

SAC Newsletter



Summer/Fall 2011

The next Sage-grouse Advisory Committee meeting will be November 29-30 and December 1 (location to be determined).

Look for Local Working Group Updates in the Winter 2011 newsletter!

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Hunters, please turn in your sage-grouse wings! Wings collected from harvested birds provide important biological data. If you see a wing barrel, please deposit one wing from each bird you harvest. We also collect wings at check stations and through a mail-in wing survey. If you would like to participate in the wing envelope program, call 208 334-2920.

Funding for Local Working Groups

By Don Kemner, Sage-grouse Program Coordinator, Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game

As we all know, economic times are tough—and that includes funding for sage-grouse conservation projects. We have been fortunate in Idaho. Thanks to our congressional representative and senators, from 2002–2006, 2008, and 2010 the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC) received funding from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service appropriation for sage-grouse conservation. This money has been used to fund SAC meetings, development of the 2006 state plan, Local Working Group (LWG) facilitators, and most importantly, on-the-ground projects for sage-grouse.

It is very unlikely that we will receive this appropriation in 2012. Therefore, we must plan accordingly and tighten our belts where we can. The SAC has agreed to go from four meetings a year to two. LWGs are currently approved to have a paid facilitator for two meetings in fiscal year 2012.

Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has stepped forward with additional funding for LWG facilitation. Furthermore, Idaho Fish and Game just

submitted a proposal for a Challenge Cost Share Grant with the Bureau of Land Management. If awarded, these funds will also help pay LWG facilitators.



Sage-grouse in flight. Photo © Noppadol Paothong.

2011 Sage-grouse Hunting Season

In 2011, Idaho Fish and Game continued to follow the Hunting Season and Bag Limit Guidelines, as laid out in the 2006 *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho*. Regional staff and LWGs reviewed lek data for their areas in June and provided recommendations to the Sage-grouse Program Coordinator.

Based on the data and recommendations, the Department briefed the Commission at their July meeting. The proposal was available for comment on the Idaho Fish and Game website and at Regional open houses. We received 128 comments. Of these, 97 comments were

substantive (i.e., many commented on the change in the opening date or provided only nonspecific information). Of the 97 comments, 44% supported the proposed season, 28% supported increasing the seasons (longer season or bigger bag limit), and 28% supported closing the season.

The Department did not recommend any changes from the 2010 season, except as per 2010 Commission action, the season will open on October 1st. The Commission accepted the Department's proposal at their August 24 meeting. The 2011 seasons are:

Restrictive: Seven-day (October 1-7), one-bird daily bag limit (possession limit of 2 after 1st day) statewide within sage-grouse range, except in designated closed areas.

Closed: East Idaho Uplands area in southeastern Idaho; Washington and Adams counties; eastern Owyhee County and western Twin Falls County; and north Elmore County.

For more detail, a map and area descriptions, please see the *Sage-grouse Seasons and Rules 2011* brochure. It is available for download at: <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/public/docs/rules/uplandSage.pdf>

Sage-grouse Monitoring on the INL

By Jericho Whiting, S.M. Stoller Corporation



Sage-grouse hen with radio-collar on the INL Site. Photo by Kristy Howe.

In 2002, the U. S. Department of Energy Idaho Operations Office (DOE-ID) began working on a conservation management plan for natural resources on the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) Site. Because of the potential for sage-grouse to be listed under the Endangered Species Act, DOE-ID focused more resources on data needs related to sage-grouse habitat use on the INL Site. Biologists from the S.M. Stoller Corporation and the Wildlife Conservation Society began monitoring sage-grouse on the Site in 2006 to delineate use of seasonal habitats, to document migration corridors, and identify nest areas and brood success for these birds. This information was coupled with data from counts of sage-grouse on 3 lek routes across the INL Site that have occurred for over 15 years.

In 2008 and 2009, researchers captured and collared 52 grouse (31 females and 21 males). For both years a high degree of variation occurred in annual distance traveled by these birds. The maximum seasonal distance (one way)

traveled by a male was about 108 km (67 mi.) and 66 km (41 mi.) for a female. Biologists documented high inter-annual lek and nest site fidelity for collared birds on the INL Site, and the lowest occurrence of collared grouse on the Site occurred in September. Telemetry data from collared grouse on the INL Site also indicated that these birds have at least two general movement patterns and maybe more. Generally, females captured and collared on the north end of the Site migrated north off of the Site during the summer; whereas, females captured on the south end of the Site migrated south, east, and west.

During the same time, researchers identified 20 nests that were initiated in 2008; 6 (30%) of those nests were successful. Of those nests, 4 of 6 broods (67%) survived through September of that year. In 2009, biologists identified 24 nests that were initiated; 11 (46%) of those were successful. During that year, 7 of the 11 broods (64%) survived until September. Typical nest success for this species in unaltered habitats, comparable to that which occurs on the INL Site, is 51% (Connelly et al. 2010). Although nest success in 2008 was much lower than expected, data collected by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game suggest that 2008 was a poor recruitment year for sage-grouse across the region and may not be representative of long-term trends.

Since 1995, DOE-ID, in conjunction with the Idaho of

Department of Fish and Game, has provided funding to conduct lek route surveys for sage-grouse in three areas on the INL Site. Biologists have monitored these leks and counted male birds at these mating grounds. These data indicate that the minimum number of male sage-grouse counted on leks that are part of these lek routes has been relatively stable over the past 8-16 years. These estimates are consistent with the trends of lek route data from 340 leks across the Snake, Salmon, and Beaverhead regions (an area that encompasses the INL Site) from 1995 to 2007 (Garton et al. 2010).

All of the data that have been collected concerning sage-grouse on the INL Site has provided valuable information to assist in properly managing this species and its habitat on the Site. Numerous human activities have influenced sage-grouse habitat in recent decades. The INL Site occupies some of the best sagebrush habitat remaining in Idaho due to the limited access of the area, which provides protection of both the habitat and the birds. Proper habitat management on the INL Site will help conserve this species and its habitat while moving forward with existing and new projects at the facility.

Literature Cited

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- Garton, E. O., J. W. Connelly, C. A. Hagen, J. S. Horne, A. Moser, and M. A. Schroeder. 2010. Greater Sage-Grouse population dynamics and probability of persistence. *Studies in Avian Biology* 38:293-382.



Sage-grouse chick. Photo by Kristy Howe.

Protecting Sage-grouse Habitat from another Invader

By Wendy Green, West Central LWG

Jointed goatgrass (*Aegilops cylindrica*) may be a new name in your noxious weed lexicon, but it has been spreading across the continent for more than a century. The winter annual grass, native to Europe and Asia, has especially plagued winter wheat farmers since the 1970s. According to the National Jointed Goatgrass Research Program, it now affects 5 million acres of winter wheat in the U.S. and is spreading at the rate of 50,000 acres a year.



Close up of the unique seed heads of jointed goatgrass.

What do weeds in wheat fields have to do with greater sage-grouse? Keen-eyed conservationists and landowners noticed jointed goatgrass (JGG) showing up along roadsides in the West Central Sage-grouse Planning Area (SGPA). If left unchecked, they fear JGG will spread to rangelands and degrade sage-grouse habitat. "I think we have a problem," said Tom Yankey, retired Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) district conservationist in Weiser. "I think we'd better find out how widespread it is and figure out how to keep it in check," Yankey told his fellow board members of the Lower Weiser River Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA). Rancher and West Central LWG member Royce Schwenkfelder of Cambridge

also noticed that county snowplowing and roadside mowing seemed to be spreading the weed along the county right-of-ways and into adjacent rangelands.

Members of the CWMA and the Weiser River Soil Conservation District (SCD) met with NRCS State Conservationist Jeff Burwell last October to outline the problem. NRCS offered \$25,000 to survey and treat JGG if the CWMA could come up with matching funds. Vicki Lukehart with the Weiser River SCD helped write the grant, and numerous agencies joined the CWMA and SCD to match the NRCS contribution. Partners include Idaho Fish and Game, Idaho Soil Conservation Commission, Southwest Idaho Resource Advisory Committee, Bureau of Land Management, West Central Highlands Resource Conservation and Development Council, Adams CWMA, Washington County Farm Bureau, and Friends of the Weiser River Trail.

With funding and GPS in hand, district technician Sharona Olsen spent the summer driving the county roads within the West Central SGPA, recording the location and the extent of JGG infestation along Adams and Washington county right-of-ways. Unfortunately, she found the encroacher just about everywhere she looked. Very few roadsides in the SGPA didn't have at least some JGG. Sharona then overlaid her resulting JGG maps with lek locations and telemetry data from the West Central LWG's six-year grouse tracking effort. Without time and money to treat the entire problem at once, the project partners prioritized treatment



Jointed goat grass along a canal bank.

areas based on proximity to known grouse habitat.

"Our plan is to spray those high-priority areas this fall, if we can find contractors to do the work," Yankey said. The group's goal is to spray 160 miles of road right-of-ways to get out in front of jointed goatgrass before it takes a bite out of key sage-grouse habitat and livestock forage. Already, the effort has raised awareness of the weed among members of the LWG, CWMA's and other partners.

For more information on jointed goatgrass and other noxious weeds in Idaho, visit the Idaho Weed Awareness website at: www.idahoweedawareness.org



NRCS District Technician Sharona Olsen with her map of sage-grouse locations and jointed goatgrass infestations in the West Central SGPA.

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Visit our web site!
[http://
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Report sage-grouse observations to the Idaho Fish and Wildlife Information System on the Fish and Game web-site:

[https://
fishandgame.idaho.gov/
ifwis/observations/](https://fishandgame.idaho.gov/ifwis/observations/)

History of the Sage-grouse Advisory Committee

The Sage-grouse Advisory Committee (SAC) was formed in 2003, with members appointed by former Idaho Fish and Game Director Steve Huffaker. The main purpose of the SAC was described as, "... helping all Idahoans, and especially Local Working Groups, by making sure they have the funding, support, and information they need to put meaningful sage-grouse conservation on the ground." In addition to representatives from key agencies, the SAC includes private citizens from agricultural and conservation groups and at least one member from each LWG. There are currently about 21 SAC members and 10 technical advisors. In 2006, the SAC completed the *Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho*.

**2011 Cooperative Sage-grouse Projects
By Alison Squier, SAC Facilitator**

This past June, the SAC reviewed 15 proposals for Cooperative Sage-grouse funds through the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC). Project proponents or LWG representatives presented their proposal to the SAC. SAC members then had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions if necessary, and discussed the merits and concerns associated with each project. Using project-ranking criteria that were developed by the SAC and distributed to all project proponents with the

Request for Proposals, SAC members scored each project. Individual SAC member scores were averaged and the projects were ranked according to the total score. Habitat projects by default are allocated a potential additional five points over monitoring projects to emphasize the importance of funding on-the-ground restoration project. All habitat and monitoring projects were combined in the final ranking. The SAC then reviewed the final ranking and compared the project amounts to the cut-off

point for available funding. There was one project that straddled the line. After some discussion, and with additional funding located by Don Kemner to cover the balance of the funding shortfall for that single project, the SAC agreed to a recommendation to fund in full the 11 highest scoring projects.

Idaho Fish and Game Director Virgil Moore and OSC Administrator Nate Fisher gave their final approval for the 11 projects in July.

Project Name	Applicant	Amount Funded	Match*
Big Desert Road Grading and Fuel Breaks	Big Desert LWG, BLM	\$16,000	\$16,000
Monitoring Sage-grouse Movements near Proposed Friedman Memorial Airport Site	North Magic Valley LWG, IDFG	\$20,950	\$56,022
Measuring Habitat Quality in the Mountain Home Sage-grouse Planning Area	Mountain Home LWG	\$15,100	\$9,521
Jarbridge Field Office Fence Marking	Jarbridge LWG, IDFG	\$5,900	\$3,000
Big Desert Fence Marking	Big Desert LWG, BLM	\$6,000	\$5,687
Lek Search and Documentation in Less Studied Portions of the East Idaho Uplands	East Idaho Uplands LWG, IDFG	\$27,140	\$7,500
Urquidi-Jacks Creek Basin Brood Rearing Wet Meadow Restoration	Owyhee LWG	\$9,345	\$3,755
Small Fence Strike Reduction	Upper Snake LWG, IDFG	\$2,100	\$1,100
Jefferson Fire Sagebrush Seeding on Idaho Department of Lands	Upper Snake LWG, IDFG	\$7,540	\$2,000
Lower House Creek Pond Jack Fence Project	Aslett Ranches	\$2,000	\$6,000
Seasonal Habitat, Migration Corridor Delineation and Nesting Habitat Assessments	Challis LWG	\$42,840	\$26,300
Total		\$154,915	\$136,885

*Although match is not required for these funds, it is included to demonstrate the cooperative nature of sage-grouse conservation in Idaho.