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## Landowners share experience on sage grouse, cattle



3 HOURS AGO • BY DYLAN WOOLF HARRIS —  
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ELKO — Helping out sage grouse with habitat preservation might not be so bad for ranchers after all. And government agencies and landowners might not have to butt heads either. Instead of combative relationships, the two might be able to work cooperatively toward mutually beneficial ends.

At least that's what a few ranchers said Tuesday at a forum organized by the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group.

Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Nevada Department of Wildlife all have programs available to assist landowners in nurturing sage-grouse habitat on private land.

"Ranching and wildlife habitat are very compatible. They are the same thing in my estimation," said Elko rancher Mitch Heguy.

While some landowners are fearing the worst — fettering regulations that cripple revenue — as agencies scrupulously monitor sage-grouse populations and habitats because of the bird's potential endangered species listing, others are saying the goals of the agencies and those of the ranchers aren't necessarily at odds.

Heguy and his wife Rhonda Heguy were one set of four landowner speakers who shared their personal experience working with agencies in cost sharing projects. Heguy's PowerPoint covered the projects he has worked on and also shared his philosophy on the perceived controversy: "Fortunately, what is good for the sage grouse is good for the rancher."

Heguy said on his ranch, as a partnered project, he put up a fence creating a riparian pasture and worked to get two streams functioning properly in the area. He let the field grow for two years without any grazing, then began lightly grazing.

"That project has been a great success," he said.

Others shared similar sentiments, but most important, these projects do not take away from business, they said. Rancher Duane Coombs of Smith Creek Ranch said selectively choosing projects that benefit grazing is a luxury landowners have.

"When it comes to projects, the cows are the economic engine that drives the bus. We don't cut them out," Coombs said.

"The sage grouse is the issue. I'm going to figure out where the sage grouse and the cows' paths cross and that's where I'm going to focus my energy," he said.

Not only did the projects not take away from production, but the undertakings, which improved rangeland, were often not feasible without cost sharing.

Jesse Braatz from Squaw Valley Ranch also talked about a few ventures over the years, which include seeding and thinning stretches of sagebrush too dense for the bird.

Coombs showed before and after photographs of a strip of land affected by a pinyon tree removal project. The trees, Coombs said, were sapping up water and little was available for growing feeding vegetation. In a few short years after clearing the trees, the once sparse basin grew verdant.

However, none of the ranchers spoke on behalf of others in their industry. The speakers only told the crowd how the cooperative experience affected their own operations, and acknowledged that not all projects will be right for all ranches.

"We don't come here today to think that we know more than anybody here. A lot of you know more than us. We're just here to share our views and share our experiences of the programs we've participated in," said rancher Sam Mori. Mori said his ranch is "forage dependent."

"The better job we can do of managing that forage, the more profitable we're going to be in the ranching business and the cattle business," he said. "The better situation we set up for cattle, the better situation we set up for wildlife. Real simple."

Sam Sanders, Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group sage grouse pod chairman, said after the forum he was pleased with the presentations and the afternoon's civil dialogue. He said cost sharing, cost reimbursement, and technical assistance projects include wildfire management, removal of invasive plants, and habitat conservation.

The Western Folklife Center donated its facilities for the forum, and refreshments were provided by Midas Chapter Nevada Bighorns Unlimited and Starr Valley Conservation District.

For information on the NNSG's sage grouse committee contact Sanders at 738-8431.

