



News

## Video: Coyote Ridge Offenders Cultivate Sagebrush to Boost Sage Grouse Habitat Destroyed by Fire

Video By Will Mader, Digital Communications Specialist



[Watch the YouTube Video](#)

**For DOC staff only:** If you are unable to view the YouTube video, you may [watch the video here](#).

**By Rachel Thomson, DOC Communications**

CONNELL – The greater sage grouse is a strange-looking bird. The males are short and chubby, with spikey tail feathers fanning out from their rears that make them look like a cross between a turkey and a quail.

It's also a species in trouble. Federal wildlife officials say the bird, whose population was once as high as 16 million across the western U.S., has declined to less than 200,000 over the past century. Of those, less than 1,000 live in Washington.

Wildfires, invasive plant species and industrialization have contributed to the loss of habitat for the birds. The species have been threatened in Washington since 1998 and had been recently considered for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act.

A group of offenders at a Washington state prison wants to change that.

Since April, offenders at Coyote Ridge Correctional Center have been cultivating 20,000 sagebrush plants that will be planted next Spring in an area near Wenatchee destroyed by last summer's Palisades Flat fire, which burned more than 1,000 acres in Douglas and Grant counties.

Story: <http://www.doc.wa.gov/news/stories/2015/102215-crcr-sagebrush.asp>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6R53DUZSEy4>



*The Greater sage grouse walks along a section of dessert. Offenders at prisons in Washington, Idaho and Oregon are growing sagebrush that will be planted in eastern parts of these states that have been destroyed.*

Gretchen Graber, a Native Plant Greenhouse Manager at Washington State University Tri-Cities, who helps teach offenders how to grow the sagebrush, says it's an opportunity for them to learn while helping restore habitat.

"They're getting stoked about conservation, horticulture, and biology," Graber says. "It's a chance for them to get passionate about something. They can learn that 'maybe I don't benefit from this directly, but it's benefitting the greater environment, and that's something we can all benefit from.'"

The brush is crucial to sage grouse survival. The birds rely on the plants for everything including food, water, shelter and a place to lay their eggs.

The project, called the Sagebrush Steppe Conservation Nursery Project, is one of the Sustainability in Prisons Project's (SPP) most recent efforts. SPP is a collaboration between the Department of Corrections, The Evergreen State College and other partners that leads science and conservation projects at each of the DOC's prisons. Offenders participate in many SPP projects statewide including beekeeping, running compost facilities, growing gardens and training service animals.

Though Coyote Ridge Corrections Center is the first prison in Washington state to grow sagebrush, it is not the first in the Pacific Northwest to do so. Three prisons in Idaho and one prison in Oregon currently have sagebrush restoration projects, according to the Institute of Applied Ecology's website.

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*Offender Kevin Bowen examines some potted sagebrush starts at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center. He is one of several offenders who have been growing the plants at the prison since April. The sagebrush will be planted in an area near Wenatchee that was destroyed by last summer's wildfires. The area destroyed was home to the federally-threatened Greater sage grouse.*

Dorothy Trainer, an environmental specialist and liaison for SPP for Coyote Ridge, says projects like the Sagebrush Steppe Conservation Nursery Project not only help restore habitat, but gives offenders confidence and skills they can use to obtain jobs after releasing from prison. Each morning, offenders enter a hoop house and fertilize the plants, each one in a separate container. The seedlings are watered and transplanted to larger containers as they grow.

"I enjoy watching them grow," said 48-year-old Kevin Bowen, who is serving sentences for possession of a stolen vehicle, stolen property and a controlled substance. He said he's helped maintain other gardens while he's been incarcerated and feels the skills he's learned growing sagebrush will help him continue his gardening hobby after he's released.

"This has been the best job for me. You get to learn how much water and how much sun it takes to get them to grow. I care about the plants now."

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*Sagebrush starts inside a hoop house at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center. Offenders have been growing the plants since April. Sagebrush provides crucial habitat to the federally-threatened Greater sage grouse. The starts will be planted in an area near We*

Brian Younce, 35, who is serving a sentence for taking a motor vehicle without permission, says growing sagebrush has given him some time to reflect about himself and gain a new survival skill.

“It’s something to learn and know how to do. If something bad happened that destroyed food sources, I know how to grow something myself. How many people would know how to plant things on their own?”

Though this is the first time sagebrush plants have been grown inside a Washington state prison, Graber says project collaborators already have plans to continue the project next year with another set of plants.

“There’s a need for more. The partnerships are working really well together and there’s no reason we can’t create a higher number of plants growing,” she said.

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