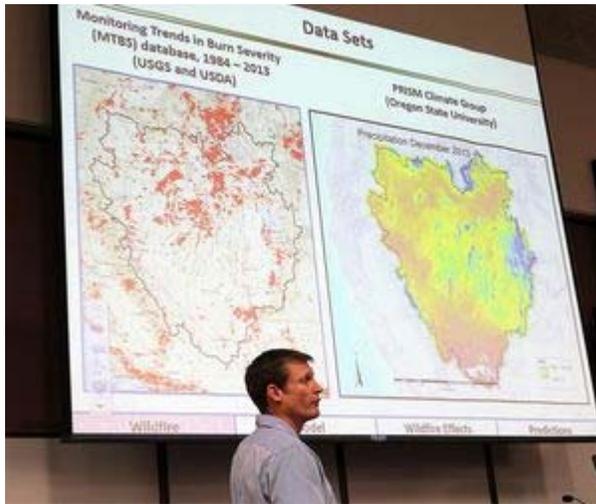




SAGE GROUSE

## Coates: Improving sage grouse habitat has more than one answer



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ELKO — Increasing the sage grouse population and improving its habitat will take more than one solution, according to wildlife research biologist Pete Coates, Ph.D., of the U.S. Geological Survey.

He presented a study on how wildfire, pinyon-juniper encroachment and predation affect the bird and its habitat to a full house Wednesday in Great Basin College's Greenhaw Technical Arts building.

The threats to sage grouse in the Great Basin include wildfire and invasive grass, conifers and predation, Coates said.

He went into great detail on how wildfire changes the landscape by burning the sagebrush — which is needed for sage grouse habitat — and allowing invasive weeds — cheatgrass — to take over.

The other plant life that encroaches on sage grouse habitat are pinyon and juniper trees. These conifer trees are natural perches for hawks, which prey on sage grouse. He suggested that when clearing an area of trees to improve the sage grouse habitat, it would be better to take down all the trees, rather than leaving one or two trees.

Coates said there are three types of areas with trees. The study found that when sage grouse avoided Cover Class 1, which has less than 10 percent trees but more than zero, the birds' survivability rate increased.

He also talked about the threat of ravens on the sage grouse, but unlike wildfire and conifer trees, the raven only affects the nesting stage in the bird's lifespan.

"I think what we saw is that when you have wildfires, those wildfires have multiple effects on populations, but they can influence predator communities," Coates said. "The pinyon-juniper, it influences movement rates and it can also influence predator communities that are going to be more likely to occupy those areas in Cover Class 1, for example. So these aren't working independently. It shouldn't be viewed really as independent threats, because one threat is actually leading to the increase in another threat and they need to be managed as such."

Coates said these scientific studies help to identify such effects and the lack of independence among them, and to predict future outcomes on sage grouse populations.

With those predictive outcomes communities can actually adjust the parameters to come up with management scenarios that would reduce the effects, and could develop conservation tools to help improve sage grouse habitat, he said.