

BY CONTRIBUTING GUEST DEBORAH RICHIE,
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The Sage Grouse Initiative

**SPECIAL
REPORT**



RICK MOSEMAN

The Greater Sage-Grouse is fortunate to have so many good people investing their resources into this new initiative. Among SGI's many partners are some we know well; the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, and the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust.

Big-scale conservation starts at rancher Allen Miller's kitchen table

If you're looking for Allen Miller, there's a good chance he's on horseback, picking his way through lava rock, sagebrush, and tall grass on a far part of his land, the Tower Rock Ranch. That's the best way to check cows, mend fences, and keep an eye on range conditions in the rugged coulees of the Columbia River Basin in eastern Washington. He's an enthusiastic participant in the **Sage Grouse Initiative** (SGI) that's helping him improve both his range and nesting conditions for the bird simultaneously.

Douglas County is sage grouse habitat, some of the last remaining in eastern Washington, where conversion to cropland has taken a heavy toll on the birds that inhabit just eight percent of their former habitat.

The day in April that I met Miller, he walked over from the main barn which was surrounded by wintering cows. He extended a hand and gave me a slow smile. Miller is middle-aged with grown kids and a work ethic that won't quit. That quality matches the windy, rugged and arid land near Leahy Junction in Douglas County, about 30 miles southwest of Coulee Dam and the Columbia River.

"When the forecast calls for 20 percent rain, well you know the wind's going to blow," Miller says, shaking his head at a worrisome drought.

Miller grew up ranching under the tutelage of his father who taught him lessons gained from observing nature's cues.

"My dad always said if you wait a week longer to turn the cows out in the spring after the serviceberry blooms, you get another month of grazing in the fall," he tells me. "My dad was gung ho about protecting the grass, and so am I."

Not overgrazing his land is paramount in his mind, yet with 60 pastures, hundreds of miles of fence, and fickle weather, it's not a simple matter to be the conservation steward he seeks to be.

He may be modest, but Michael Schroeder, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist and renowned sage grouse expert, says there's a reason why Miller earned Landowner of the Year from his agency

several years ago.

"He illustrates that a good steward benefits wildlife, too," Schroeder says. "You can tell Allen is in ranching for the long haul. He cares about wildlife, but first and foremost he's a rancher. So we work with him where his objectives and ours overlap, and they often do."

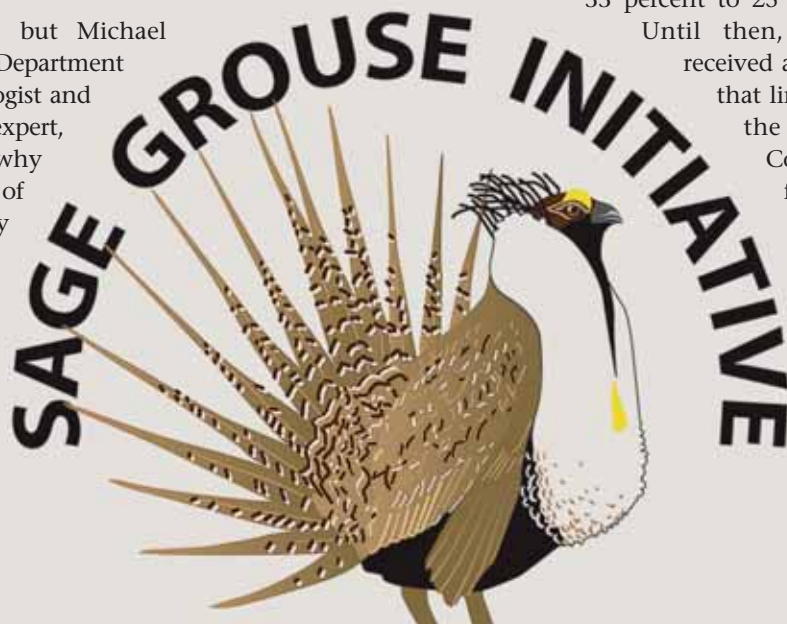
The admiration is mutual. Miller credits Schroeder for teaching him sage grouse science as the biologist collared birds on the ranch, showed him leks (where males gather to display for hens in spring), and shared the trends. He values Schroeder's openness and ability to agree to disagree.

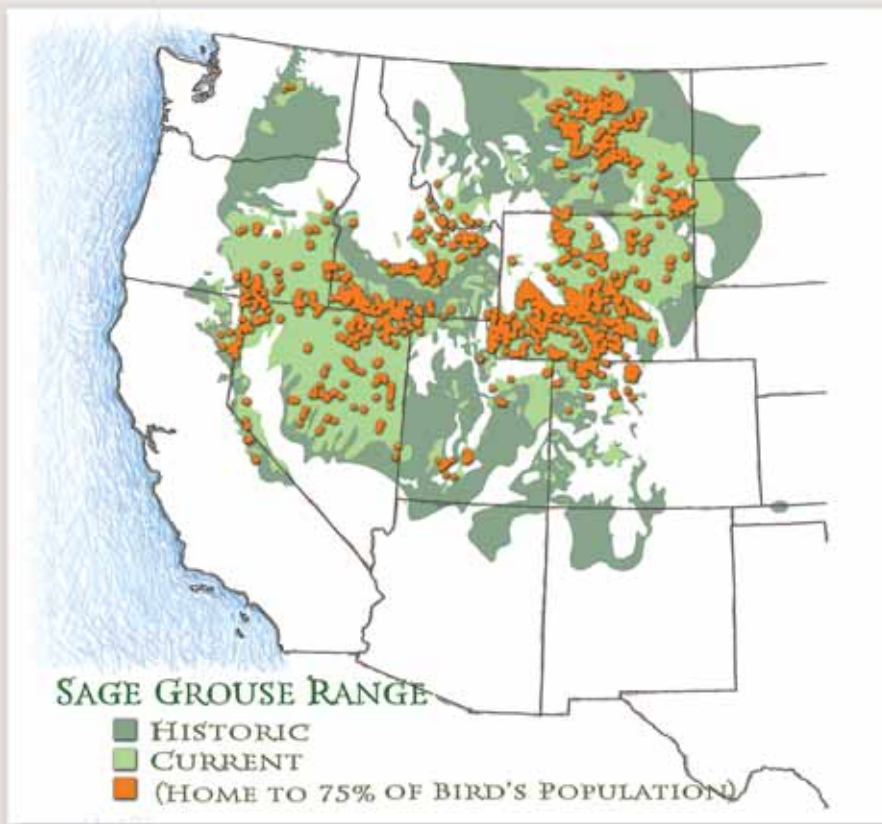
Schroeder is currently working on a complementary program to the SGI called **SAFE (State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement)** that has an emphasis on wildlife restoration. The sage grouse SAFE project in Washington (there are many ongoing SAFE projects nation-wide) is administered by the **Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife** and the **Farm Services Agency**. Together, SGI and SAFE may just give sage grouse the traction they need to survive, especially after a turn of events in 2010.

In that year, many **Conservation Reserve Program** (CRP) leases were expiring without a chance for renewal. The CRP is a federal Farm Bill program that pays farmers who voluntarily take lands out of production to reduce soil erosion and provide wildlife habitat through planting perennial grasses and shrubs. Since 1985, the CRP has proven to be the lifeblood in this area for wildlife of the sage, from sage grouse to mule deer and sage thrashers. These valuable CRP lands, combined with pockets of native range, have resulted in a foothold for the sage grouse.

The problem for the CRP in Douglas County stemmed from a 2010 federal order to reduce CRP acreage from 33 percent to 25 percent of private lands.

Until then, Douglas County had received an exemption from a rule that limited CRP to a quarter of the cropland in Douglas County. Hope dwindled for farmers and ranchers who would have preferred to





keep their lands in CRP and range and not plant them in wheat. When it comes to habitat, a plowed brown dirt field is the equivalent of a parking lot for sage grouse, making them about as vulnerable to predators as possible.

A GRAND PLAN UNFOLDS

What appeared to be a grim future shifted to bright possibility with the entry of the SGI, launched fortuitously in 2010. **National Resources Conservation Service** (NRCS) funds via the SGI paid to keep the expiring CRP in grass and shrub cover, using prescribed grazing tools. The Washington SAFE program, too, offered an alternative that was similar to CRP, but tailored for sage grouse.

Two years later in early spring of 2012, an outstanding opportunity arose to conserve key sage grouse habitat and rangeland. That's when a grand plan unfolded over a kitchen table conversation at Miller's home near Leahy Junction. All the key players were there – the five neighboring landowners who cumulatively own and lease a fine chunk of sage grouse habitat.

The assembled ranchers listened with keen interest to local NRCS staff telling them about a program that could keep them in ranching and conserve a bird being considered for list-

ing under the Endangered Species Act. The Sage Grouse Initiative, a partnership started by the NRCS, aimed to proactively conserve sage grouse through sustainable ranching and offered funding to willing participants.

"We needed a central place to meet, and we'd worked with the Miller family for 20 years," recalls Will Keller, NRCS range management specialist

out of Okanogan. "In 2012, the fields that were coming out of CRP happened to be positioned between native sagebrush grasslands and all we needed was a strategy to put all the pieces together to connect the larger landscape for sage grouse."

To learn the story of why Miller and the neighboring ranchers readily agreed to enroll 14,400 acres of contiguous habitat in SGI rest-rotation grazing programs, I had driven six hours west from my home base in Missoula, Montana.

It was a chance to become better acquainted with eastern Washington's unusual story, where birds don't fit the mold of inhabiting unbroken sagebrush-steppe. Each spring, male grouse strut and court females in green sprouting wheat fields, not your typical lek. The hens fly for several miles to find safe nesting in sagebrush. It's not ideal and the bird population is low, about a thousand and divided into three populations. Washington listed sage grouse as a threatened species in 1998, and the federal government pronounced them a candidate for the endangered species list in 2001.

While bird numbers teeter on the threshold, the agencies, landowners and others who care about the sage grouse future remain undaunted by the uphill battle. In 2008, Washington



Michael Brown, SGI rangeland wildlife conservationist (R) and Clancy Jandreau, NRCS technical assistant biologist, inspect a sage plant.

DEBORAH ROHIE



Department of Fish and Wildlife began reintroducing sage grouse to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area, in Lincoln County to the west. The game plan was to restore and link enough lands together in Douglas, Lincoln and Grant Counties to give the birds a fighting chance.

To do that required a key ingredient, landowners willing to participate. Trust had everything to do with why the kitchen table conversation went so well that spring of 2012.

"A big reason we were all willing to say yes to the Sage Grouse Initiative right away is the respect we had for the NRCS folks at the meeting," Miller says.

Miller decided the gathering was important enough to host right away in spite of his son getting married the next day. Around that table, they learned that SGI had funds available through Farm Bill programs to enroll former CRP lands in grazing programs designed to increase nesting success for sage grouse.

"We knew our CRP was expiring and we didn't want to have to farm and the idea of helping the sage grouse and grazing the land with SGI

Fast Facts on Sage Grouse

From the SGI website www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/

Official Name: Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*).

Appearance: A large chicken-like bird with a spiky tail that blends in with the sagebrush country. Males bigger than females.

Habitat: Big, open sagebrush and grassland country.

Food: Sagebrush leaves (entirely in winter), other plant leaves, stems and buds; and insects.

Behavior: Males gather to dance and compete with each other on leks each spring. Choosy females pick their mates, usually the most dominant males.

Nests & Chicks: Hens lay 6-13 eggs in a ground nest hidden under sagebrush. Chicks are downy at birth and ready to run after their mother.

Conservation: Numbers are declining, because of the fragmenting of their sagebrush habitat.

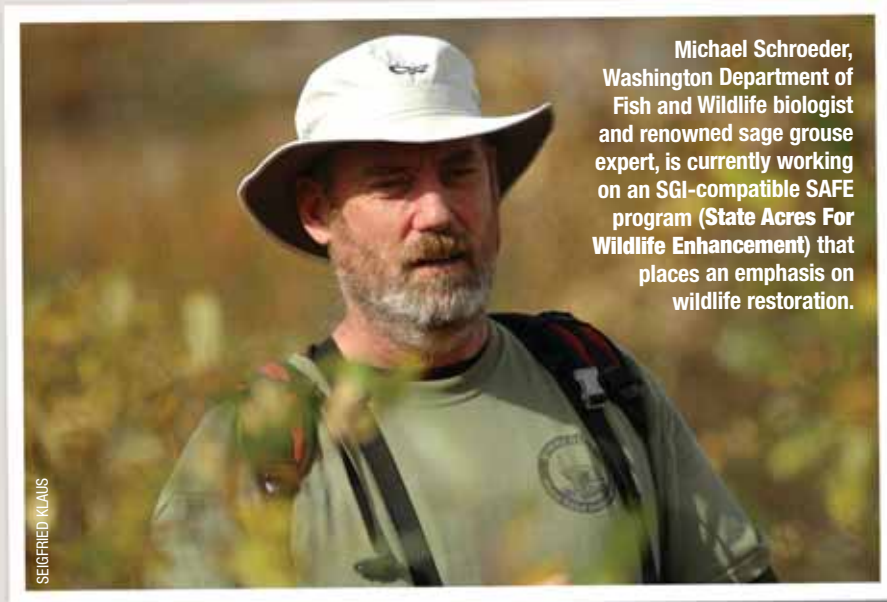
worked well," Miller relates.

"None of us wanted to see the bird disappear, but we have to make a living also, so SGI is a win-win for the bird, the rancher and the environment," Miller adds. "I don't know the downside." But then he paused and added with a slightly pained grin, "except for more monitoring." In truth, monitor-

ing is a way of life for Miller who heeds grass growth and conditions on his own and formally for other programs he's enrolled in, as well.

SAGE STRATEGY

"Partnerships are why SGI succeeds, but we still need to monitor to measure our success," agrees Kevin Guinn,



Michael Schroeder, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist and renowned sage grouse expert, is currently working on an SGI-compatible SAFE program (State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement) that places an emphasis on wildlife restoration.

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NRCS, who serves as the agency's sage grouse lead staff for Washington and has assisted landowners out of his home base in Ephrata since 1983. He'd been a key player at that kitchen table discussion.

"Everyone worked together to assemble 11 contracts in 2012, obligate the dollars, and enroll the connecting lands for sage grouse habitat under a time crunch to match the expiring CRP," Guinn recalls.

Today, Guinn says they've refined their strategy in Washington for SGI to assure that range inventories, plans, and monitoring are together leading to a long-term success for sage grouse and other wildlife that share the habitat. On Miller's ranch, they're

still fleshing out a grazing plan. It takes time and staff.

To shoulder a giant work load, Guinn relies on his NRCS field staff and on Michael Brown, who serves as the SGI range and wildlife conservationist out of the NRCS office in Ephrata. Brown is in a partnership position through **Pheasants Forever**, joining 23 others in similar positions across 11 western states. He dedicates 100 percent of his time to assisting landowners with enrolling in SGI, on inventories, planning, and coordinating with partners on restoration.

To check out the SGI contract unfolding on Miller's land, I climb into his hefty pickup and we bump our way slowly up a hill to a vista, close to a

new well drilled with SGI funds. Miller owns and leases about 20,000 acres and runs 300 plus cows. As we ascend through the open country that's a mix of farmed, wild sagebrush-steppe or CRP, we pause to watch a pair of kestrels guarding a nest box on one of Miller's wildlife-friendly fences. Whenever it's time to replace a barbed wire fence, he puts in smooth wire to help mule deer and other wildlife. Where necessary, he puts up fence markers to prevent sage grouse from colliding into the wires.

Up top, Miller pulls out his map to show me the SGI prescription for six pastures, with plans to defer grazing on two of them for a year and a half. The drilled well is the key that will allow plentiful rest from grazing to rejuvenate lands and give sage grouse much needed nesting habitat. We take a look at the thigh-high, black pipe with a metal top that represents a significant SGI investment. From it, Miller will use solar power to pump water to different pastures to assure cattle will have drinking water when they need it.

As clouds darken and wind ripples across rolling hills of sagebrush grasslands, Miller gazes into the horizon, taking in a landscape where family ties run deep.

"Cowboys are getting a bad rap on sage grouse," he says in his measured way, "but if it weren't for us having the land in ranching there wouldn't be sage grouse." **WR**



Washington rancher Allen Miller, standing beside a project-driven water well, says this: "Cowboys are getting a bad rap on sage grouse, but if it weren't for us having the land in ranching there wouldn't be sage grouse."

DEBORAH RICHIE

Range Inventory

Restoring Missing Sagebrush and Linking Populations

When it comes to sage grouse, the favorite drama to report is the wondrous spring dance of the males, fanning their tails, engaging in mock or serious combat, and vying for female attention.

Less dramatic, yet essential to their future, is the range inventory that the **Natural Resources Conservation Service** has excelled in for decades to help ranchers improve the health of their range. Inventory specific to sage grouse adds a whole set of new measures to a complex process that takes knowledge of plant species and cover combined with sage grouse biology. The inventory becomes the foundation for a ranch plan and SGI funding to carry it out.

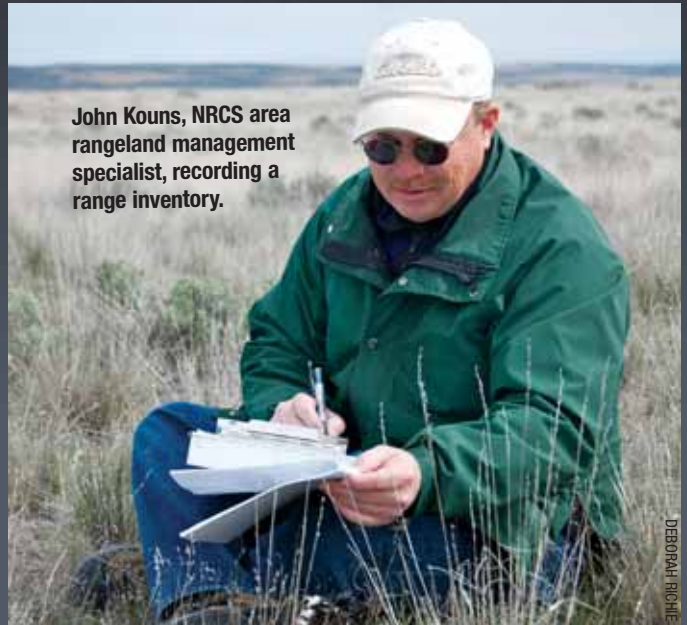
I'm tagging along on an inventory in Grant County, a connecting piece of land between Douglas County's sage grouse stronghold and the reintroduced birds to the east in Lincoln County. Stepping out onto the flat land of drab tan grasslands speckled with clumps of horsebrush and rabbitbrush, I admit that this is not country you swoon over, as I had on the drive north from Ephrata passing under massive columns of lava-sculpted basalt, adorned in fluorescent yellow and red lichens.

Yet, despite a cool wind under dreary skies, I change my mind after a half-mile tromp. Two pairs of curlews wheel overhead, their keening cries giving voice to the silence and downward curving bills etching an invisible calligraphy upon the muffled gray world. At my feet, a Hooker's balsamroot blooms, a yellow splash of hidden color. A purple shooting star blooms from under a Thurber's needlegrass, a dominant bunchgrass around us. Okay, the beauty is here. It's subtle, and takes exactly what I'm doing – walking and looking down at my feet, except when diverted by birds overhead.

I'm joining Michael Brown, SGI rangeland wildlife conservationist, John Kouns, NRCS area rangeland management specialist, and Clancy Jandreau, NRCS technical assistant biologist. Their quest is to determine how best to restore missing sagebrush to the land and to provide high quality habitat so that sage grouse will be safe in a journey from the isolated ranges on either side.

Kouns is a veteran of range inventories. I crouch next to him as he sits down to write everything he can see in about a 20-foot radius, noting flowers like daggerpod, globemallow, vetch, long-stemmed phlox, woodland star, along with the balsamroot and shooting star. He jots down grasses and shows me how he estimates the grass forage to give production values for livestock. He takes a pen and stabs the earth in different places to estimate soil compaction. The pen slides in easily close to bunchgrasses, but not in the bare earth. He compares references to the historical native range and notes whether this area is trending in a positive or negative direction ecologically.

This pasture is in good shape, not overgrazed, with few weeds and plentiful bluebunch and needle and thread grasses, along with the wildflowers. It just needs sagebrush. As I shiver in the biting breeze, Brown cheerfully notes that it's



John Kouns, NRCS area rangeland management specialist, recording a range inventory.

DEBORAH RICHIE

this very wind so often blowing from the west that will be the key to spreading sagebrush across the land. Brown is tall, lanky, youthful and enthusiastic, and a newcomer to eastern Washington since July 2013. After working with hundreds of landowners on a wetlands program in California, he's delighted to have a chance to continue his one-on-one contacts with ranchers making a difference for wildlife.

On our drive to the site, he'd noted the Wyoming big sage that flourishes in most sagebrush areas remaining, rising four feet high or more from two to three trunks. In the scablands, stiff sagebrush grows low and as tough as the shallow soils that sustain it. In deep valley soils, basin big sagebrush grows to towering heights of 5-7 feet. Three tip sagebrush falls in the medium size range, thriving in volcanic soils. The point? If you've seen one sagebrush, you haven't seen them all. In fact, there are 18 species and 27 different kinds, when you count subspecies and hybrids.

Sagebrush restoration works well in eastern Washington, with the aid of the wind. Brown explains that it's cost effective to plant seedlings on the western edge of lands, so the seeds from the plants scatter them to the east. The plan here is to plant strips or blocks of Wyoming big sage on the west side of this participating landowner's property.

Brown pulls out map after map to show me the small and big picture of where we stand. As he gazes around the country broken by power lines and wheat fields, he sees possibility.

"All the sage grouse need is a way through the hazards and this piece of land has the promise to be a great connector, thanks to the landowner," Brown says. "I know we've got a ways to go to get to 2000 birds and a viable sage grouse population in eastern Washington, but we're all determined to make it happen."