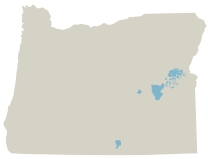
Oregon Model *to Protect Sage-Grouse*

Oregon Model to Protect Sage-Grouse
All Counties FIP Initiative

OWEB FOCUSED INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIP
PROGRESS REPORT / BIENNIA 2 & 3: 2017-2021

SAGEBRUSH / SAGE-STEPPE HABITAT



Greater sage-grouse conservation efforts are taking place across a 165-million-acre expanse of sage-grouse habitat that includes areas within eleven western states. The Oregon context for the Oregon All Counties CCAA Steering Committee's (OACSC) initiative is defined in the Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan – covering approximately 18 million acres of habitat. The partnership's Strategic Action Plan is focused on privately-owned Sage-grouse Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH) and adjacent lands in seven Oregon Counties and defines strategies and objectives that cover a 30-year timeframe (2015-2045).

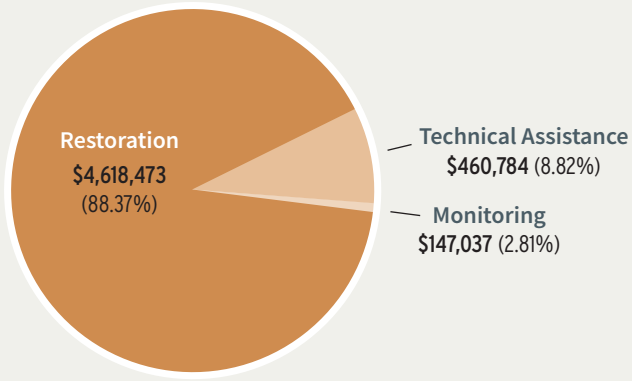
Corresponding actions on public lands are being led by federal and state agencies including the Bureau of Land Management, Oregon Department of State Lands, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, with complementary funding on private lands provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Together, the OACSC and partner agencies are contributing to the ecological outcomes shown in the results chain.

The OACSC's primary focus is on privately-owned Sage-Grouse PPH occurring within Harney, Lake, and Malheur counties. Conservation measures support the design and execution of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) in partnership with private landowners through the development of Site Specific Plans (SSP) by Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs). The CCAA is an agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), SWCDs and non-federal landowners, in which the landowner agrees to reduce or eliminate threats to a candidate species on lands they manage in exchange for assurances from USFWS that they will no longer face further regulatory requirements should the species become listed under the Endangered Species Act in the future. The Oregon sage-grouse CCAAs showcase the widespread private land efforts in conserving rangeland health and sage-grouse populations.

In an effort to begin implementing the conservation measures identified within CCAA enrolled landowner's SSPs and make strides in sage-grouse conservation, Harney, Lake and Malheur Counties applied for a FIP with a sage-grouse focus. These three counties came together to seek funding for restoration, technical assistance and monitoring of these 30-year agreements. Each county identified site specific FIP geographies within their counties that held the highest numbers of CCAA enrollments and highest probabilities of success for sage-grouse conservation.

Funding

OWEB awarded $5,226,294 in funding with $2,876,719 in matching funds.



Benefits

- *Restored diverse plant communities that support all life stages of Sage-Grouse*
- *Reduced risk of frequent, damaging wildfires*
- *Created small business opportunities for juniper removal and rangeland treatment*
- *Engaged private landowners in a local, collaborative solution to improve Sage-Grouse and rangeland health*
- *Provided technical and financial support to farmers and ranchers to implement conservation measures*

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) grant program is a bold, new conservation approach that supports high-performing partnerships to implement strategic restoration actions and measure ecological outcomes through coordinated monitoring. In January 2016, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board awarded a FIP grant to the Oregon All Counties CCAA Steering Committee. This report documents projects for which funding was obligated in Biennia 2-3 (2017-2021) and cumulative progress since the FIP was initiated in 2016.

Work completed by the partnership under the FIP grant program is part of a much larger on-going collaborative effort of federal, state and local agencies, private landowners, and non-governmental organizations to meet Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan goals. ***Accomplishments included in the report only reflect actions completed with OWEB FIP funding.***

PARTNERS

Core Partners: Harney Soil and Water Conservation District, Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District, Malheur Soil and Water Conservation District, Private Landowners, US Fish and Wildlife Service

Supporting Partners: Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, County governments, Oregon State University Extension, US Department of Agriculture Agricultural Research Service, Cooperative Weed Management Areas, Sage Grouse Conservation Partnership, Watershed Councils

GOAL

Restore Oregon's private rangelands and sustain abundant populations of sage-grouse, by minimizing threats of wildfire, exotic annual grass, and juniper invasion, and supporting management practices that promote local economic and social needs.

STRATEGY

Execute Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances for private lands

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS FUNDED (2017-2021)

Restoration

53
ESCAPE RAMPS FOR SAGE-GROUSE
(72 RAMPS TOTAL)

2,999
ACRES EXOTIC ANNUAL GRASS TREATMENT
(9,588 acres total)

8,201.9 UPLAND ACRES + **10.8** RIPARIAN ACRES
fenced to manage grazing

3,983
ACRES SEEDED
to promote recovery of native vegetation

21.27
MILES OF MARKED FENCE

8,434.73
ACRES OF JUNIPER TREATMENT
(20,540.73 acres total)

Planning

14,274.73
ACRES IN SITE-SPECIFIC PLANS
for private land *(200,569.73 acres total)*

11
SITE SPECIFIC PLANS SUBMITTED

14,274.73
ACRES IN MANAGED GRAZING PLANS
(200,569.73 acres total)

(The metrics shown reflect actions that have been completed or for which funding has been obligated in Biennia 2 and 3. Metrics in parentheses include Biennium 1 accomplishments.)

OUTCOMES

Expected Near Term 0-5+ YEARS

- Reduction of conifer encroached sage-steppe and sage-grouse habitat
- Increased rangeland health and diversity
- Reduced invasion of exotic annual grasses
- Increased water availability to livestock & other wildlife
- Improved livestock dispersal/utilization that improves sage-grouse habitat & nest survival
- Improved/increased mesic habitat for brood rearing sage-grouse
- Increased connectivity between seasonal habitats of sage-grouse
- Decreased wildfire threat

Expected Intermediate Term 5-20+ YEARS

- Continued success of all results listed above
- Increased desired plant cover of sagebrush, perennial bunch grasses, and forbs
- Less predation of Sage-Grouse by raptors and corvids perched on junipers

Expected Long Term 20+ YEARS

- Connectivity of habitats increased and is maintained
- Habitat containing nesting cover and food for sage-grouse is restored
- Increased sage-grouse survival and population stability

FIP Initiative Progress, Biennia 1-3

Progress on metrics reflects implementation supported by OWEB funding, and does not represent all progress achieved via other funding sources.

OUTPUTS	PROGRESS	OBJECTIVE
Develop site-specific plans for privately-owned sage-grouse habitat	200,569.73 acres	199,778 acres
Treat exotic annual grass	9,588.03 acres	8,550 acres
Remove juniper for sage-grouse habitat	20,540.73 acres	14,680 acres
Establish managed grazing systems for privately-owned sage-grouse habitat	200,569.73 acres	199,778 acres
Mark fence in high-risk collision areas	27.21 miles	40 miles
Install escape ramps in troughs	72 ramps	50 ramps

Monitoring Approach

- Collects baseline ecological data
- Completes required monitoring for CCAAs on private lands, including annual monitoring and repeat long-term monitoring (5-7 year increments). Funding to fulfill the thirty-year monitoring obligations is an ongoing concern for the partnership as it is a critical piece of the conservation effort
- Monitors improvements and changes in ecological states in Sage-Grouse habitat over time, including upland and riparian ecosystems, habitat expansion, and rangeland improvements
- Monitors the effectiveness of weed treatment, juniper cutting, rangeland seeding, and grazing management practices

PHOTO USFWS (Tom Koerner)

Adaptive Management

Restoration

CHALLENGES / OPPORTUNITIES	LESSONS LEARNED	ADAPTATIONS
Project implementation was sometimes delayed by unforeseen issues including weather, lack of access to project sites, remote site locations, lack of pre-qualified contractors, or other challenges	The partnership was able to achieve many of the initiative goals due to the flexibility of the FIP budget and the understanding of OWEB staff	Establish flexibility within the FIP budget and maintain robust communication with OWEB staff
Extended drought and large, intense wildland fires adjacent to project areas delayed some actions	Conservation actions that lead to a reduction in fuel loads and improved rangeland conditions contributes to reduced risk of catastrophic fire within the FIP geography	Conservation measures have been developed to guide treatment of vectors, and large-scale fuels management strategies
Short timeframes for planning, design, grant development and contracting increased pressure to work efficiently and effectively and created difficulties coordinating contractors, conducting bid tours, awarding contracts, and fully meeting requirements for continued landowner enrollment into the CCAA program	Having shovel-ready projects with CCAA Site Specific Plans (SSPs) in place helped expedite the process of planning, design, and implementation Proactive relationship building led to increased landowner desire to improve sage-grouse habitat via CCAA SSPs	Strong emphasis on proactive project and relationship development well before funding was made available has allowed the partnership to carry out and complete quality projects
Lack of adequate guidance for fuel break construction and fire mitigation strategies	The structure of the results chain/theory of change aided in the development of new conservation measures	New conservation measures related to fire mitigation, weed treatments, and additional mesic habitat data were developed

Planning

CHALLENGES / OPPORTUNITIES	LESSONS LEARNED	ADAPTATIONS
Utility or value of the Progress Monitoring Framework	The PMF required the group to collaborate and develop a uniform methodology for prioritizing restoration projects Having clearly identified goals and objectives enabled the initiative to track progress toward reaching desired goals Methodology for annual reports required by USFWS as part of the CCAA agreements was easily incorporated into progress tracking The implementation objectives, timelines, and metrics, set clearly defined guidelines for the initiative and long-term FIP funding allowed consistent baseline and effectiveness monitoring to be initiated	The partnership developed prioritization protocols with internal knowledge and input from outside experts. Prioritization was based on potential sage grouse habitat quality and quantity with focus initially in the most critical areas for conservation Progress tracking methodologies were developed using the monitoring framework in conjunction with the CCAA protocols and reporting occurred quarterly and annually. Near-term, intermediate, and long-term ecological results will continue to be recorded and will identify ecological impacts. These metrics are broken down in the results chain and guide monitoring methodologies, in order to identify whether conservation actions are delivering the desired outcomes

Adaptive Management, continued

Partnership Capacity

CHALLENGES / OPPORTUNITIES	LESSONS LEARNED	ADAPTATIONS
The partnership experienced improved communication and unity amongst its members	Improved partner communication resulted in uniform monitoring and increased ability to problem solve across county jurisdictional boundaries with project implementation and design Stronger communication increased interest of outside FIP partners and greater willingness to combine funds and effort and work on larger, landscape scale projects, ultimately expanding the success of the FIP Stronger relationships promoted increased fluidity of funds across county lines and breaking down rigidity in fund division and allocation between counties.	Relationships and regular communication with partners facilitated the development of a database to improve efficiencies in data collection, plan development, implementation reporting, and monitoring progress toward FIP goals
Some members of the partnership experienced significant staff turnover throughout the FIP creating complications with project development and monitoring	Staff turnover emphasized the need to develop a database and clear protocol to input and manage project information	Database development which has detailed instructions for data collection and reporting requirements allows any new staff to readily enroll, monitor, report conservation measures, create annual reports, and report project acres/locations needed for FIP reporting

PHOTO USFWS (Tom Koerner)

Addressing Climate Change

The partnership has integrated climate change information into the initiative by prioritizing and improving fire mitigation strategies, annual grass abatement practices, and augmenting multiple conservation measures. Increasing resiliency of existing sagebrush communities has always been a priority, but with the increased risk of fire, fuel breaks and fire management plans have shifted to the forefront.

- Climate change guidance has influenced the way the partnership prioritizes projects. With the frequency of large wildfires increasing across the region, the FIP's attention has shifted to how they can prevent devastating fires and conserve the intact sagebrush communities that exist. Fire is a natural part of the sagebrush system, but the increased intensity and more frequent return intervals are not.

  The introduction of non-native herbaceous species and the invasion of conifers into historically sagebrush dominated sites (due to the lack of fire), has created the perfect environment for very hot, very destructive fires. Long term drought has also benefitted the invasive annual grasses, while decreasing native forbs, bunchgrasses and shrubs. Alterations in the sagebrush ecosystem including changing fire regimes, spread of invasive grasses, and climate change, have led to new challenges to the landowners and public that live in sagebrush country. Land and species managers, landowners, and other stakeholders need scientific information to improve their ability to understand and address these challenges. In order to implement landscape-scale management decisions, the partnership is able to consult with researchers, rangeland ecologists, and fire professionals to identify treatment methods.

- Our partnership has adapted to changing conditions and conservation measures have been developed to guide our treatment of vectors, and large-scale fuels management strategies. The initiative has always had well developed conservation strategies that address threats to sage-grouse and their habitat, while being able to work together when new challenges arise. The Model to Protect Sage Grouse steering committee does not foresee any circumstances that would prevent the incorporation of climate change considerations into project planning.

PHOTO USDA NRCS