

Ecological Conversion of Shrub-Steppe Ecosystems

Issue

The threat of ecological conversion of the shrub-steppe and Great Basin sagebrush ecosystems (hereafter referred to as shrub-steppe rangelands) by noxious weeds and other invasive species.

Problem

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources with other state and federal land management agencies this last year identified 600,000 acres in shrub-steppe rangelands that is seriously threatened by noxious weeds and other invasive species (a situation exacerbated by over five years of extreme drought).

Further Utah rangelands dominated by sagebrush and pinyon-juniper woodland are no longer suitable habitat for sensitive wildlife species and without treatment could result in the Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing of sage-grouse, pygmy rabbit and other obligate species.

How this would affect your constituents

The loss of native shrub-steppe rangelands means the loss of wildlife populations; unstable watersheds and degraded water quality; reduced livestock grazing; and more costly wildland fire fighting. If measures are not taken to reverse the downward trend in sage-grouse populations, which are now near the threshold of being listed as an endangered or threatened species, they will continue to decline, as will other shrub-steppe obligate species. ESA listing would have dramatic consequences on the traditional uses and the way public/private lands are managed in Utah.

What you can do about this issue

Review the joint resolution (attached) signed by the 15 member Utah Partners for Conservation and Development and endorsed by Utah Governor Walker to “*to maximize efforts to restore watershed health.*” As the Utah Partners’ strategy moves forward from assessment to implementing range restoration and management plans landowners and livestock producers will need additional financial and technical assistance.

The initial priority is to assist operators address range restoration and management needs within critical sage-grouse and mule deer habitats that are the highest risk for conversion to monocultures of cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). Eventually management plans will be developed to address risks to healthy watersheds by non-desirable plant species or dense stands of pinyon-juniper woodlands.

Since Utah rangelands are inclusive of private, state, and public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service cooperation will be needed from all parties. The federal agencies will need to implement restoration and best management practices in concert with private and state land managers. Additional financial and technical assistance will be needed for federal land managers to be able to do their part.

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