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## **Meet Me at the Border: Sage Grouse Initiative Projects Converge on Utah- Colorado Boundary**

Ranchers Scott and Alan Chew know what it's like to work across borders. The Utah and Colorado boundary literally crosses through their property that's part of vast sagebrush steppe known as Blue Mountain, found east of Vernal, Utah, and including part of Dinosaur National Monument. This September, the Chews shared their experience and ideas for conserving sage grouse, a bird that doesn't recognize private versus public land, or Utah versus Colorado.

The Chews met in the field with a group of landowners, local working groups from the two states, and agency employees. The tour sparkled with converging ideas, brainstorming, and new projects to return a declining species to abundance. The secret? Make the projects as seamless as possible to benefit the bird, the private landowners, and public land management too.

Natasha Gruber, who organized the tour, is no stranger to erasing boundaries to create success. She is one of 24 Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) biologists and rangeland conservationists who work in partner positions across 10 western states. Their main tasks are to help landowners carry out SGI projects

that are funded through Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Farm Bill programs. The main sponsor of her position is the Mule Deer Foundation. Additional support comes from the NRCS, ConocoPhillips Company, Intermountain West Joint Venture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, National Wild Turkey Federation, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, Utah Chukar & Wildlife Foundation, and the Utah Chapter of the Safari Club International. Gruber is delighted to give credit to every possible partner.

“When you work with a large landscape bird like the sage grouse, it takes big picture thinking and actions that have to go beyond fence lines or any kind of line,” Gruber said. “The tour gave a chance for people who know this country like the back of their hand to come together and brainstorm in the field where we could see the challenges.”

Gruber said the Chews have taken on a leadership role in identifying ways to help sage grouse on Blue Mountain that are compatible with active ranching operations. Scott Chew is the chairman of the local Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management (UBARM) Local Sage-grouse Working Group. When Uintah County formally adopted the Utah Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, Scott was ready to help private landowners initiate the plan. He proceeded to meet with Gruber and Brian Maxfield (UT DWR Sensitive Species Biologist) out on Blue Mountain to look at the landscape from another view, through the eyes of a sage grouse.

Scott learned how to evaluate sagebrush canopy cover, forb and grass understory, wet meadow availability, and phases of pinyon-juniper invasion. With these new ideas in mind, he suggested a tour on Blue Mountain, especially targeted toward private landowners who could then carry out the Utah Sage Grouse Conservation Plan. The Chew family has already proactively enrolled some of their private lands into an SGI contract to address the sage grouse and range habitat resource concerns.

On the field tour, the line between the pinyon-juniper forest and the sagebrush and grasslands provided a constant reminder of a major challenge. The Chews showed the participants how the forest has steadily advanced over the past 40- 50 years into former sage grouse habitat. Where once natural fire confined the native forests, a century or more of controlling fires and other

practices have led to the trees taking over sagebrush country and lowering rangeland productivity for livestock and wildlife alike.

The problem for sage grouse is two-fold. Trees and the birds don't mix. Recent studies in Oregon showed that when trees reach a low threshold of 4 percent, sage grouse numbers plummet. These are birds that need big open treeless country without perches for hungry raptors. Second, the roots of junipers and pinyons suck up huge quantities of water, which in turn dries up historic wet meadows that provide crucial habitat for sage grouse broods.

The Chews take the problem seriously, and have even mapped the changes in wet meadow abundance over the years. There out on the ground, wildlife biologists, resource managers and ranchers laid out the best ideas on hand for strategic removal of the younger trees that have not yet grown tall enough to shade out healthy grasses and brush. They discussed where best to focus work for the return of wet meadows. The landowners noted where they've seen the most golden eagle activity and suggested avoiding conifer removal projects there to reduce predation threats to sage grouse.

Beyond pinyon-juniper removal projects, the group discussed the need for sage grouse use surveys in and around Dinosaur National Monument and funding ideas. They compared techniques for research and projects, and more ways to expand the partnership for conservation on the ground.

"At the tour's end, we felt like we had opened doors across borders," said Gruber. "The enthusiasm is high for coming together for projects that are better because we're combining our collective expertise."