

Aiding Grouse

6-year, \$6.1-million project aims to improve sage grouse habitat in Baker County

By Jayson Jacoby
Baker City Herald

Dallas Hall Defrees' job is to help protect populations of a Baker County bird that many people have never seen.

But the sage grouse, inconspicuous as it is, casts an immense political shadow — one that extends not only over parts of Baker County but much of the inland West, an area covering several states.

The sage grouse, which is about the size of a chicken, as its name implies needs habitat that includes healthy sagebrush.

And sagebrush, as anyone knows who has traveled extensively in Eastern Oregon, is hardly scarce in our region.

But sagebrush alone is not enough to sustain populations of sage grouse, said Hall Defrees, a Baker County native who is the sage grouse Local Implementation Team coordinator for a multiyear and multimillion-dollar project designed to reverse a significant decline in sage grouse numbers in the county.

The birds also need bunchgrass and forbs (a botanical category that includes many types of wildflowers), which are important sources of food, she said.

This type of habitat is imperiled by multiple factors, Hall Defrees

said.

The main threats in Baker County are:

- the spread of annual grasses, principally cheatgrass and medusahead, which can crowd out beneficial grasses and forbs

"We have a lot of both in Baker County," Hall Defrees said of the annual grass species.

- encroachment by juniper, which can supplant sagebrush, in part by sucking up most of the available water in the soil

- wildfire

Cheatgrass and medusahead contribute to the fire threat because those species dry much earlier than native bunchgrasses and can form dense mats of tinder that can carry flames as readily as dry paper.

That trio constitutes the greatest danger to sage grouse in Baker County, but there are others, Hall Defrees said.

Predation by other birds — ravens, which eat sage grouse eggs, being the most common avian culprit — can also threaten sage grouse.

And human activities, including off-road vehicle travel, can potentially harm sage grouse habitat or fragment it.

Environmental groups have lobbied the federal government for more than 15 years to list sage grouse as a threatened or endan-



Associated Press file photo

Three male sage grouse during the seasonal ritual designed to attract hens. The males inflate air sacs in their breasts, creating a distinctive thumping sound, and fan their tail feathers.

gered species over much of its range in the West, including in Eastern Oregon. They contend that cattle grazing also imperils sage grouse.

But in September 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the bird, although federal officials conceded that sage grouse do face multiple threats in some areas.

Sage grouse have frequently been compared, in their potential to affect land management, with the spotted owl. The owl, which lives in the western parts of Oregon, Washington and California, was listed as an endangered species in 1990. Protection for the bird contributed to a decline in logging on public land in those areas.

The most likely effect of federal protection for sage grouse would be constraints on cattle grazing, a primary use on millions of acres of public land across the inland West.

Baker County's sage grouse situation is unusual, however.

The county is on the northern fringe of the bird's range in Oregon, and accounts for less than 10% of the state's sage grouse habitat. A 2019 report from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) estimated that 3.9% of Oregon's sage grouse live in the BLM's Baker Resource Area.

Most of Oregon's sage grouse live in the sprawling sagebrush steppe of

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— Dallas Hall Defrees, coordinator for a sage grouse habitat improvement project in the county



Malheur, Harney and Lake counties.

But unlike in those counties, where most of the land — and sage grouse habitat — is on public land, more than 70% of the sage grouse habitat in Baker County is privately owned.

And the birds have been faring badly on that land.

ODFW estimates that sage grouse populations in Baker County dropped by about 70% between 2004 and 2014. The numbers have been relatively steady since then. The 2019 report estimated the spring population of sage grouse in the Bureau of Land Management's Baker Resource Area at 541 birds.

The declining population, and the potential for restrictions on grazing and other activities should the sage grouse be federally protected, prompted a group of Baker County landowners and officials from county, state and federal agencies

to form the Local Implementation Team several years ago.

Those partners applied for a grant through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board with a goal of improving sage grouse habitat and, ideally, boosting the population of the birds.

In January 2019 the Baker County Local Implementation Team was approved for a 6-year, \$6.1 million grant that extends over three of Oregon's two-year budget cycles.

The team initially received \$1.7 million for the first biennium. The money comes from the Oregon Lottery.

The team hired Hall Defrees as coordinator in November 2019.

Having grown up on her family's cattle ranch in Sumpter Valley, Hall Defrees, a 2009 Baker High School graduate, was excited about the opportunity.

"It's a fun job for me," she said. "I care a lot about agriculture within Baker County because I grew up doing that. Any way that I can help to improve the natural resources of Baker County."

Hall Defrees earned a degree in biology at Oregon State University in 2013, and a master's degree in rangeland ecology and management from OSU in 2018.

GROUSE

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She has worked as a consultant helping ranchers improve their properties, so the sage grouse coordinator job, which has similar goals, was a natural for her.

Hall Defrees said the coronavirus pandemic has affected the Baker County sage grouse project.

Oregon Lottery revenue plummeted this spring, mainly because bars, which have the most video poker games, were closed for more than 2 months.

Hall Defrees said the state cut \$350,000 from the \$1.7 million grant for the current biennium.

She said that reduction shouldn't have a significant effect on the project, and she's optimistic that the county will receive its full allocation for the two succeeding bienniums. The full 6-year grant has been awarded, and the county does not need to reapply, she said.

Although grant dollars can be used to improve habitat on public land, because most of the county's sage grouse habitat is on private property that's the focus for the project, Hall Defrees said.

Private landowners can apply for financial aid through the grant twice a year — in October and March.

Landowners are eligible if their property is within an area that includes all of Baker County (except a sliver at the southwest corner) and a small part of southern Union



Nick Myatt / Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

A male sage grouse seeking to attract hens at a "lek" — the areas where the birds gather during the spring mating season.

County.

The campaign is in its early stages, with the first projects, mainly in the Keating Valley area about 15 miles east of Baker City, approved this spring, Hall Defrees said.

The focus is on that geographic area because applications are given priority based on how close they are to what are known as "lek complexes." There are five of these in Baker County, clustered in the Keating Valley area.

A lek is a place, usually a clearing among sagebrush, where the birds gather each spring during the mating season.

Male sage grouse perform an elaborate ritual designed to attract hens. The males inflate a pair of air sacs in their breast, producing a

distinctive hollow thumping sound.

They also fan their tail feathers.

Projects underway

Approved projects in the Keating area are intended to control medusahead and whitetop, the latter a noxious weed, on about 6,000 acres, and inventory those two weeds, as well as rush skeletonweed and yellow starthistle, on another 25,000 acres.

The project includes \$92,294 from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board sage grouse grant, as well as \$121,264 from landowners and a federal agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"We're just starting these treatments," Hall Defrees said. "We'll start seeing benefits in the next few years. Unfortunately there's not a magic bullet to improve these systems really quickly. It requires diligence, and monitoring."

She said she has received many phone calls from landowners interested in applying for grant aid.

"It's been really great to see how many landowners have contacted me," Hall Defrees said. "Landowners are willing and receptive to improving their land."

Some areas likely will be seeded with bunchgrasses once the weeds and invasive grasses have been culled.

Hall Defrees said a fortuitous aspect of this effort is that changes that improve sage grouse habitat are also beneficial for cattle grazing,

which is the main use of the land that's the focus of the project.

"What excites me about it is that what you need for ideal sage grouse habitat, all of those things are also good for grazing," she said.

In addition to dealing with invasive plants, the project can pay for fencing that allows ranchers to change grazing patterns to keep cattle out of areas that are being restored, Hall Defrees said.

Michael Cook, a cattle rancher in the eastern part of the Keating Valley, is one of the first participants in the multiyear project.

Cook, who learned about the Lottery-funded grant through the Tri-County Cooperative Weed Management Area, a La Grande-based group that deals with noxious weeds in Baker, Union and Wallowa counties, said the grant is helping control an infestation of yellow starthistle on 425 acres of his cattle-grazing range north of Keating Valley.

Cook said he had worked for many years to control that weed and had considerable success, in part through the release of insects that feed on the thistles.

But Cook suspects the bugs were victims of the hard winter of 2016-17.

And since then yellow starthistle has spread again.

Cook said he's grateful that the grant program has helped him renew his battle against the weed, which, because it's not palatable to cattle, can reduce the value of his rangeland.

Cook said that although there isn't a large sage grouse population on his land, there is a group of birds that seems to live there year-round.

He said he has strived over the years to improve his land, not only by controlling noxious weeds but by other means such as building fences along streams to keep cattle from trampling the banks and eating streamside trees that shade and cool the water.

"All of these areas, public or private, need to have the weeds controlled to improve habitat for all wildlife, and sage grouse just happens to be one of those," Cook said. "I'm all for protecting the sage grouse."

The Project

WHAT IT IS

The Baker sage grouse project is designed to improve habitat for the birds and reverse a significant decline in their populations in the county over the past 15 or so years

HOW IT HAPPENED

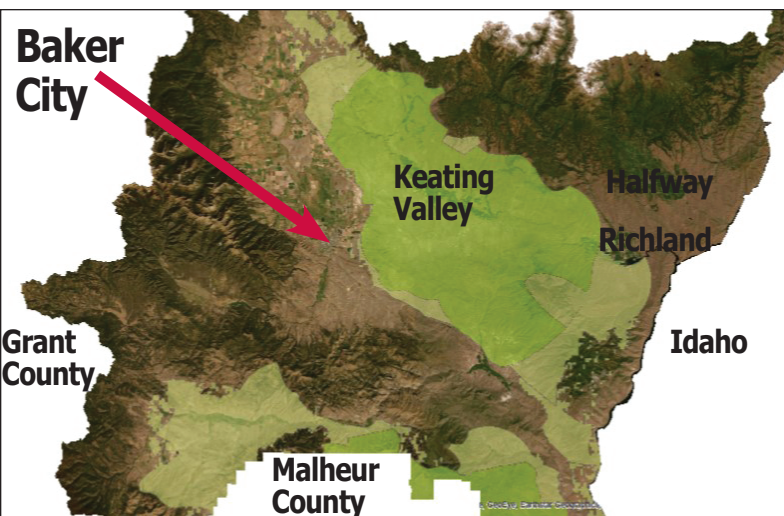
A group of local, state and federal officials and landowners — the Baker Sage Grouse Local Implementation Team — applied for a multiyear grant through the Lottery-funded Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to improve sage grouse habitat, primarily on private land where most of the bird's habitat is in Baker County. In January 2019 the Watershed Enhancement Board approved a 6-year, \$6.1 million grant.

HOW IT WORKS

Private landowners can apply for financial aid for projects on their property. The work can include removing invasive annual grasses and broadleaf weeds, planting native grasses, restoring streamside areas or wet meadows, reducing wildfire risk, fencing to control cattle grazing, ranch management plans and inventorying noxious weeds. Applications are accepted two times per year, on March 15 and Oct. 15.

MORE INFORMATION

Contact Dallas Hall Defrees, the project coordinator, at 541-239-7016 or by email at ddefrees@bakercounty.org



The map is of Baker County and a small part of Union County at the upper left. The darker green shading is priority habitat for sage grouse, and the lighter green is general habitat.

That said, Cook believes that the efforts on private land will be largely negated unless weeds are also treated on public land.

He said his grazing land is all but surrounded by public ground, and if weeds proliferate on public land they'll eventually spread to private ground.