

# 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 has identified nearly a million acres in shrub-steppe rangelands that is seriously threatened by noxious weeds and other invasive species (a situation exacerbated by over six years of extreme drought and resulting from the die off of grasses, forbs and other desirable plants).

Further Utah rangelands dominated by decadent sagebrush and invaded by pinyon-juniper woodland and noxious weeds are no longer suitable habitat for sensitive wildlife species. Without treatment to restore and protect these lands, shrub-steppe obligate species such as sage grouse and pygmy rabbits could be listed as threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In addition rangelands that have been invaded by noxious weeds or pinyon-juniper lose their ability to produce clean water and water yield is greatly decreased.

## *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. On January 6, 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the Greater Sage Grouse did not warrant listing as threatened or endangered on a range-wide basis. Part of the reasoning for this decision was to allow state and local conservation efforts a chance to succeed.

## *Progress report*

Since presenting this issue last year, the Utah Conservation Partnership has prioritized potential projects, prepared conservation plans and obtained federal, state and private monies for many restoration activities. Cooperation and collaboration continues under the joint resolution signed by the 15 member partnership and endorsed by former Governor Walker to "*maximize efforts to restore watershed health.*" To tour representative project sites in the Northern Utah and West Box Elder County Soil Conservation Districts please go to [www.uacd.org](http://www.uacd.org), tab "News & Events (*to be added to the UACD Internet site April 2005*).

The initial priority has been to assist operators in addressing 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*). Management plans are being developed to address risks to healthy watersheds by non-desirable plant species or dense stands of pinyon-juniper woodlands.

***What you can do about this issue***

With many more projects scheduled for implementation this fall federal land managers will need to continue to work in concert with private and state land managers to get the prescribed best management practices on the land. It is critical that federal agencies continue to be inclusive of private and state properties when treating public lands. Cooperation will be needed from all parties including the sharing of limited heavy equipment (range drills, aerators, disks, chains, etc.) for land treatments and seeding.

The financial assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Landowner Incentive Program has enabled the participation of private landowners. Additional financial and technical assistance will be needed as private landowners' participation increases and also for state and federal land managers to be able to do their part.

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