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### Sage Grouse Save Ranches

By [Kathy Voth](#) / July 4, 2016 / Comments Off on Sage Grouse Save Ranches

Usually ranchers worry problems that could be caused by a threatened or endangered species on or near their operations. But in this case, a species being considered for listing helped ranchers ensure their land would always stay in agriculture.

**“Well, working out here, you couldn’t ask for a better place to work. It’s pretty hard to have a bad day. But ranching is a tough way to make a living. I mean we all make a living. I can’t say as we make any money... Economically, with the expense of equipment, of fuel, of wages of taxes of you name it...it doesn’t pan out and lots of people are forced to have to sell out part or all and the only time you make money is when you sell the ranch.”**



*Maggie Miller, Wyoming Rancher, Grindstone Cattle Company*

**“We are in a difficult situation in agriculture because the economy of agriculture doesn’t keep up with the rate of inflation of the things we need to produce our food. How do we keep from going broke? And Conservation Easements I believe are a viable option for some families to continue ranching.”**

*Albert Sommers, Sommers Ranch*

When Wyoming ranchers Maggie Miller and Albert Sommers and his sister Jonita thought about the future of their ranches, one of the things they were most concerned about was ensuring that their land would remain in agriculture. But given the economics, they realized they'd have to do something unusual to make that happen. That's where the sage grouse comes in.



About 40% of the sage grouse remaining in the U.S. are found in Wyoming, and in addition to providing critical deer winter range and year round moose habitat, the two neighbors' ranches are home to lots of sage



Sage grouse "booming" and dancing is part of their courting ritual, and they return to the same place year after year to meet and mate. Protecting their "leks" is critical to the bird's survival. (You can see a bit of this behavior in the video below.)

grouse. This is important because for the past few years, the Fish & Wildlife Service has been studying sage grouse populations to decide if it should be listed as threatened and endangered. Ranchers, and oil and gas producers throughout the west were very concerned about how listing might affect their operations. In Wyoming, both industries are critical to the state economy, so state, local and federal agencies began working with ranchers and industry on ways to protect and improve sage grouse habitat.

One of the biggest threats to sage grouse habitat is fragmentation as a result of subdivisions. The threat that their ranches could someday become subdivisions was something that Maggie and Albert were also concerned about. So the two land owners worked with a very long list of government agencies and funders to create the Sommers-Grindstone conservation project. It was something good for both the birds and the ranches. The result, according to the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust, was "a massive land-protection agreement conserving 19,000 acres of historic agricultural land, critical wildlife habitat and iconic view sheds."

"We're basically tying up the development value of the land and leaving the ag and wildlife values," Albert said. "Regardless of what happens in the future the land will be available for ranching." While the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust holds the easements, the ranches remain under the ownership and management of the landowners.



A view of some of the Grindstone-Sommers Conservation project.

### So What Does This Mean To You?

This project, completed in 2010, is just one example of ranchers stepping up to solve sage grouse habitat issues. The combined result of their efforts is that in 2015, the Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the sage grouse was not at risk and did not need to be listed. Sure, there's more work to be done, and it's still not easy. But thanks to these folks, we have some examples to work from.

In this case, instead of combating possible listing of a species, ranchers chose to create value for themselves out of protecting it. You may not be living near a sensitive species, but every ranch and farm operation provides ecosystem services of one kind or another.

From wildlife habitat, to open space, to clean water, you have something that you could potentially be paid for. Think about that when you're doing chores. Think about the kinds of partners you might choose that you wouldn't ordinarily consider. See what the outside of the box looks like.

*Want more?*

*If you'd like to take a visit out to Wyoming and learn a little more about how people can work together, here's a video courtesy of the Sage Grouse Initiative. Enjoy!*

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