



New check dam installed by the Butte SWCD as part of a Sage Grouse Action Team grant. (photo by Butte SWCD)

IDAHO CONSERVATION DISTRICTS ENCOURAGED TO APPLY FOR SAGE GROUSE ACTION TEAM GRANTS

By Steve Stuebner

The deadline for applications is coming up on May 2 to apply for Sage Grouse Action Team grant funds from the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation (OSC). Funds for successful applications will be available by July 1, 2025.

A number of conservation districts have applied for Sage Grouse Action Team grant funds in the past, including the Butte, Wood River and Bruneau districts, leading to successful conservation projects.

Funding for individual grant projects ranges from \$2,000 to \$218,000 per year, said Josh

Uriarte, project manager for OSC. The agency receives \$750,000 in general funds for work on sage grouse that includes restoration, wildfire rehabilitation, surveys, fire equipment and employee time each year, he said.

About \$550,000 to \$600,000 is available for projects this year, Uriarte said. Fifteen projects were funded last year.

"There is a lot of potential overlap between District goals, landowners' objectives to improve or protect their range and livestock grazing, and balanced sage grouse habitat management," said George Hitz, SWC Deputy Director.

"Idaho's Conservation Districts take a lead role in helping landowners make timely effective land management decisions. For Conservation Districts containing Sage Grouse Management Areas, I think this could be an excellent Idaho-sourced funding opportunity for conservation to support a diverse rangeland ecosystem and to help ranching thrive. I encourage Districts to look into it along with any potential participants or partners and see if the opportunity fits."

The types of projects that have been funded in the past include wet meadow habitat projects, re-seeding projects to restore the range



Beaver dam analogs installed on Hurry Up/Hurry Back Creek on Bruneau rancher Chris Black's property in Owyhee County slow down runoff and increase the water table, benefitting wildlife and cattle. (photo by Steve Stuebner/LOTR)

post-fire or to eliminate invasive grasses, slash treatment projects in areas where juniper trees are being removed to enhance sage grouse habitat, fuel breaks projects and more.

Background from the OSC web site:

“In May 2015, the state agencies charged with implementing the Governor’s Strategy – OSC, Idaho Department of Lands, and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) – established the Sage Grouse Actions Team, along with local federal agency partners including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and and the National Resources Conservation Service. The Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission, Idaho Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy also are part of the group.

“The team works collaboratively to prioritize and fund actions in accordance with the Governor’s

Strategy. Priorities for funding include helping equip Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) to improve fire suppression capabilities, build strategic fuel breaks to slow the spread of wildfire, restore areas that have been degraded by wildfire from encroached juniper trees and annual grasses, restore and improve brood rearing habitat, and enhance the monitoring of sage grouse activity.”

In Fiscal Year 2024, 15 conservation projects were funded by the Sage Grouse Action Team, which on average leveraged \$3.57 non-state dollars for every state dollar spent to implement projects, Uriarte said.

“These efforts resulted in more than \$2.8 million in collaborative conservation. There were also 10 RFPAs assisted with an offset to their insurance, wildland firefighting tools and protective equipment (PPE) for over \$52,000. Many times, the State General Fund dollars are used as match to bring other

funding sources to Idaho such as the Cheatgrass Challenge and grants through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.”

Here is a list of the Fiscal 2024 projects that were funded:

- 2,538 acres - conifer treatment
- 3,122 acres – annual grass treatment
- 1,318 acres of post-fire rehabilitation

LOW INTEREST LOANS FOR IDAHO SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION

- Sprinkler Irrigation
- No-Till Drills
- Fences
- Livestock Feeding Operations
- Solar Stock Water Pump Systems

3% - 6%
Terms 7-15 Years
Up to \$600,000





swc.idaho.gov (208) 332-1790

Flint Creek - Owyhee County



Before



After

Flint Creek rangeland restoration project near Triangle dramatically reduced invasive grasses, mainly medusahead wild rye and cheatgrass with herbicide, allowing native grasses and forbs to “release” following treatment. (Courtesy OSC)

- 62 acres of wet meadow enhancement and 5 miles of stream work
- 393 acres of fuel breaks
- 2,000 acres of sagebrush seeding
- Sage grouse lek counting and monitoring
- University of Idaho Grouse and Grazing Study
- Idaho Rangeland Conservation Partnership (IRCP) Coordinator Position
- Bruneau-Owyhee Sage Grouse Habitat Project (BOSH) Coordinator Position
- Support for Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs)

Conservation District projects

Hammond Springs – Butte SWCD – worked with a landowner and NRCS to install check dams in the fall of 2018 to trap sediment and help reconnect the creek with its flood plain. In addition, they removed cattle water troughs located in a riparian area, returned springflow to the creek, and moved the water troughs off-site to uplands, and

installed a well, solar pump and pipeline to route water to them.

In 2020, Butte SWCD received funding for a no-till drill and Wood River SWCD got funds for a rangeland drill for seeding projects.

Bruneau SWCD – Beaver Dam Analogs on Hurry Up/Hurry Back creek with Bruneau rancher Chris Black on his private land in Owyhee County. The first BDAs were installed initially by a Utah Conservation Corps crew, who worked on the project in coordination with Utah State University.

Conservation professionals with OSC, SWC, U.S. FWS, IDFG and NRCS were all interested in exploring the benefits of using BDAs to improve riparian habitat and store water. They assisted the landowner and Utah crews with project management and implementation.

Beaver dam analogs (BDAs) are woody structures made with local materials such as willow branches attached to vertical posts pounded into a creek-bottom that mimic the natural work of beavers. The BDAs

create pond habitat, spread out the water table, and slow down runoff in the spring.

They started with 10 BDAs on Chris Black’s property, and added more over the next several years.

“They came in and put them in very successfully,” Black said in a story and video produced on the project by Life on the Range, a public education project sponsored by the Idaho Rangeland Resources Commission. “They’re backing water up, they’re creating habitat for spotted frogs, for sage grouse, for beaver.”

“It just benefits a whole host of wildlife species and that’s why Fish and Game is really interested in this,” says Chris Yarbrough, habitat biologist for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. “It’s a low-cost way to get a lot of bang for your conservation buck.”

“These meadows are like a sponge,” Black explains. “They take that water and they hold it, and release it slowly into the system. So we don’t get that big rush in the spring,

when the springs are active, they run hard and then just dry up. Then you just have a dry meadow. With water being held back in the system, it releases slowly, and that benefits downstream users, too, so it's a benefit for everything."

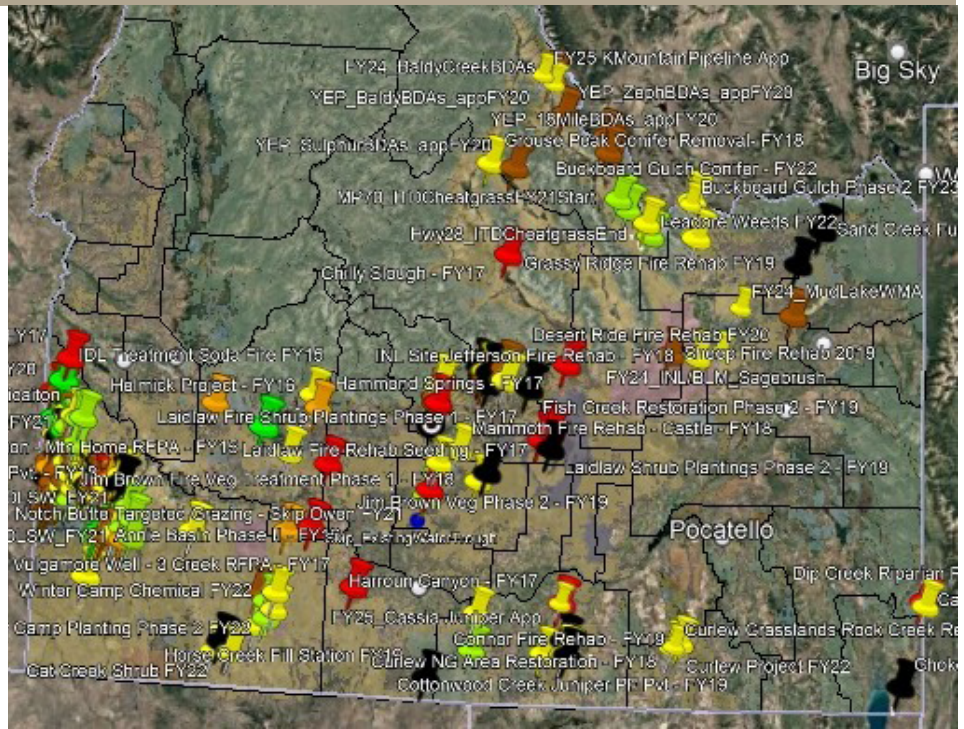
Black has a healthy sage grouse population that live part of the year on his private ranchland and part of the year on public lands nearby that are benefitting from the project.

Invasive Species Rangeland Restoration Projects

Two conservation districts around the state and the BOSH project have tapped into the Sage Grouse Action Team grant funds to restore native rangeland habitat by spraying invasive grasses with herbicide, which allows native grasses and forbs to "release" and grow back following the treatments.

In the fall of 2021, Connor White, BOSH project manager, worked with two different private landowners to treat a total of 136 acres of land infested with medusahead wild rye, cheatgrass, ventenata and Japanese brome. Both sites were sprayed with the herbicide Rejuvra.

The rangeland restoration project was done following the treatment for invasive juniper trees. The BOSH project has been removing juniper to open up historic sage grouse habitat areas. The birds are not able to safely use areas where predators like crows, ravens and birds of prey can perch nearby. Juniper trees also consume much of the available



Pins show all the Sage Grouse Action Team projects funded from fiscal 2015-2025. (Courtesy OSC)

water from an area. Once they are removed, native grasses and forbs will increase in vigor, research shows.

If invasive grasses are preventing the native vegetation from rebounding, rangeland projects are experimenting with the use of the herbicides Rejuvra and Plateau to allow the natives more space, water and nutrients to grow back, White said.

"We did those initial pilot projects and then in the fall of 2023, we treated 3,000 acres in two fields with similar results," White said.

More information about the science of using Rejuvra has been coming forth from the research community, he said. Rejuvra can take several years to show positive results, he said. It can be used

in tandem with Plateau, which brings stronger results in the first year, White said.

Once the native grasses and forbs have space to thrive, they will release and grow. "My goodness, we were surprised how well things grew back," he said.

The Lemhi SWC and Cassia SWCD tried similar treatments to eliminate annual invasive grasses with similar results.

For more information, go to the OSC Sage grouse Action Team web page: <https://species.idaho.gov/programs/sage-grouse-actions-team/> or contact Josh Uriarte at joshua.uriarte@osc.idaho.gov, 208-332-1556.

COMMISSION
 Erik Olson, Chairman
 Wendy Pratt, Vice-Chairman
 Karen Sharpnack, Secretary
 Blake Hollingsworth, Treasurer
 Mitchel Silvers, Commissioner
 Joan Cloonan, Commissioner
 Richard Savage, Commissioner
 Delwyne Trefz, Administrator


SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION
 322 East Front Street, Suite 560 Boise Idaho
 83702 P: 208-332-1790 • ww332-1799
info@swc.idaho.gov • www.swc.idaho.gov
Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship