

PERSPECTIVES ON

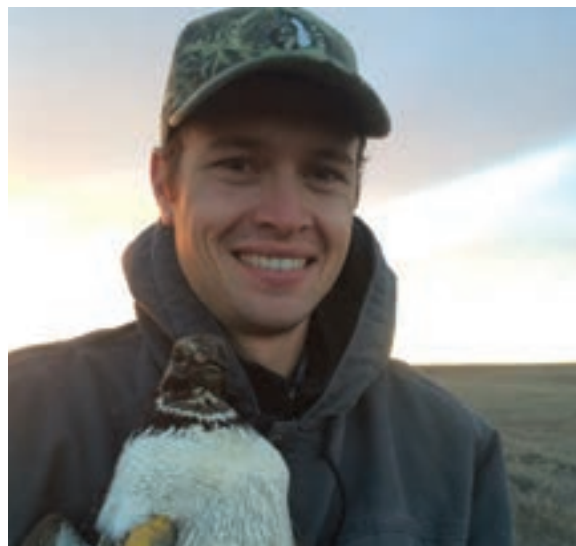
Collaborative Conservation

The background of the entire page is a photograph showing several people engaged in conservation work. In the foreground, a man wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt, a light-colored baseball cap, and yellow work gloves is crouching and placing a large, flat stone into a wall. To his right, a woman in a bright red jacket is also crouching, holding a stone. In the background, other individuals are visible, some standing and some working, in a grassy, hilly landscape with scattered evergreen trees under a clear sky.

*Lessons Learned From The Greater
Sage-Grouse Collaboration*



Credit: Scott Root, Utah DWR, courtesy of Intermountain West Joint Venture



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Background

Collaborations and partnerships are increasingly recognized as essential for effective natural resource conservation. In fact, the collaborative partnerships that developed from 2010 to 2015 have been recognized as a key reason why the greater sage-grouse was kept off the federal endangered species list. Whether partnerships between federal and state agencies with private landowners, restoration projects coordinated between non-profit groups and land management agencies, or the thousands of hours negotiating state sage-grouse conservation plans, the collaborative efforts across the West were - and still are - unprecedented.

But what made these efforts unique? What was it that brought so many different perspectives to the literal, and figurative, table? And perhaps most importantly, what lessons can be learned from the successes and challenges that developed throughout the process.

To answer these questions, Partners for Conservation interviewed more than 40 individuals who were actively engaged in sage-grouse collaborative efforts. Those interviewed represent a variety of perspectives from landowners to industry to non-profit organizations to decision makers that were involved in the negotiations at all levels of government. The perspectives also reflect the different scales in which sage-grouse collaborations developed, from individual operations and watershed groups to state and national levels.

The following report provides a synopsis of the various responses and identifies the primary themes that emerged across the perspectives. By identifying what worked well - and where the greatest challenges emerged - there are lessons to be learned. The hope is that the information generated will help guide collaborative conservation on future natural resource challenges.



Credit: David Allen, USFWS

Executive Summary

Between 2010 and 2015, there was an unprecedented effort across the West to keep the greater sage-grouse off the endangered species list – culminating in the September 2015 announcement that the bird did not need federal protection. However, collaborations had begun well before 2010 and continue to this day. Partners for Conservation set out to gather the perspectives of individuals who were actively engaged in sage-grouse collaboration to identify the critical elements that led to this conservation success.

Interviews

Our goal was to gather information from a broad cross-section of participants in sage-grouse conservation efforts, both from a variety of perspectives and at different scales. Primary perspectives that were interviewed were: private landowners, local agencies or community groups, industry, groups that were facilitators of collaborative efforts, state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, and elected officials or their staff. Individuals were also selected based on their work at different scales. Specific input was sought from the individual ranching operation level, the watershed or landscape level, statewide efforts, regional coordination, and national decision-making level.

There was often significant overlap across the perspectives given how actively engaged most players were across a variety of spectrums. For instance, some individual landowners interviewed were engaged on their own operation but also actively engaged at the state or national levels. Alternatively, some federal or state agency personnel were leaders of local collaborative efforts and were interviewed to provide their perspective of coordinating those efforts rather than the larger perspective of their agency. Respondents were asked to keep their answers focused on the specific perspective and scale in which they were being interviewed.

Our initial goal was to reach out to one individual for each perspective at each scale, with the hope of interviewing 40 people. Based on recommendations from individuals that participated in the interview process, we ultimately reached out to 50 people requesting interviews and received a total of 42 completed interviews (84 percent response rate). Respondents were provided a set of questions and were given the opportunity to respond to the questions in writing or to be interviewed over the phone. Approximately one-third of the interviews were conducted over the phone and the remainder submitted their responses in writing.

Overarching Themes

Those that came to the table for the sage-grouse collaborative efforts had a shared purpose and vision: to have healthy sage-grouse populations that would preclude the need for listing under the Endangered Species Act. While many of the stakeholders came with very different motivations and had different perspectives, several themes emerged from the respondents that crossed all scales and perspectives. These overarching themes were:

- Building trust and the relationships that grew from this trust formed the bedrock of the collaboration.
- Building relationships takes time and some degree of risk taking. Fortunately, many key relationships already existed and participants were highly motivated to form them where they were missing.

- Diverse perspectives representing multiple interests (ecologic, economic, sociologic) were key to building trust as well as creating innovative workable solutions.

- Basic skills such as good listening, understanding and respect of perspectives other than your own, and patience as relationships were built and trust established were key.

- Open and transparent communication were critical to moving the collaborations toward workable and sustainable solutions.

- Integration of trusted science broadly shared and understood formed the sideboards of the collaborative solutions.

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Credit: Linda Poole, courtesy of Sage Grouse Initiative

Response

Was the response to concern about sage-grouse different than other efforts you have been involved in? If so, how?

Across the spectrum of participants, there was a general recognition that the efforts and response for greater sage-grouse conservation was significantly different than other efforts in which they had been involved. Some of the respondents had experience with other large-scale conservation efforts associated with the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest and the Klamath Basin in California and Oregon. Those that had knowledge of these natural resource challenges knew the potential ramifications that regulatory decisions can have on local communities. As a result, there was increased commitment to recognizing the importance of balancing conservation actions with real world social and economic impacts.

While individual elements of the collaboration were unique, there was general recognition that the following elements are what made the sage-grouse issue different:



Credit: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media, courtesy of Sage Grouse Initiative



Credit: Partners for Conservation

Scale and Scope

Almost unanimously, respondents said the primary reason the sage-grouse collaboration was different was the scale and the scope of the challenge. Greater sage-grouse are distributed across 11 different states and roughly 200 million acres of sagebrush landscape. Across this region there are a variety of landowners and land uses, so a decision to list the bird under the federal Endangered Species Act would have far reaching impacts across the entire region. While the collaboration and consensus needed to be developed at the local level, the solutions needed to ultimately result in a range-wide response.

Variety of Perspectives

As a result of the broad scale and scope of the sage-grouse issue, there was also a need to engage a wide variety of perspectives. Across the 11-state region, there are many different users of the land and the many different perspectives needed to be represented at the table to develop and implement durable solutions.

Use of Science

Because of the variety of challenges found across the species’ range, many of the collaborations depended on science to drive solutions. There was a lot of research that was underway and continued throughout the process that helped inform how to apply conservation tools and which tools to apply from a land management perspective.

Proactive, Voluntary Conservation

When the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined in 2010 that sage-grouse were a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act, they established a September 2015 deadline. Having a date certain allowed for pro-active conservation before the species was listed and created the opportunity to engage in voluntary, incentive-based conservation rather than halting all activities due to regulatory protection. This flexibility in management options was essential for collaboration to occur.

“Success or failure in sage grouse conservation had, and still has, far-reaching implications on the economy, communities, and natural resources of the West. Even more importantly, the hallmark of the effort was the incredible commitment to solving problems through partnerships and tangible, on-the-ground conservation. It was not a battle waged by policy wonks and litigants; it was a joint endeavor to sustain an ecosystem and its people in a way that supported the American public.”

–Dave Smith, Intermountain West Joint Venture Coordinator

Motivations

What were your or your organization’s motivation for becoming involved in the sage-grouse partnership efforts? How do you think motivations differed from your own among the partners you worked directly with during your involvement?

The primary motivation for many partners engaged on sage-grouse conservation was the threat of the endangered species listing decision. Industry and livestock producers recognized the potential impacts that increased regulatory protection would have on their ability to do business. Associated with this, state fish and wildlife agencies were motivated to play an active role in conservation planning, and the collaborative process, in order to maintain statutory responsibility for sage-grouse within their borders. Another motivation came from conservation and sportsmen’s organizations that recognized the overlap in sage-grouse habitat with



Credit: Jeremy Maestas, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service/Sage Grouse Initiative

other species of interest. This synergy of habitat conservation and the opportunity to work with private and public land owners would allow the groups to accomplish broader habitat conservation goals.

In general, there was recognition that while the listing decision might be the primary motivation, there were differing motivations for people to be at the table. One respondent noted that recognizing that there were individual interests was essential to being able to look at the 90 percent of things that groups had in common and agreeing to disagree on the remaining 10 percent of the issues. As another respondent put it, it was important not to overthink the motivations of other participants.

One motivation that several people pointed out as not being helpful was when individuals or entities used their participation as a way to further their personal career or promote their agency/organization.

“Groups had very different motivations. When we brought them to the table we weren’t sure if we’d come out alive. These groups had a glorious history of fighting with each other and were suspicious of each other. What we were able to do was to walk them through to see if we really had different motivations or if we all had more in common than we do on the outside. Ultimately, they were able to say no one wanted the species to go extinct, nobody wanted to deal with this issue forever. Then people found a lot of commonality.”

–Bob Budd, Chairman Wyoming Sage Grouse Implementation Team

Differing Perspectives

If you perceived a difference of perspectives, do you feel that these differences were helpful or not helpful to the process.

Similar to the difference in motivations, everyone recognized that it is essential to have differing perspectives represented in collaborative relationships. As a respondent noted, sometimes differing perspectives allow stakeholders to come up with novel solutions to problems. These differing perspectives must be represented within the negotiation process to allow for the robust discussions – and even disagreements – that can lead to consensus on approach. In fact, it was noted that where singular interests control the decisions, the resulting strategy has been less than ideal and fostered acrimony.

Once again, science was mentioned as a factor that helped the process. The science on sage-grouse conservation and addressing threats provided the sideboards for discussion. However, within those sideboards all perspectives were essential to creating solutions.

At the same time, these different perspectives can create challenges to the collaborative process, specifically:

- If individuals were inflexible and unwilling to embrace solutions that might be larger than their own immediate needs or agenda.
- If individuals came to the table with their own presumption on what the end result would be, it contributed to a problem of building trust and perhaps impacted their willingness to fully engage in the process.
- If individuals were not forthright about why they were doing things and where they were going, it caused distrust and affected communication.

“Initial motivations were vastly different. What led to eventual success through time was the gradual coalescence of purpose. Conservation of a species became a shared purpose as people began to become part of an effort larger than any of their initial individual motivations.”

–Tony Wasley, Director Nevada Department of Wildlife

“There were three, but one is more conceptual than what most think about with the word “partnership”. The crosswalk between science and policy was absolutely a critical partnership. Without the solid science, and the application of that science within the human dimension components, any results would have been challenged. This would have resulted in not only a failed conservation effort, but also a huge loss of trust between partners because agreements would have failed. On a more traditional side, the partnership between the states and federal agencies was key, as one manages the bird and the other 68% of the habitat (as well as having influence on a great deal of private lands). If these entities did not work together the entire effort would have failed. The last key relationship was local biologists, regulatory officials and local land users. Sage-grouse are a rangewide issue, but conservation has to be local to be successful given the diversity of habitat and economics across the range. To be absolutely honest, none of the above relationships were perfect and likely never will be. But they are critical.”

–Pat Deibert, Sagebrush Ecosystem Science Coordinator,
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Credit: Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media, courtesy of Sage Grouse Initiative

Key Relationships

From your perspective what were the key relationships that contributed to what you were able to accomplish in the sage-grouse effort?

In collaborative conservation efforts, the relationships that meet around the table to develop actionable solutions are essential to reaching agreement, and to standing behind the solutions. The respondents agreed that there were a number of key relationships that made a difference across all the scales of the collaborative process.

At the local and watershed scale, the active engagement of landowners and local organizations was seen by many as a critical element. Those closest to the landscape would be most affected by management decisions, they were also the individuals most capable of putting conservation action on the ground. State wildlife agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, conservation districts, stockgrowers associations, and non-profit organizations all worked to create meaningful relationships with landowners and land managers. Local landowners were also invited to and welcomed at policy discussions at the local, state, and national levels because they provided the on-the-ground perspective necessary for durable solutions.

It was noted that a key outcome of the collaboration was the recognition that working with landowners in a voluntary, partner-based manner was far more effective than through regulatory restrictions. A key component of this was the local technical service providers and partner biologists that provided the direct communication with landowners to implement conservation practices. Several individuals mentioned that agreements like Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, as well as projects through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Partners for Fish and Wildlife program and NRCS’ Sage Grouse



Credit: Partners for Conservation

Initiative provided landowners with regulatory assurances that their proactive conservation work would provide them flexibility should the species be listed. These agreements also helped channel funding for on-the-ground conservation efforts.

At the state and regional level, the development of solid relationships among the various government agencies was seen as critical during the development of sage-grouse conservation plans. An essential element was the leadership and engagement of governors that drove many of the discussions and provided the foundation for the collaborative efforts. In addition, the fact that state fish and wildlife agencies worked closely with their state offices of the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service both during the planning process as well as the implementation of conservation actions was seen as key.

Regionally and at the national level, the leadership of groups like the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and the Western Governors Association created the forums that took the local collaborative efforts up to the national scale. These relationships allowed for the conservation actions to be implemented at the range-wide level, and allowed the local conservation efforts to all contribute to successes across the sagebrush landscape. Of particular note, several respondents said that a critical element to success was that the collaborative efforts focused on bottom up rather than top down decision-making.



Credit: Tatiana Gettelman, USGS

Missing Relationships

Were there any relationships that were missing or that could have been better, either external to your organization or internal, that impacted the work?

Many respondents felt that there were no relationships missing from the table, however others recognized that a number of organizations and individuals chose not to participate

in the process. Several respondents noted that it was important to welcome those groups that were willing to come to the table and compromise. Some groups wanted nothing but to have the sage-grouse listed as endangered and others wanted the species not to be listed, but also did not want any changes to their activities. In addition, there were some partners that were missing at the beginning of the collaborations but when it was recognized that their perspectives were critical they were welcomed to the discussion. The individuals that were willing to work together and seek compromise were the ones that came to the table and stayed at the table throughout the long process.

Specific notes and points of recommendation that came out include:

- Having the actual decision-makers in the room when decisions are made rather than surrogates. Alternatively they need to clearly delegate the decision-making authority to those that will be in the room rather than making decisions contrary to the those made through the collaborative process.
- On a similar note, there was a feeling by a number of respondents that there was a disconnect between regional and local agency staff and the agency and departmental staff at the national level which resulted

“I’m not sure that we could have done better. Clearly there were external groups on all sides that didn’t believe in the process and didn’t participate. The line between those that participated and those that didn’t was about where it should have been because if too many of those groups that wanted the sage grouse to be listed, or didn’t believe in collaboration, or didn’t want any constraints on their activities had come to the table we might not have reached the results that we did. In general, the people that needed to be at the table were at the table, and those that would have thwarted the process stayed away from the table.”

–Jim Magagna, Wyoming Stockgrowers Association

in changes being made that hadn’t been developed through the collaborative process.

- While industry respondents were active participants in the discussion, and most respondents said that industry was a key part of discussions, it was noted that after decisions had been made some within the energy and livestock industries felt that they had not been included in the discussions.
- Commerce or economic experts would have provided valuable input on the results of actions on rural economies, both from the land use perspective as well as for tourism.

Skills and Abilities

From your perspective, what were the most important skills and abilities to effectively work with partners on greater sage-grouse?

There was general consensus from respondents about the skills and abilities that are most necessary for effective collaboration. **Trust, communications skills, willingness to compromise, ability to actively listen, and patience** were all words and concepts that came out in almost every interview. Respondents talked about the importance of being able to see things from different points of view and to look for win/win solutions rather than win/lose solutions. The ability to relate to all the players and respect one another in order to talk frankly about the challenges and barriers that each entity faced was critical. In addition, there were many reflections on the importance of good team leadership to keep discussions on track. Once again, the role of science was brought up as a key component with respondents noting that the technical skills and science-based solutions were critical at both the landscape level and during planning discussions.

“It’s the leanin’ against the pickup conversation where you let your guard down because you build up trust, that’s where the magic starts. This takes decades of trust building, rather than walking in and telling you what to do.”

—Pat O’Toole, Ladder Ranch,
Savery Wyoming

It was noted that similar skills were necessary from the high-level discussions on sage grouse conservation plans as well as at the landscape level when working directly with landowners. In many cases, the relationships that developed to put conservation practices on the ground developed because of long-standing trust. Conservation providers, state and federal agencies, local NRCS offices, and non-profit organizations had individuals that lived and worked in the communities that had or developed the necessary relationships to work with farmers and ranchers. It was mentioned that investing in these staff positions with the individuals who can build these relationships is a critical lesson learned in this process.

More Than Part of the Job

We asked participants if the sage-grouse collaboration efforts were more than part of the job. The question, while not obvious, raised a variety of responses. Most people got involved initially because it was part of the job, or would affect their job, or some were simply told they had to get involved. But as the process developed, the passion and commitment to forging durable solutions took over for most. The collaborative process took immense amounts of time and often took participants away from family and other obligations. But working together for a shared vision also built friendships and relationships that have endured well beyond the original deadline.

Limitations

What were the biggest limitations to working in partnership from your perspective?

Ironically, many of the limitations mentioned by respondents were also the same things that made the sage-grouse collaborative response so unique in the first place. Time was mentioned by most as the biggest limitation – the fact that there was a firm deadline for appreciable action, the number of hours required for meetings and planning, the time required to establish relationships and trust – all of these elements played in to the challenges faced during the collaborative efforts. In addition, the challenge of the scale and the variety of perspectives was seen as a limitation while also being essential for the collaboration to work.

Beyond these broad themes, other specific limitations mentioned include:

- Adequate technical capacity to provide services to landowners.
- Maintaining consistency across states with disparate challenges faced in different states; associated with this was expectations of “one size fits all” requirements when using federal funds for conservation projects.
- Maintaining agency staff continuity for work on the landscape and in planning negotiations.
- Regulatory process required through the National Environmental Policy Act (for implementation of restoration projects).
- Endangered Species Act interpretation that had typically focused on regulatory limitations, but lacked a way to measure voluntary conservation partnerships.

We asked people to not fall back on the standard response of “staff and funding” when looking at limitations. While these can often be a challenge, many respondents specifically noted that this wasn’t a large issue under the circumstances due to the partnering and cost-sharing relationships that developed.

- Politics (between states and federal agencies; between Washington DC leadership and field staff, etc.) and egos that impacted negotiations and undermined trust.
- Last minute changes and lack of transparency that undermined long-term negotiations because they were not part of the discussion throughout the process. As one person mentioned, 11th hour “gotta haves” will prevent durable long-term solutions in a collaborative process.
- Reverting to top down decision-making and not listening to comments and recommendations from the collaborative teams that had worked together to develop solutions.



Courtesy of Intermountain West Joint Venture

Lessons Learned

Did you learn anything from your experience working with partners on greater sage-grouse that you will carry forward to future work?

When we asked for lessons learned, the responses reflected on the big achievements and the road that still lies ahead. Developing a process with a clear goal and timeframe that is achievable was seen as essential. Additionally, engaging paid facilitators can help in the process and others mentioned investing in collaborative conservation training to help teach the skills necessary. Many respondents focused on the importance of local relationships and building commitment to the process and solutions by including those local voices. The relationships in general at all levels were clearly the foundation for the collaboration that developed. Some responses went back to the core values of trust and mutual respect as well as tolerance, patience, and perseverance. There was also frustration expressed at the time and effort put into developing consensus and collaboration that was undermined by requirements that were not put on the table for discussion until late in the game - or were never discussed as part of the group discussions at all. Perhaps the best way to outline the lessons learned from our respondents is to share their own takeaway messages.

“Include the people who live closest to the land, get to know them and listen very carefully to them. These places are their homes and they care.”

–Virgil Moore, Director Idaho Department of Fish and Game

“I’ve learned to recognize that there is a wide spectrum of collaborative processes. What I’ve experienced and witnessed these past twenty-plus years is a process of creating deeper more meaningful communication by cultivating respectful listening, which leads to respect and trust among participants. It’s a deep human need to be listened to, valued and to feel a sense of purpose and belonging. Collaboration creates community in a larger context, it can bring people together and give them the opportunity to build the trust that is required to hone durable solutions for resource issues. It is an example for the broader world.”

–Robin Boies, Stewardship Alliance for Northeast Elko (SANE)

“Maintain transparency and work on trust every day – that’s easy to say but it takes a lot of energy. Benefits are collaborative outcomes that are durable. Top down solutions are only good as long as you’re there to enforce them. Solutions that are collaborative and durable are supported by the communities that have to live with those outcomes long after decision makers are gone.”

–Tim Murphy, Bureau of Land Management Idaho State Director (retired)

“Start proactive efforts early and give private landowners lots of time to mull over and consider the benefits of their individual conservation agreement voluntary participation. Collaborative participants who understand the stakes and put both their heads and hearts into the process provide the perfect storm of the “right stuff” to develop win-win outcomes.”

–Tom Sharp, cattle rancher in Burns Oregon and Chair of the Harney County Sage-grouse CCAA Steering Committee

“Live by the golden rule – treat others how you want to be treated. When people were in a listening, cooperative mode and willing to share thoughts and willing to agreeably disagree, when things were kept cordial and civil, that’s when the needle moves and things get done.”

–Seth Gallagher, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (then)

“If you had sage-grouse management that was done by agencies alone, it might not withstand changes. But with industry and agriculture behind it too, conservation efforts are going to be a lot more durable.”

–Sherry Liguori, Rocky Mountain Power

“To have lasting success in a landscape project, a big broad picture must first be painted by diverse stakeholders and local communities that describes what the desired landscape and associated communities will look like. People have to be part of the desired future! Once completed, local partners must be empowered to work together and develop their unique approaches that both meet the broad goals of the plan and the unique needs of the community. All partners must embrace the diversity and help them succeed.”

–Tim Griffiths, NRCS West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator (and former Sage Grouse Initiative Coordinator)

“This is bigger than sage-grouse this is about our approach to really difficult issues where in some cases the public is polarized. Opinion is that you’re on one side or another, and we’re not on one side or another – it’s about balance. We know intuitively we can do both, it isn’t easy but we know we can do it. This is preserving Colorado’s approach to these issues, we need to protect what we’re really good at. If it gets polarized if people walk off in their old adversarial camps we will have lost 35 years of building collaborations.”

–John Swartout, Natural Resource Advisor, Governor John Hickenlooper, Colorado



Credit: Duane Coombs, courtesy of Intermountain West Joint Venture

Going Forward

As a number of participants either stated or implied, large-scale collaborative efforts fall into the category of simple but not necessarily easy. The investment in time and effort to build the relationships, trust, and eventually effective partnerships can seem daunting and even insurmountable without an immediate threat and a hard deadline such as a species listing decision. On the other hand, unless some relationships are already in place, a large-scale collaborative response may not be possible in the time available.

Heeding the advice of those respondents encouraging an early start, it stands to reason that addressing other natural resource challenges in a collaborative fashion can pay dividends today as will preparing individuals and organizations for the next game-changing challenge. Consequently, emphasizing the skills necessary to build effective internal and external relationships - typically called “people” or “soft” skills in natural science fields - is a wise investment of resources if building durable, voluntary, landscape-scale solutions is part of the work plan. This is true regardless of the scale of the natural resource challenge. In many cases, it may not require learning new skills as much as simply summoning the willingness to apply principles learned long ago in pursuit of durable landscape conservation solutions.



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