

## Idaho Sage Grouse Actions in FY17: *Implementing the Governor's Strategy*

The 2016 Idaho legislature authorized \$750,000 for FY17 sage grouse conservation efforts, an investment that helps show that the sage-grouse can be state managed while keeping the bird off the endangered species list. With strategic planning and collaboration, the State of Idaho **leveraged** these funds with **\$4 for every state dollar spent**. This is **double** the ratio of dollars leveraged at this time last year. To date, these efforts have resulted in **over \$3 million** in on-the-ground conservation and wildfire prevention.

In May 2015, the state agencies in charge of implementing the Governor's Sage grouse Strategy – the Office of Species Conservation, Department of Lands, and Department of Fish and Game – formed the Sage Grouse Actions Team along with federal agency partners from US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Natural Resource Conservation Service. The Nature Conservancy, a private non-profit organization, helped facilitate team meetings. The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the US Forest Service joined the group in 2016.

Since its creation the team continues to evolve, becoming more efficient and strategic. It seeks the best projects for sage grouse across the landscape that can be implemented in the next twelve months. The team prioritizes actions in accordance with the Idaho Plan that addresses the threats and limiting factors to sage grouse across southern Idaho. Priorities include helping equip Rangeland Fire Protection Associations; implementing strategic fuel breaks to slow the spread of wildfire and ensure the safety of firefighters; restoring areas that have been encroached by juniper, invaded by annual grasses, or have degraded brood rearing habitat; and monitoring sage grouse activity and conservation practices.

**Crews hand planting sagebrush seedlings on the Flat Top 2 fire in a partnership effort between several groups.**



### **By the Numbers: FY17 Projects**

- 1,631 acres of juniper treated
- 160 acres late brood rearing habitat enhanced
- 1,371 leks counted: 6% more than last year
- 8 watering systems to improve livestock distribution
- 271 acres of fuel break treatments
- 735 acres of annual grass treated
- 10,000 sagebrush seedling planted
- 2,400 acres: post-fire revegetation
- 4 Rangeland Fire Protection Assns.
- \$2.4 million leveraged (1 million more than last year at this time)**



**Left:** FY17 contributions to sage-grouse projects with a state funding nexus.

**Rangeland Fire Protection Associations** are a major asset in suppressing rangeland wildfires when they're small. Led by local volunteers, RFPAs can provide first response initial attack until agency resources arrive on the scene. At this point in FY17, the State of Idaho and partners provided equipment and resources totaling almost \$60,000 to make four of the eight separate RFPAs more effective.

**Fuel Breaks** are another key tool in minimizing the impact of catastrophic wildfire on sage grouse habitat. In FY17, Idaho, along with federal partners and private landowners, reduced fuel loads by creating new strategically located fuel breaks and maintaining existing ones. These fuel-free strips of land provide a secure area for firefighters to work and a barrier to slow the spread of fire. The partners continue to work on existing fuel break projects and plan for upcoming fuel break projects to remain true to the Idaho Plan of ameliorating a primary threat to sage-grouse: wildfire.

### Restoration and Stewardship

In FY17, partners have come together to work on several different types of projects. Many projects tied into the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) and, Sage-grouse Local Work Groups (LWGs) across the state, while other projects dealt with fire rehabilitation for recent and past fires. Actions were aimed at implementation across the administrative boundaries to deal with invasive species as well as restoring grasses, forbs and shrubs. The partnership has worked to look at larger landscapes and fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle to create key sage-grouse habitat through shrub planting and other restoration efforts. These groups have come together to help develop the blueprints for restoring sagebrush steppe ecosystems for wildlife and the people that use and live off the land, matching state funds with federal and private dollars and maximizing benefits to sage grouse.

### Research and Innovation

The State continued to lead efforts in FY16 and will continue in FY17, to monitor leks, the breeding grounds for sage grouse. During the 2016 sage-grouse breeding season, with increased funding provided by the legislature, agency biologists and volunteers monitored 1,371 leks – 63% of the known leks in Idaho, a 6% increase from the previous year. They discovered 19 new leks. This upcoming season the increased efforts will continue.

The team also helped launch a multi-year project to find better techniques for controlling cheatgrass. The goal for this project is to find more effective tools for ranchers and other land managers to control this major threat to sage-grouse habitat.

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