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Inmates help restore sage grouse habitat

Sage grouse remains off endangered list due to prisoners' efforts

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Greater sage grouse remained off the endangered species list last year due to widespread sagebrush habitat restoration plans by federal, state and local agencies and private landowners.

Sagebrush provides the bird and other species with food and cover from predators and is the key to sage grouse survival. Lovelock bird watcher Randy Pontius warned that if massive sagebrush habitat

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restoration is not implemented, sage grouse could end up on the endangered species list anyway. Sage grouse were once plentiful and popular with hunters in the Lovelock area according to his father.



Now, greater sage grouse sightings anywhere in the county are almost unheard of according to Pontius. A high elevation wilderness study area on the Tobin Crest is just about the last breeding ground for sage grouse in Pershing County according to state wildlife biologists and wilderness conservationists.

That could change if a local sagebrush cultivation project means local sage grouse habitat is restored.

Wildfires and invasive species destroy or damage sagebrush and are three of the top threats to sage grouse and their habitat. Growing and planting sagebrush to restore thousands of acres of sage grouse habitat in Nevada and across the West sounds like an enormous task but inmates at three Nevada prisons are helping sage grouse and possibly themselves by nurturing sagebrush seedlings.

Thousands of sagebrush seeds planted in the spring are watered by inmates at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center and the Warm Springs Correctional Center in Carson City as well as the Lovelock Correctional Center according to Nevada Department of

Corrections spokeswoman Brooke Keast.

The “sagebrush in prisons” project is a collaborative effort and an unlikely alliance between the NDOC, the Bureau of Land Management and the Institute for Applied Ecology, a private, non-profit wildlife and habitat conservation group headquartered in Corvallis, Oregon according to Keast.

According to the IAE website, prison inmates in Oregon, Idaho and Washington have already been

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growing sagebrush seedlings in the “Sustainability in Prisons Project Network.” The sagebrush project is “jump starting” sage grouse habitat recovery. Otherwise, native sagebrush (there are more than 350 species of it) normally takes 30 to 50 years to reestablish itself in burned areas according to the IAE.

“These inmates are currently growing 160,000 sagebrush for restoring burned areas and to support the greater sage grouse,” the IAE website says of the ongoing prison projects. “This model program, supported by the BLM, is designed to be transferable to correctional facilities throughout the West.”

In 2016, IAE coordinated the Great Basin Sagebrush Project with inmates in seven states including Nevada growing 390,000 sagebrush and other native plants to restore habitat for sage grouse.

The project includes the Lovelock, Northern Nevada, and Warm Springs Correctional Centers, where minimum-security inmates are growing 35,000 sagebrush plants at each of the three prisons facilities for the BLM in Nevada and California.

In a rare chance to document inmates at work, LLC allowed reporters to view the project last week. Nine inmates attending Coal Canyon High School, the prison's GED program, showed off the sagebrush seedlings to be planted on public land by conservation crews or contractors in the fall.

Sagebrush seedlings with roots established in potting soil may out-survive bare seeds in burned areas.

Sagebrush habitat restoration should benefit not only sage grouse but other species that have lost habitat to wildfires and invasive weeds including pygmy rabbit, antelope, mule deer, lizards and rodents. As food for hawks, owls and other predators, rodents are an essential part of the food chain.

Before last week's sagebrush horticultural tour, LCC inmates in the horticulture program heard more about the importance of their sagebrush project for sage grouse and other wildlife during a lecture by Nevada Department of Wildlife Game Biologist Ed Partee. The bird's range has declined and the sage grouse population that was once in the millions is down to an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 birds.

Partee said sagebrush habitat restoration projects are the only hope for sage grouse recovery. The birds tend to die off rather than move on when their leks and nesting areas are burned by wildfires, he said.

Sagebrush cultivation is just one of the many projects for inmates in the prison's in depth horticulture program. Their pride was apparent during last week's tour as the inmates showed off their various flowering plants in outdoor gardens that beautify the facility. Inmate James Cole, 34, has developed an in-depth knowledge of plant cultivation that could lead to a job after his release from prison. He and other inmates are working on a proposed internship for other inmates also interested in horticulture.

The 35,000 seedlings require hours of daily attention from inmates to eliminate weeds and produce one healthy plant per container. Deep tap roots will help the perennial sagebrush seedlings reach water that can't be reached by the shallow roots of invasive annual weeds such as cheat grass and medusa head.

“The sage grouse are counting on us for their survival,” said 50-year-old inmate Roger Libby. “The sagebrush is essentially their livelihood.”