**Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act (SNPLMA)** is one of the tools that could be used to purchase private properties or potentially conservation easements for Sage Grouse habitat conservation. SNPLMA is a source of funding for Nevada created by the sale of federal lands (BLM) in Clark County. While the majority of the revenue generated is stipulated for expenditure in Clark County, a small percentage of the proceeds are available to purchase “environmentally sensitive” properties statewide. All proposals submitted for SNPLMA acquisition require the landowner’s consent, involvement of a federal agency partner and endorsement by the local government. [www.nv.blm.gov/snplma](http://www.nv.blm.gov/snplma) Contact Tina Nappe at [tnappe@nvgbell.net](mailto:tnappe@nvgbell.net)

**Q1 - Conservation and Natural Resource Protection Bond** was passed by the voters of Nevada in November 2002. This bond provides \$27.5 million for the Nevada Division of Wildlife to enhance, protect, and manage wildlife and wildlife habitat, \$20 million for local governments and \$15 million for nonprofit conservation organizations to acquire land and water to protect and enhance wildlife habitat critical properties (both require 50% match). Purchase of conservation easements is allowable under this bond. Contact Pam Wilcox at Nevada Division of State Lands [pwilcox@lands.nv.gov](mailto:pwilcox@lands.nv.gov) or Roy Leach at Nevada Division of Wildlife [rleach@ndow.org](mailto:rleach@ndow.org)

**National Fire Plan:** Is the US Congress response to the severe wildfires of 2000 with the intent of reducing their impacts on rural communities and enhancing the firefighting capabilities in the future. The National Fire Plan assists in the implementation of five key areas: firefighting resources, rehabilitation and restoration, hazardous fuels reduction, accountability and community assistance. Funding is administered through the Bureau of Land Management and the Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF). Where Sage Grouse habitat improvement can also be tied to fuels reduction projects and Multi-Resource Stewardship, funding through the NDF or BLM may be available. (Contact: Jenny Scanland, NDF [jennys@ndf.state.nv.us](mailto:jennys@ndf.state.nv.us) or Pat Murphy, BLM state office [www.pmurphy@nv.blm.gov](mailto:www.pmurphy@nv.blm.gov)).

Additional Landowner incentive options for conservation of sage grouse in California include the following which was excerpted and modified from a portion of the California Department of Fish and Game home page <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/habitats/private.html>

*Conservation Banking:* A [Conservation Bank](#) (may also be called a Mitigation Bank) is a biological bank account. Instead of dollars in the bank, the "bank" owner has biological mitigation credits to sell to developers. Under state and federal laws, development projects that propose to remove or harm biological resources must assess the level of impact. If judged to be significant, those impacts must be compensated for. One means of doing so is through establishment of conservation banks which attempt to set aside larger

blocks of natural habitat needed for long term conservation. [A recent report on conservation banking is available](#). Contact the Department of Fish and Game for more information.

• *Enhancement and Management of Fish and Wildlife and their Habitat on Private Lands (PLM program)*: The PLM program offers ranchers and farmers an opportunity to increase their profits by improving habitat for wildlife. Through 1996, there were 52 PLM properties encompassing approximately 645,000 acres. The economic incentive provided is in the form of offering fishing and hunting opportunity to the public beyond the traditional seasons, and issuing tags or permits directly to individuals you allow to hunt or fish on your land. The landowner sets and collects whatever access and service fees they wish. The landowner pays a fee to be in the program, pays for the tags/permits, develops an approved management plan, and implements the agreed upon wildlife habitat improvements. While most of the habitat enhancements under this program are for increased hunting opportunity for big game animals, many of the enhancements and protections can be designed to benefit other species of wildlife including sage grouse.

The specific laws for the program are described in [Sec 3400-3409 Fish and Game Code](#). Contact the Department of Fish and Game's PLM coordinator for more information and a brochure on the program (916) 653-7203.

The following 3 are primarily wetlands programs but could have some application to sites that include habitat for sage grouse populations, especially when brood-rearing in summer:

• The [California Wetlands Information System](#) is a program of the California Resources Agency. The Wetlands Information System is designed to provide comprehensive wetlands information to the general public, the educational community, and government agencies. It is a compilation of public and private sector information, including maps, environmental documents, agency roles in wetlands management, restoration and mitigation activities, regulatory permitting, and wetland policies.

• The Department's role in wetlands management is to meet the wetlands protection, restoration, and enhancement goals of the Intermountain Habitat Joint Venture, a component of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. These habitat goals are achieved on state-administered wildlife areas and on private land enrolled in the Department's voluntary wetland incentive or easement programs:

*California Waterfowl Habitat Program*: This program pays private landowners for following practices in department approved management plans. Activities include increasing food supplies, providing optimal water depth for foraging birds, and offering summer wetlands for breeding birds.



A guidebook- *Farming for Wildlife: Voluntary Practices for Attracting Wildlife to your Farm* is a collaborative effort and wonderful resource available from the Department.

• The [Inland Wetlands Conservation Program](#) of the Wildlife Conservation Board has made significant contributions toward achieving the specific objectives outlined in the

CVHJV Plan. These contributions will ultimately result in the restoration, enhancement and protection of critical habitat necessary to support the millions of migratory waterfowl dependent upon the Central Valley of California. The [language establishing the program](#) is available. A similar program, focusing specifically on riparian areas is the WCB's recently established California Riparian Habitat Conservation Program (CRHCP).

• [Natural Communities Conservation Program](#) (NCCP): The Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) program of the California Resources Agency and the Department of Fish and Game is an unprecedented effort by the State of California, and numerous private and public partners, that takes a broad-based ecosystem approach to planning for the protection and perpetuation of biological diversity. An NCCP identifies and provides for the regional or area-wide protection of plants, animals, and their habitats, while allowing compatible and appropriate economic activity. The program seeks to involve public and private landowners/administrators in large-scale conservation planning efforts to ensure the long-term integrity of natural communities and accommodate compatible land use. The pilot program involves coastal sage scrub habitat in Southern California, home to the California gnatcatcher and approximately 90 other potentially threatened or endangered species.

• [Riparian Habitat Joint Venture](#): RHJV is a statewide, cooperative endeavor to enhance, conserve, and restore riparian habitats. It is part of Partners in Flight, an international bird conservation effort. The RHJV program works to provide information and education on riparian conservation projects, restoration efforts, and local planning efforts in working towards a goal to increase the amount of riparian habitat for wildlife, in particular songbirds. Contact the Department of Fish and Game's RHJV coordinator for more information.

• The widely known [Williamson Act](#) lands program also supports maintaining agricultural lands and wildlife habitat in California by providing incentives decreasing property tax liability for private land owners.

• [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#): NFWF supports projects that conserve the nation's wetland resources, in particular habitat for wetland-dependant fish and wildlife. NFWF generally funds three program types: acquisition of wetland resources, both in fee-title and conservation easements; wetland restoration and enhancement projects, particularly those on private lands; and applied research on wetland management techniques, restoration or enhancement practices, or other wetlands-related applied conservation.

• [Partners for Wildlife](#): A program in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that started in the midwest. This link provides some background, but contact the Fish and Wildlife Service for information related to California. Also, a [map and text](#) description of USFWS facility locations is online.

• [The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program](#) (WHIP) is a component of the 1996 USDA Farm Bill and is voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private lands. It provides both technical assistance and cost sharing to help establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.

• This link provides information about Conservation Programs offered by the USDA's [Farm Service Agency](#) along with links to associated news releases and Program Fact Sheets. One program, the [Conservation Reserve Program](#) (CRP) is the Federal Government's single largest environmental improvement program -- and one of its most effective. Today, the CRP is safeguarding millions of acres of American topsoil from erosion, increasing wildlife habitat, and protecting ground and surface water by reducing water runoff and sedimentation. Countless lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams are cleaner and more vital in part because of the CRP.

**Conservation Easements and Acquisition through the Wildlife Conservation Board:**  
In close cooperation with the California Department of Fish & Game, this board provides oversight for acquisitions and easements to protect important and threatened wildlife habitats in California. Acquisitions are generally more common than easements and most have targeted listed species or complex habitats with many high value species (ie, coastal wetlands, critical habitats, etc. Funding of various bond measures passed under the California Initiative process intermittently provide very large increases in the funds available for such easements and acquisitions.