

25 July 2004

**Review of: Western Governor's Association "*Conserving the Greater Sage Grouse: A Compilation of Efforts Underway on State, Tribal, Provincial and Private Lands*"**

All of the materials available online relating to the above 2 Volume set were carefully reviewed. A number of points should be considered when evaluating the usefulness of the material.

1. There is no literature cited and the best that is offered in the name, agency, and address of some of the people who prepared the information. Basically, what is prepared was "borrowed" from other sources.
2. The Executive Summary is incorrect that "these groups are busy collecting new scientific data about the grouse" as most of the studies referenced are incomplete and have not been peer reviewed or published.
3. The Executive Summary is incorrect that "populations in most areas have stabilized or declined only slightly in the last 15-20 years." While there has been some slight improvement in numbers of leks and males counted in the last 5 years, that is more a function of effort than in actual increases in numbers of sage-grouse over large expanses. It is true that a few populations appear to be approaching the "high" in a cycle; that "high" is lower than in previous "cyclic high years." Most populations are still well below (30-80%) their previous high levels. Further, some populations have become extirpated in the "last 15-20 years" and others have become functionally extirpated because of isolation from other populations and low numbers.
4. The Executive Summary is correct that the efforts of Local Work Groups are "voluntary." Many of these efforts are still in the planning phase, most are unfunded or under funded, actual implementation is less than necessary to benefit grouse, there is little or no monitoring of what is being done and any grouse response to the actions, and most plans seem to benefit domestic livestock grazing as well as other uses which degrade and fragment sagebrush steppe habitats. "Voluntary" does not suggest that actions will be sustained over time and any actions planned can change and not be implemented.
5. The few (11) efforts documented in the "Examples of Partnerships and Strategies at Work Across the West" are not sufficient as indicated in the Executive Summary "to ensure the conservation and preservation of the Greater Sage Grouse and the enhancement of its habitat" on a sustained, long-term basis across the breadth of its original or present range.
6. The Executive Summary (page 2) makes a point of what is happening in the State of Washington where sage-grouse use some lands enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. This example illustrates the basic problem as, at present, only about 700 sage-grouse (a decrease of ~300 birds in the last 3 years despite the large acreage in CRP) persist in this area. Clearly, both small, disjointed populations of sage-grouse in the State of

Washington are on their way to extinction despite the large enrolled area of former wheat acreage into the Conservation Reserve Program. Federal programs are normally too small with too many restrictions to benefit sage-grouse when contracts are only for 10 years and do not really encourage vegetation management to benefit a species that depends on sagebrush steppe. Converted agricultural lands are deficient in many respects for sage-grouse and only serve as habitat in a worst-case scenario. These areas are essentially “sinks” and not sources for sage-grouse. At best, they cannot prevent extinction of the species and at worst give a false impression that “all is well.”

7. The Executive Summary gives glowing reviews for the various programs cost-shared under the Farm Services Agency (Natural Resources Conservation Service). Unfortunately, there is no uniformity of delivery of services, the programs affect only small acreages, there are too many time consuming restrictions, they are short-term, most have no documented value to increasing or maintaining sage-grouse populations, emergency haying and grazing can be allowed, and all are at the whim of the local District Manager and the Advisory Board (which is comprised of farmers). Having Conservation Priority areas (FSA, NRCS) specifically for sage-grouse has not been demonstrated to benefit small populations of sage-grouse (e.g., Dolores County, Colorado; Douglas County, Washington). Certain farm programs can have more benefit for sharp-tailed grouse in localized areas.
8. The listing of “conservation actions” being used or planned in a variety of states (II, Conservation Efforts) is interesting. Here one learns that additional water developments, “5-miles of water lines”, additional fencing for livestock, prescribed burns, use of the “Dixie Harrow” and “Spike” to “thin” sagebrush, etc. are all being used to benefit sage-grouse. There are no data to demonstrate that any of these practices will benefit sage-grouse and some will actually be very negative. However, all will benefit domestic livestock. Thus, Conservation Plans to benefit sage-grouse have been turned into Conservation Plans to benefit livestock. What is apparent is that maintaining the status quo for livestock is no longer the situation as these local plans are designed to benefit livestock and more efficiently use the entire sagebrush steppe. This will be negative for sage-grouse.
9. Careful review of the conservation actions across all states indicates that many are several years from being implemented, provided funding becomes available. Further, many listed are those that would normally be done by agencies and ranchers, etc. to maintain the status quo of use on both public and private lands. In actual practice, some “planned” activities through both the BLM and NRCS will further fragment the sagebrush steppe making survival of sage-grouse more problematic. It is difficult to see where additional conservation actions will be implemented to benefit sage-grouse. It appears credit is being taken for normal ranching and land “management” activities while claiming (very dubious and frequently non-existent) benefits for sage-grouse.

- 10. Many of the claimed conservation actions are actually those that should have been done on an annual basis as a normal management activity. Many are research projects, some of which have little value to habitat management to benefit sage-grouse.**
- 11. Close review of the 11 “examples of things that work” indicate they have been carefully selected. Some are disingenuous as I note the Moffat County (Northwest Colorado), Colorado Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Plan was initiated in 1998 and has been beset with “finger pointing” and still has not been completed. In passing, some coal mining companies south of the town of Craig, Colorado are now claiming to be doing actions that benefit grouse (mostly sharp-tailed grouse) when in reality industry built a coal-fired generating plant on the High Mesa sage-grouse lek (eliminating it with no mitigation) and massively impacted (negatively) all sage-grouse leks and habitats south and southwest (Axial Basin) of Craig for at least a 20-year interval.**
- 12. Some of the “examples” of what works are really research projects not designed to improve sage-grouse numbers or habitats. Others are commercial big game hunting (especially elk) and ranching operations where sage-grouse are very secondary to realizing profits.**

### **Conclusions**

**The obvious conclusion is that all sage-grouse populations are in dire straits when one examines the planned and implemented conservation actions emanating from the local, voluntary Conservation Plans, and the “examples” that “work” to benefit sage-grouse. The Western Governor’s Association has tried to paint a scenario that “all is right” and “leave us alone” as we know what to do and what will work. Further, “if you leave us alone, we will do what is right.” Unfortunately, this is what has happened for the last 100 years as the “Marlboro Man Image” of ranchers riding across the western landscape doing no harm to natural resources is just as misleading as smoking cigarettes is good for one’s health and well being. Sage-grouse populations need more than weak platitudes as some should be on life support and some have died while the uses of western landscapes have proliferated and intensified. The Western Governor’s Association reports are misleading and extremely harmful for rational management of sagebrush steppe to benefit and ensure the survival of sage-grouse. Things will not get better with benign neglect.**

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