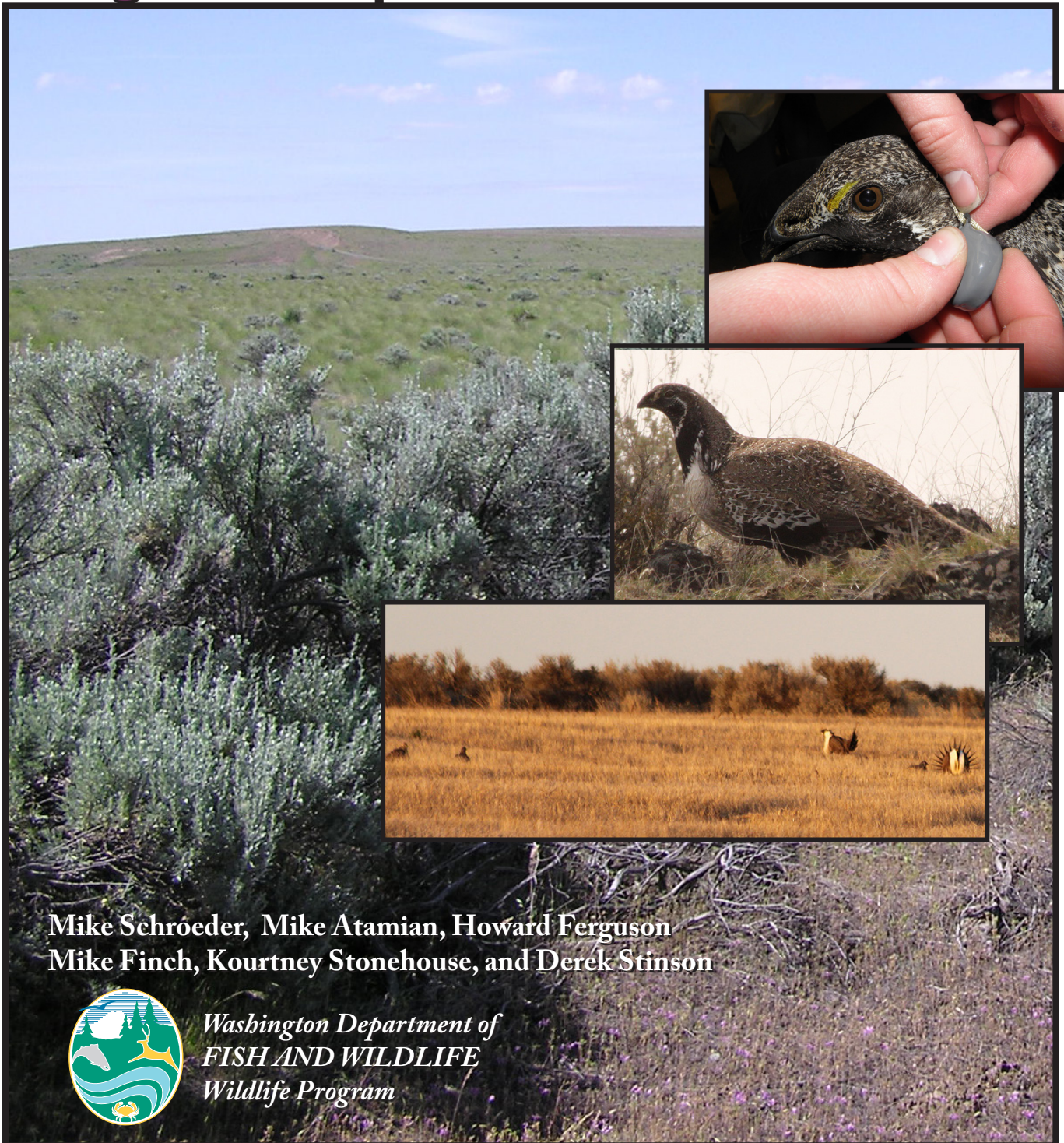


Re-introduction of Sage-grouse to Lincoln County, Washington: Progress Report



Mike Schröder, Mike Atamian, Howard Ferguson
Mike Finch, Kourtney Stonehouse, and Derek Stinson



Washington Department of
FISH AND WILDLIFE
Wildlife Program

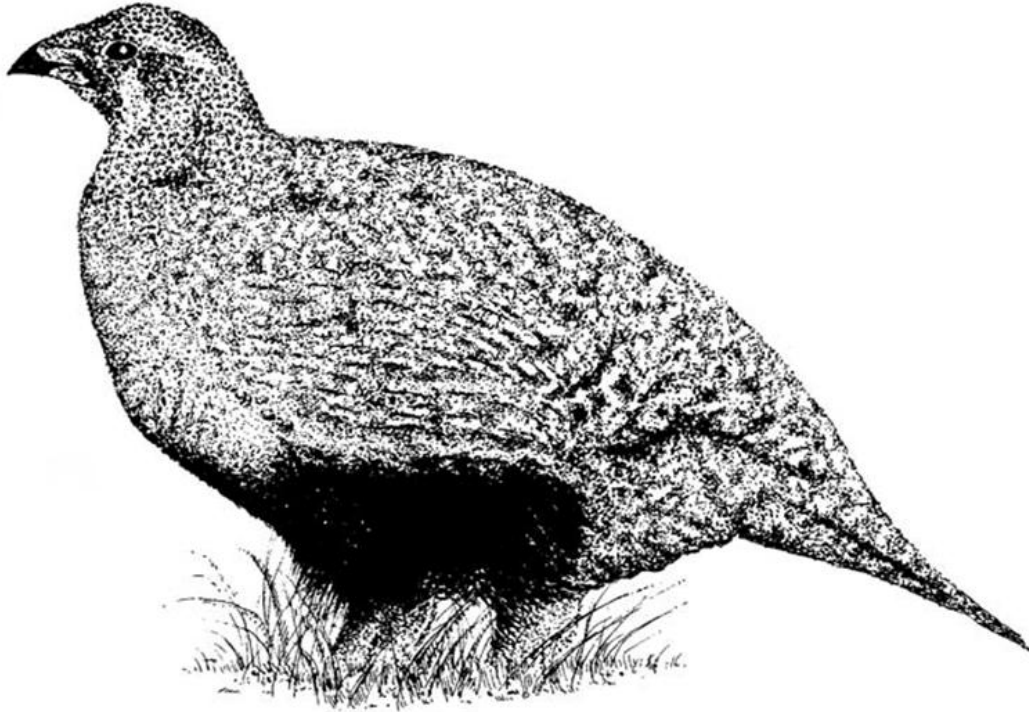
ABSTRACT

Declining populations and distribution of greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) in Washington have resulted in serious concerns for their long-term conservation status. The overall population was estimated to be 998 in 2013, associated with 27 leks. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, in cooperation with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, initiated a project in 2008 to reintroduce greater sage-grouse to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County, Washington. The project was designed to establish a third population in the state in an area with more than 200 km² of shrubsteppe habitat on public lands. Prior to the first translocation in 2008 there were rare observations of sage-grouse in the release area. It was not clear whether these observations were birds dispersing from the closest population in Douglas County or whether these birds were ‘remnants’ from an endemic population known to occupy the area through the mid-1980s. From spring 2008 to spring 2013, 202 greater sage-grouse were translocated from southern Oregon to the Washington release site and their movements, productivity, habitat use, and survival have been monitored. In 2010 three males were observed strutting for two hens post release. In 2011 a couple hundred meters to the north of the 2010 strut site a lek formed with 7 males observed pre-release. Pre-release, 7 and 12 males were observed on the lek in 2012 & 2013, respectively. Though the lek appears to be firmly established and growing the overall population is still below minimum viability and we propose an additional translocation of sage-grouse in spring 2014.

This progress report is also the **Final Report for Agreement number 13410-B-G011** with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *2011-2012 Lincoln County Sage Grouse Reintroduction*. Additional benefits under that agreement are listed starting on page 22.

On the cover: Background photo by Derek Stinson; grouse with radio by Mike Livingston; male sage-grouse near new lek in Lincoln County by Kim Thorburn. Title page and back cover illustration by Darrell Pruett.

RE-INTRODUCTION OF GREATER SAGE-GROUSE TO LINCOLN COUNTY, WASHINGTON: PROGRESS REPORT



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Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Michael A. Schroeder, P.O. Box 1077, Bridgeport, WA 98813
Michael Atamian, 2315 North Discovery Place, Spokane Valley, WA 99216
Howard Ferguson, 2315 North Discovery Place, Spokane Valley, WA 99216
Mike Finch, Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area, Creston, WA 99117
Kourtney Stonehouse, WSU, P.O. Box 646410, Pullman WA 99164
Derek W. Stinson, 600 Capitol Way North, Olympia, WA 98501

Contact information: Michael A. Schroeder, 509-686-2692, schromas@dfw.wa.gov



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BACKGROUND

Greater sage-grouse have declined dramatically in both distribution and population size in Washington. Of 76 lek complexes documented since 1960, 64% are currently vacant. Many of these vacant lek complexes (53%) are in areas where sage-grouse have been extirpated since the 1960s. The current range is about 8% of the historic range, occurring in 2 relatively isolated areas; one primarily on the Yakima Training Center (YTC) in southern Washington and the other centered in the Moses Coulee area of Douglas County in northern Washington (Schroeder et al. 2000, Fig. 1). Based on changes in number of males counted on lek complexes, 27 of which were active in 2013, the sage-grouse population size in Washington declined more than 50% from 1970 to 2013. The 2013 spring population was estimated to be about 231 in the Yakima Training Center (YTC, U.S. Department of Defense) population and 712 in the Moses Coulee population. Because additional sage-grouse are now in the Crab Creek area (centered near the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area) and the Yakama Nation, the total population in Washington is estimated to be 998. These observed declines in populations and distribution in Washington (Fig. 2) were consistent with the observations of rapid loss of genetic heterogeneity in northern Washington (Oyler-McCance et al. 2005).

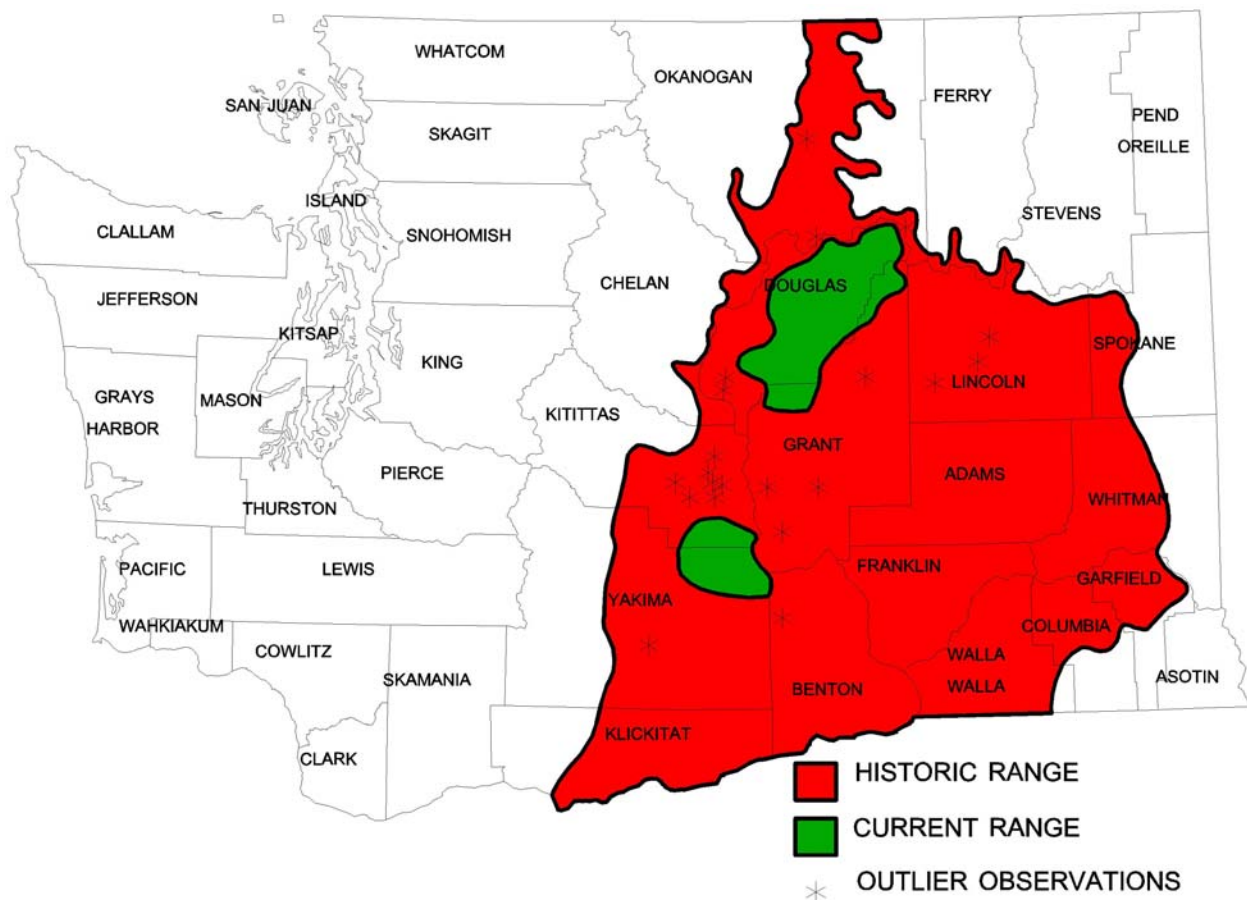


Fig. 1. Estimated historic and current range of greater sage-grouse in Washington prior to translocation efforts (Schroeder et al. 2000).

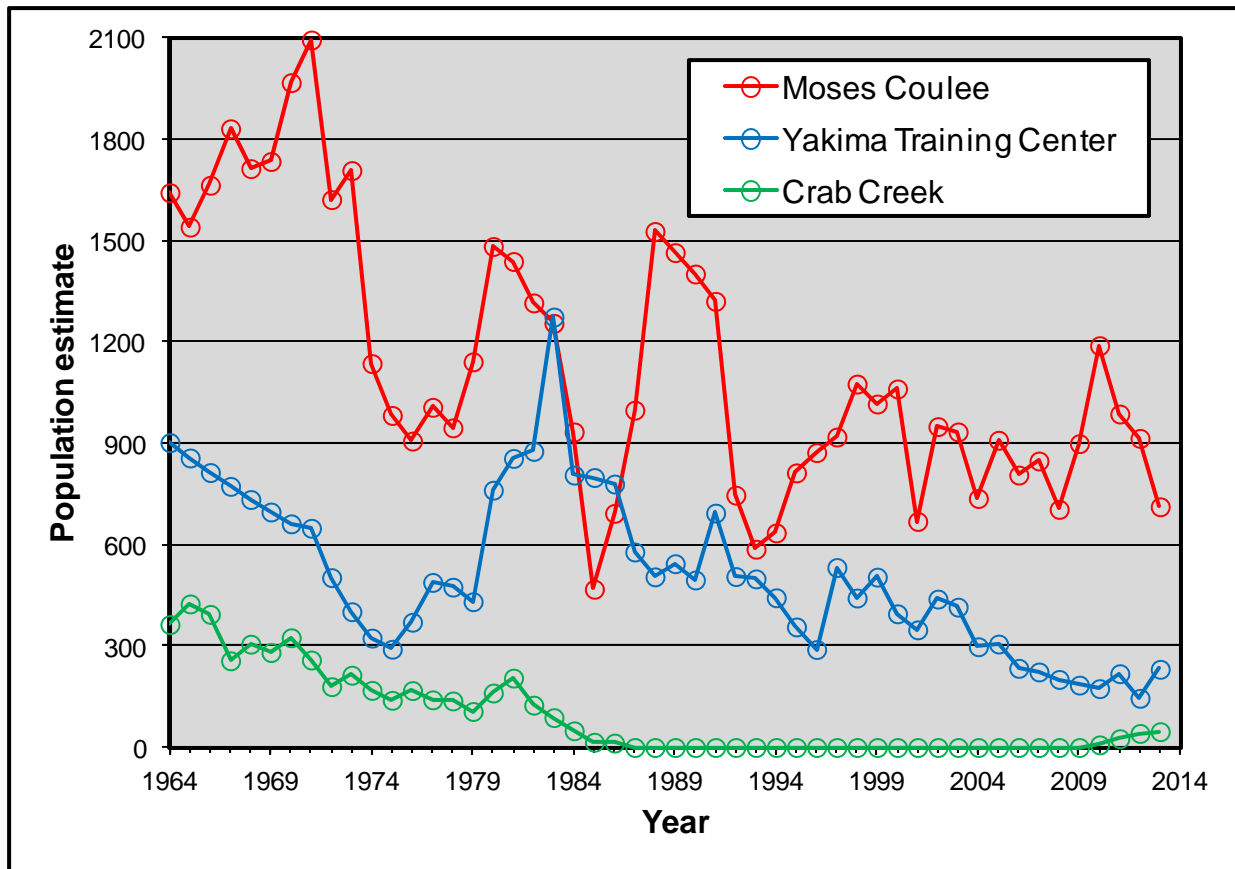


Fig. 2. Estimates of population size for greater sage-grouse within Washington, 1964-2013.

Long-term declines in distribution and abundance of greater sage-grouse in Washington are the primary reasons why the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) listed sage-grouse as ‘threatened’ within the state (Hays et al. 1998). These population declines (Schroeder et al. 2000, Connelly et al. 2004, Garton 2011) and their isolated nature were also considered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine that greater sage-grouse in Washington and northern Oregon represented a distinct population segment and that the population warranted a federal listing as ‘threatened’, though listing has been precluded by higher listing priorities (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2001).

Historic and recent declines of greater sage-grouse in Washington are linked to conversion of native habitat for production of crops and degradation of the remaining native habitat (WDFW 1995, Hays et al. 1998, Stinson et al. 2004). In the Moses Coulee population centered in Douglas County (Fig. 1), sage-grouse occupy a 3,500 km² mosaic of mostly private lands used for dryland farming (mostly wheat), lands enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), or lands with high-quality shrubsteppe (Table 1, Schroeder and Vander Haegen 2011). In contrast, the YTC population in Yakima and Kittitas counties occupies about 1,200 km², which is one of the largest, high-quality shrubsteppe sites remaining in the state. Good habitat quality on the YTC is largely due to its complex topography, isolated nature, and historic low intensity livestock-grazing program. Grazing by livestock was completely eliminated in 1995. Military training poses the greatest threat to habitat security. Cross-country maneuvers with military vehicles decrease habitat quality through sagebrush mortality (Cadwell et al. 1996, Stephan et al.

1996) and disturbance to understory communities (Cadwell et al. 2001). Training activities also ignite wildfires that pose a significant threat to the existing habitat.

Table 1. Potential habitat quantity in relation to current and historic distribution of greater sage-grouse in Washington (adapted from Table 1 in Schroeder et al. 2000).

Range or population	Proportion of area (%)				Total area (km ²)
	Shrubsteppe ^a	Cropland ^a	CRP ^b	Other ^b	
Moses Coulee	44.3	35.1	16.7	3.9	3,529
Yakima Training Center	95.6	0.5	1.9	1.9	1,154
Crab Creek	52.0	36.0	11.0	1.0	3,276
Total occupied range ^c	57.0	26.6	13.0	3.4	4,683
Unoccupied range	42.3	42.8	5.5	9.4	53,058
Total historical range	43.5	41.5	6.1	8.9	57,741

^aLandsat Thematic Mapper, 1993.

^bDetermined from aerial photos dated 1996.

^cThe total occupied range does not include the Crab Creek area.

Isolation poses a significant threat to the viability of remaining populations (Stinson et al. 2004). Westemeier et al. (1998) described the reduction in genetic diversity and in population fitness over a 35-year period in a small, declining greater prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*) population in Illinois. They reported that declines in fertility and egg hatchability correlated with a population decline from 2000 individuals in 1962 to less than 50 by 1994. Bouzat et al. (1998) genetically compared the same population with larger populations in Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota and found that it had approximately 2/3 the allelic diversity of the other populations. Bellinger et al. (2003) found a similar reduction in genetic variation, though not in reproductive success, in greater prairie chickens in Wisconsin. Their comparison of samples collected in 1951 with those collected from 1996 through 1999 revealed a 29% allelic loss.

Genetic work by Benedict et al. (2003) and Oyler-McCance et al. (2005) indicated that the two Washington sage-grouse populations might have experienced similar loss of genetic diversity. They based their conclusions on diversity and divergence of mitochondrial and molecular DNA. Samples were collected from more than 1000 greater sage-grouse from 45 populations throughout the range. The YTC population had only 1 of 38 mitochondrial haplotypes and the Moses Coulee population had 3 of 38 haplotypes present (Benedict et al. 2003). This is in comparison to an average of 6.4 haplotypes across 16 populations with sufficient samples to study. Microsatellite variation in Washington illustrated similar trends suggesting a need for immediate conservation action (Oyler-McCance et al. 2005).

CURRENT MANAGEMENT AND RECOVERY EFFORTS

A greater sage-grouse recovery plan was published in 2004 for Washington, which stated as its primary goal “to establish a viable population of sage-grouse in a substantial portion of the species’ historic range in Washington” (Stinson et al. 2004). The recovery plan also listed the following strategies, all of which have been applied and/or attempted in at least a portion of the greater sage-grouse range in Washington (Stinson et al. 2004:57).

- 1) Inventory and monitor the greater sage-grouse populations in Washington.
- 2) Protect sage-grouse populations.
- 3) Enhance existing populations and re-establish additional populations.
- 4) Protect sage-grouse habitat on public lands.
- 5) Work with landowners to protect the most important sage-grouse habitat on private land.
- 6) Facilitate and promote the use of incentives, such as Farm Bill conservation programs, to benefit sage-grouse.
- 7) Facilitate management of agricultural and rangelands that are compatible with the conservation of sage-grouse.
- 8) Restore degraded and burned sage-grouse habitat within sage-grouse management units.
- 9) Conduct research necessary to conserve sage-grouse populations.
- 10) Cooperate and coordinate with other agencies and landowners in the conservation, protection, and restoration of sage-grouse in Washington.
- 11) Develop public information materials and educational programs for landowners, schools, community organizations, and conservation groups as needed.

In order to implement these strategies and achieve these goals, the recovery plan established numerous management units (Fig. 3) to aid in the identification and implementation of management and recovery actions (Stinson et al. 2004). The northern population (Moses Coulee population) is located primarily in the Mansfield Plateau and Moses Coulee management units while the southern population is primarily in the Yakima Training Center Management Unit. Greater sage-grouse have also been observed in all other management units, and in some cases outside established management units (e.g., a male was photographed near Haley Creek, east of Omak on 30 January 2004). The management units were not designed to limit management and recovery activities, but to focus activities. Crab Creek is the only management unit, other than the three units with current populations, to have recently supported an endemic breeding population.

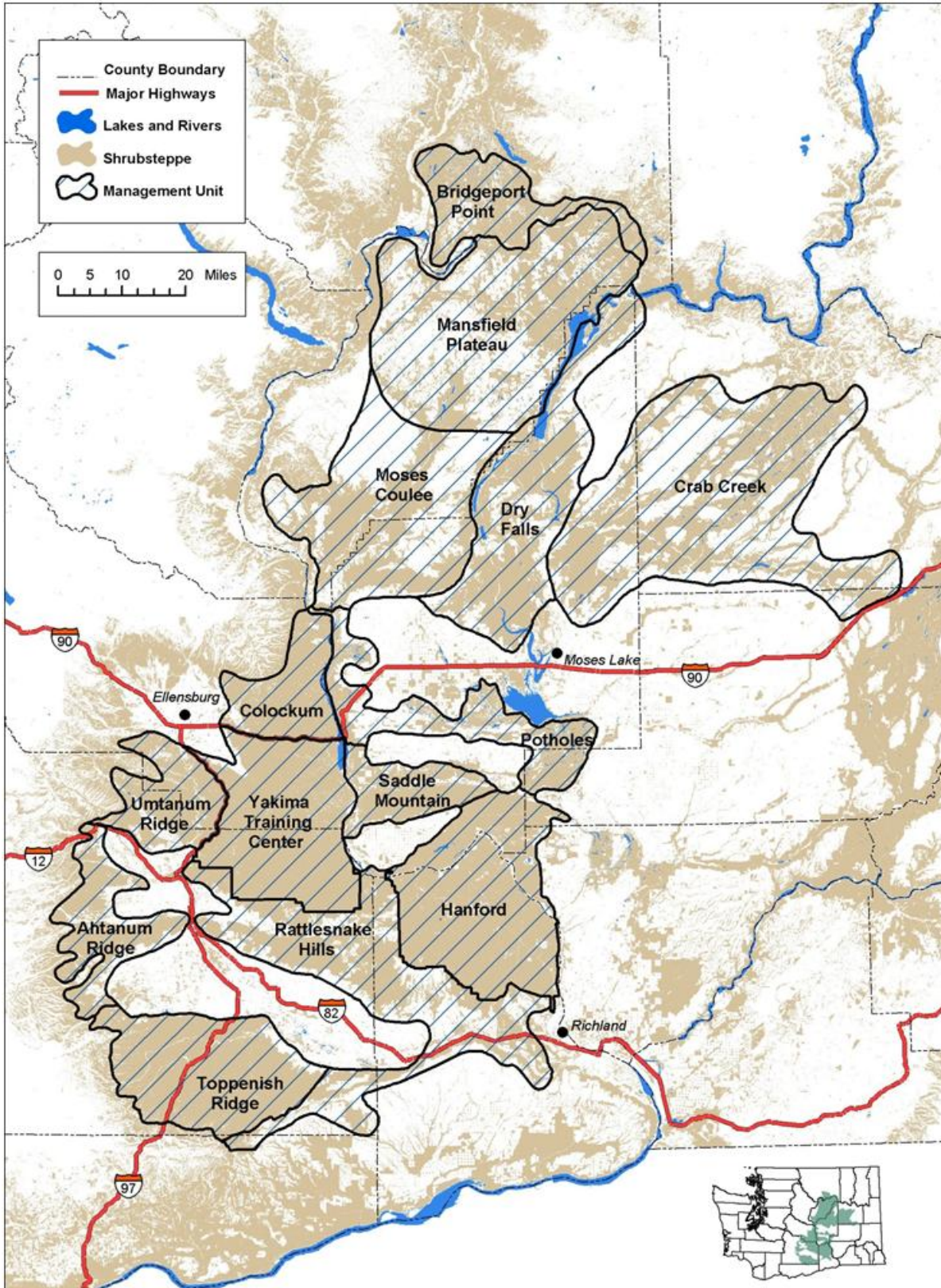


Fig. 3. Greater sage-grouse management units in relation to shrubsteppe cover types in Washington.

Enhancement of existing populations was identified as a high priority in the greater sage-grouse Recovery Plan (Stinson et al. 2004). Because the majority of the Moses Coulee population occupies private land, most management efforts have focused on programs designed to encourage management practices that benefit sage-grouse. Chief among these are federal conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) which support nesting sage-grouse (Schroeder and Vander Haegen 2011).

Within the Yakima Training Center population, the U.S. Army restricts training in many core sage-grouse areas (approximately 18,000 ha) and implements aggressive fire prevention and fighting techniques (YTC 2002). In order to restore areas impacted by military maneuvers and wildfires, the Army seeds bunchgrasses and forbs and plants tens of thousands of bare root seedlings of Wyoming big sagebrush on hundreds of hectares each year (YTC 2002). Firing range observation towers also have been removed in key sage-grouse areas to reduce the number of perches and nesting platforms for raptors and common ravens (*Corvus corax*). In addition to the management responses to military activities, the YTC also discontinued grazing by livestock in 1995 (Stinson et al. 2004).

A population augmentation effort was initiated in 2004 to address genetic issues associated with the YTC population (e.g., lack of heterogeneity and small population size). In addition, by translocating birds from ‘healthy’ populations, a basic hypothesis can be tested. Specifically, is habitat limiting the growth and/or expansion of the YTC population or is the problem related to the intrinsic ‘health’ of the birds? An increasing population trend following augmentation would support the hypothesis that a population ‘health’ problem existed. If the population size remains the same or continues to decline, and monitoring indicates that the translocated birds remained in the area and survived to attempt reproduction, data will support the conclusion that habitat quality and/or quantity is limiting population growth.

In March 2004, 25 female sage-grouse were captured with the aid of night-lights (Wakkinen et al. 1992) in Elko and Humboldt Counties, Nevada, and translocated to the YTC. In March 2005, 18 female and 5 male sage-grouse were captured on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge in Lake County, Oregon (Hart Mountain) and translocated to the YTC. Both of these translocations were designed to augment the existing population. In contrast, 12 female and 19 male sage-grouse were captured at Hart Mountain and released on the Yakama Nation adjacent to the southern Washington population in an effort to re-introduce birds to a portion of their historic range. An additional 5 males were captured at the Wind River Indian Reservation and released on the Yakama Nation in April 2006. In August 2006, 18 female and 7 male sage-grouse were captured at Hart Mountain; 4 females and 5 males were released on the Yakama Nation and 14 females and 2 males were released on the YTC.

Although successful breeding has been documented for the 109 translocated sage-grouse in southern Washington, the results are preliminary and additional work is currently underway to evaluate movement, survival, and productivity of the released birds as well as a possible population-level response to the overall translocation effort. A rebound in the YTC population has not been observed to date; the reasons may relate to a reported rangewide population low, or habitat issues. In recent years, habitat on the YTC has been affected by an increase in Army training and also possibly by an associated increase in wildfires. Although genetic samples have

been analyzed to determine if the augmentation was successful at introducing new genetic material to the population, these results have not been conclusive. A similar project involving translocation of 63 sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) onto the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area in north-central Washington revealed that even a positive response might be delayed a few years following a translocation effort (Fig. 4). The reason for this delay is that a portion of the translocated individuals die before they are able to breed, a portion are not able to either breed and/or nest successfully, and a portion of the young produced do not survive to successfully reproduce. Consequently, it is essential that translocation efforts be supported with multi-year commitments by the agencies and individuals involved.

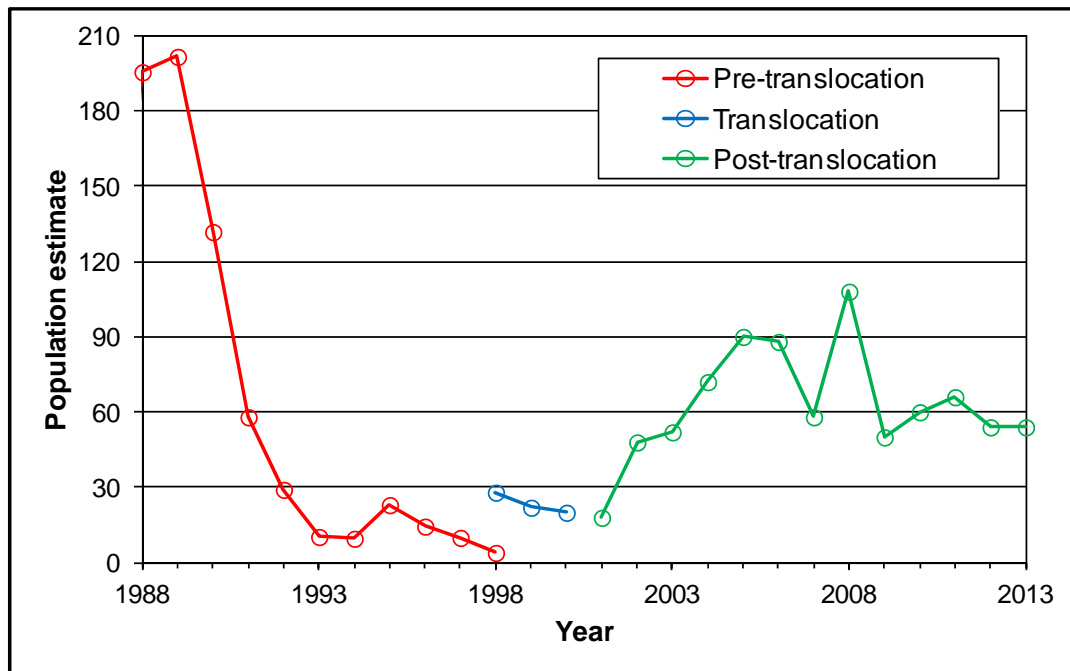


Fig. 4. Estimated population of sharp-tailed grouse on the Scotch Creek Wildlife Area in Washington before and after translocation of 63 sharp-tailed grouse in 1998, 1999, and 2000.

LINCOLN COUNTY TRANSLOCATION PROJECT

Translocations of greater sage-grouse should include four basic stages in order to maximize the opportunities for successful reestablishment or augmentation efforts (similar to Griffith et al. 1989). The first stage is to identify potential release sites based on quantity and quality of habitat on, and near, the sites. In addition, the historic presence and current status of greater sage-grouse near the release sites needs to be established. The second stage is to identify source populations for translocation to the proposed release sites. This should include a genetic analysis. The third stage is to conduct the translocation as efficiently as possible in a way that minimizes the length of captivity and maximizes survival and productivity. The fourth stage is to monitor and evaluate the success or failure of the reestablishment or augmentation effort and to determine future management goals and efforts. This fourth stage is particularly important so that all translocation efforts, even those that are unsuccessful, will provide valuable information for future efforts. The translocation effort was designed to adhere to recommendations outlined by Reese and Connelly (1997).

STAGE 1: RELEASE SITES

Because of declines in greater sage-grouse throughout Washington (overall population estimate of 998 in 2013) and the isolation and small size of remaining populations, there are four different locations that were considered for translocation efforts. Two priority areas include the YTC population (estimated to be 231 in 2013), which was initially augmented in 2004, and the Yakama Nation, which was initially reintroduced in 2006 (see earlier background discussion). Approximately 18 km of fences have been marked on the YTC to reduce the risk of collisions. A third priority area is the northern population of greater sage-grouse centered in Douglas County (estimated to be 712 in 2013). In addition to land acquisition and management, 5 km of fences on DNR land and 55 km of fences on WDFW land (Sagebrush Flat, Dormaier, Chester Butte, and West Foster Creek wildlife areas) have been marked to reduce the potential for grouse collisions. Although this area is still being considered for a translocation, it is likely that any effort will be delayed until additional genetic information can be obtained and analyzed. The reason for caution is that sage-grouse in Douglas County have been documented to have at least one unique haplotype (Benedict et al. 2003) and the importance of this characteristic has yet to be assessed. Furthermore, reproductive data collected for radio-marked birds in north-central Washington have shown that they have the largest average clutch size and the highest rate of nesting and re-nesting of any studied population in North America (Schroeder 1997). When these factors are considered, along with population data showing that the population is relatively stable (Fig. 2), the need to augment the population is not believed to be critical at this time.

The fourth priority area for translocations is the Crab Creek Management Unit, primarily in Lincoln County (Fig. 3). The historic presence of sage-grouse in the Crab Creek area has been well-established (Yocum 1956), as well as their extirpation (Fig. 2, Schroeder et al. 2000). Five leks were documented in the Crab Creek area for the 1954-1986 period; they were last known to be active in 1954 (Cormana Lake), 1978 (Marlin and Odessa), 1984 (Cannawai Creek), and 1986 (Creston Butte). The breeding population appears to have been extirpated in the area prior to the recent translocation.

Why was the population of greater sage-grouse eliminated in the Crab Creek Management Unit? Has subsequent management on the prospective release site adequately addressed the explanations for previous declines in numbers of sage-grouse? There are numerous possible reasons for the sage-grouse population decline and extirpation. These include historic declines in habitat quantity and quality, changes in densities of predators such as common ravens, and isolation of remnant populations due to the lack of dispersal corridors between adjacent populations.

Some of the explanations for the declines in sage-grouse have been directly addressed with management activities, in particular habitat restoration. The WDFW purchased 8,094 ha in Lincoln County in the early 1990s, which became the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area. An additional 518 ha of land owned by the Washington Department of Natural Resources was leased. Because the acquisition was funded by the Bonneville Power Administration to compensate for habitat lost during the construction and operation of hydroelectric projects in the Columbia Basin (Northwest Power Planning Council 2000), the WDFW is actively managing habitat at Swanson Lakes for the benefit of prairie grouse (including both sharp-tailed grouse and greater sage-

grouse). Modifications in the management practices include elimination of grazing on the wildlife area, re-vegetation of disturbed and non-native pastures, and control of noxious weeds.

The BLM has acquired land adjacent to and near the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area. The Lakeview Ranch is a 5,135 ha parcel located approximately 10 km north of the town of Odessa in southwest Lincoln County. Twin Lakes is a 6,201 ha parcel located approximately 25 km southwest of Davenport in central Lincoln County. Coffeepot Lake is a 377 ha parcel located 17 km west of Harrington in Lincoln County. Management of the BLM areas has focused on supporting wildlife habitat, seasonal livestock grazing, and wildlife-based recreational opportunities. The BLM also is considering prairie grouse in their management plans and is involved in the national strategy to “develop the partnerships needed to design and implement actions to support robust populations of sage-grouse and the landscapes and habitats upon which they depend” (Stiver et al. 2007).

Widespread programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) also have resulted in the conversion of vast areas of cropland to potential sage-grouse habitat since the mid-1980s (Schroeder and Vander Haegen 2011); this has had a large influence on private lands in the area. In 2011, 88 km of WDFW fences and 114 km of fences on adjacent BLM lands in Lincoln County were marked to reduce grouse collision mortalities with funding from the BLM. During 2010 an Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account (ALEA) grant was used to assist the Lincoln County Conservation District with removal of 24 km of unneeded fencing; an additional 8 km was removed in 2011. In 2011, 31 ha of crested wheatgrass was reseeded to native vegetation with funding from the BLM.

There is a greater proportion of shrubsteppe in the Crab Creek area (Table 2) than there is within the perimeter of the Moses Coulee population of greater sage-grouse in Douglas County (Table 1). When the revised patterns of land ownership are considered (following acquisition by the WDFW and BLM), along with the relatively large blocks of suitable and/or improving habitats (Fig. 5), it is clear that the management potential for sage-grouse in the Crab Creek Management Unit has improved dramatically since the birds were extirpated in the mid 1980s.

Table 2. Estimated landcover in relation to land ownership within the Crab Creek Sage-grouse Management Unit.

Ownership	Proportion of area dominated by each habitat (%)				Total area (km ²)
	Shrubsteppe	Cropland	CRP	Other	
WDFW - Swanson Lakes	81	10	6	3	77.19
DNR	76	21	2	1	141.74
BLM	92	05	1	2	204.04
Other government land	91	07	0	1	23.27
Private land	47	40	12	1	2,829.79
Total for management unit	52	36	11	1	3,276.04

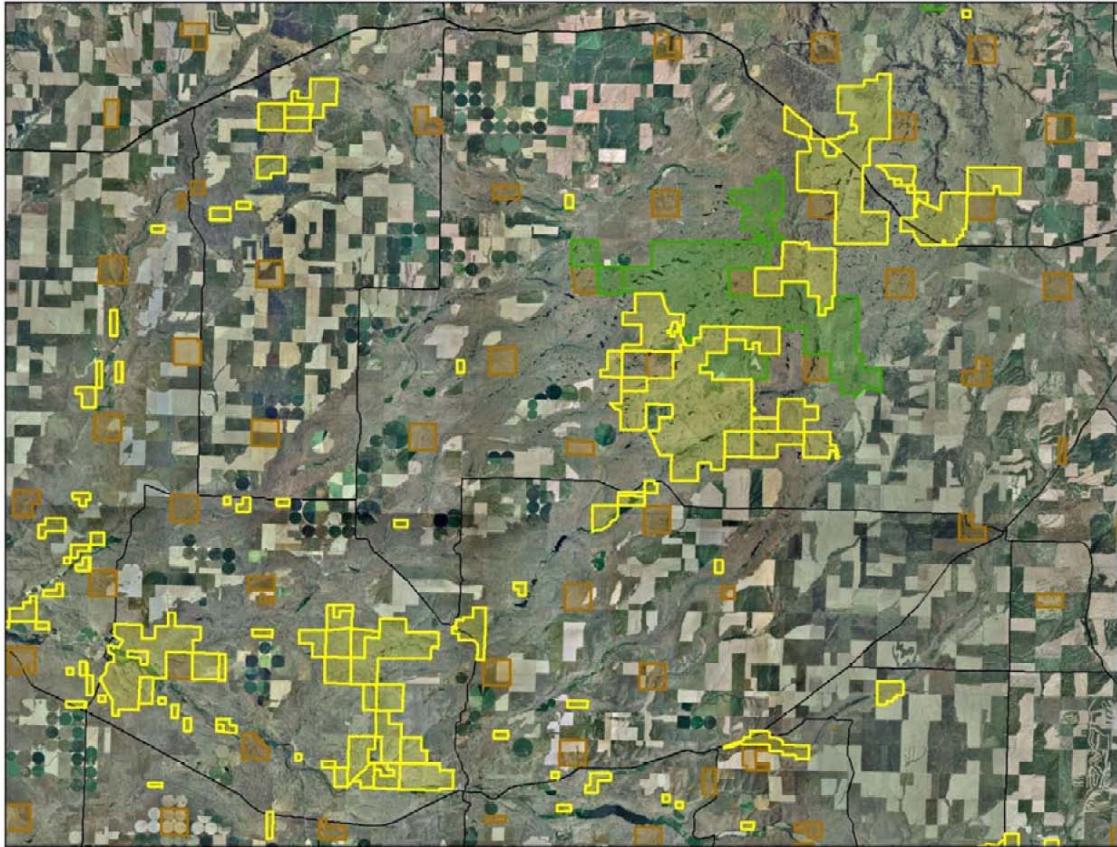


Fig. 5. Major public lands and landcover of the greater sage-grouse reintroduction area in the Crab Creek Sage-grouse Management Unit, Washington. BLM lands are outlined with yellow, WDFW lands with green, and WDNR lands with brown.

STAGE 2: SOURCE POPULATIONS

To maximize the likelihood of a successful translocation, the source population should be relatively close, abundant, and occupy similar habitat (IUCN 1995). Since the only close populations (north-central and south-central Washington) are also experiencing declines, birds are being obtained from other states. All states have had long-term population declines; however, some states have experienced more dramatic declines than others including Washington, California, Utah, Colorado, North Dakota, and South Dakota, and the Canadian Provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan (Connelly and Braun 1997, Connelly et al. 2004, Garton et al. 2011). States with populations considered to be relatively secure include Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

Although greater sage-grouse have been differentiated into two subspecies, *C. u. urophasianus* and *C. u. phaios* (Aldrich 1946), recent genetic analysis by Benedict et al. (2003) and Oyler-McCance et al (2005) do not support this subspecies distinction. Nevertheless, given the published reference to a western and eastern subspecies of sage-grouse, there still should be an effort to avoid translocating ‘eastern’ sage-grouse (eastern Idaho, Montana, Wyoming) to Washington unless absolutely necessary. Rangewide genetic data have indicated that although several greater sage-grouse populations might be suitable for translocation to Washington

(Benedict et al. 2003), there is still enough variation between populations to warrant close scrutiny (Oyler-McCance 2005). For example, an examination of 45 populations through the range of greater sage-grouse showed that Washington sage-grouse were relatively homogenous with regard to genetic material and somewhat different from adjacent populations (Fig. 6, 7). Their analysis also showed that distance between populations was the largest factor explaining variation between most populations.

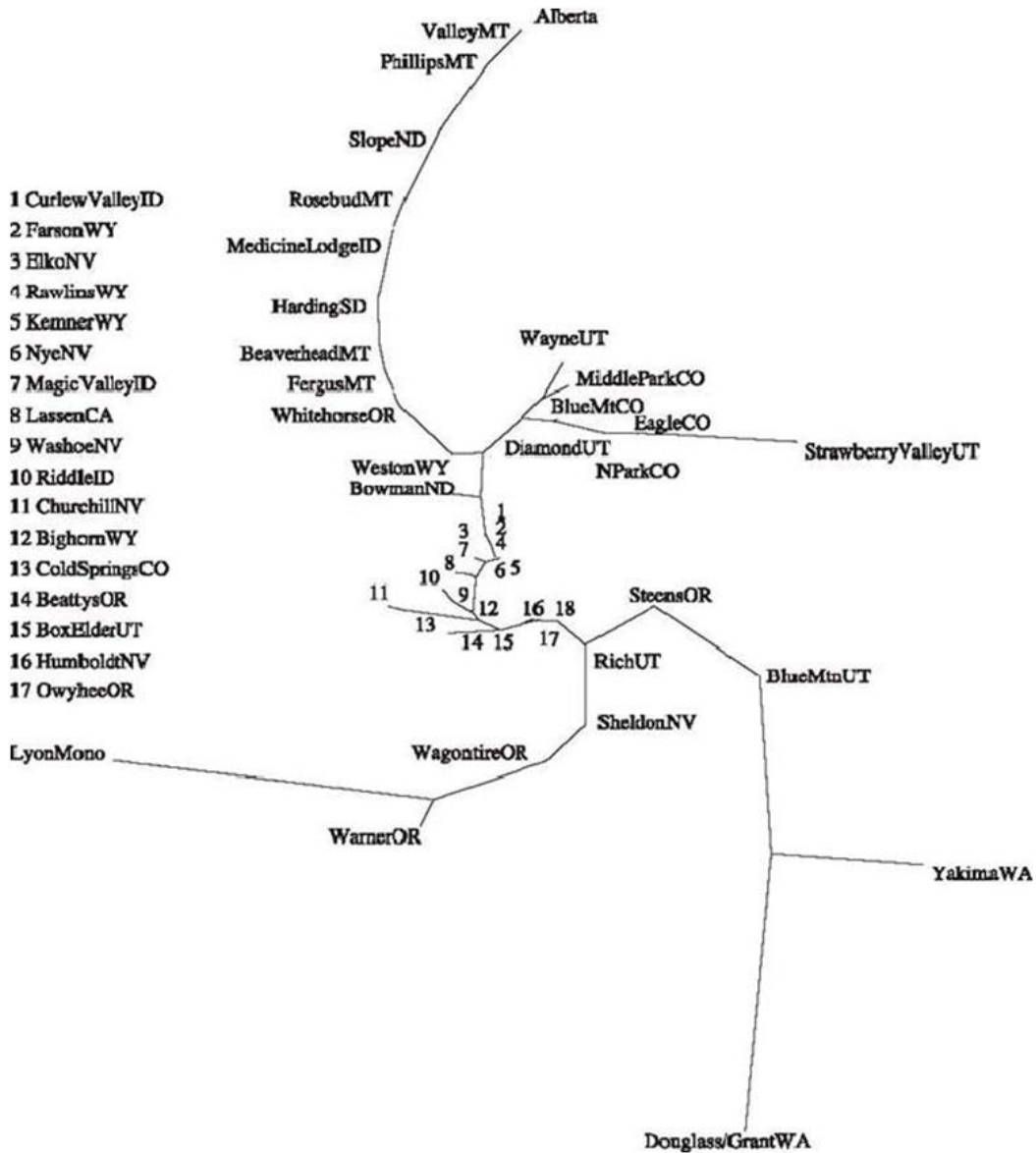


Fig. 6. Neighbor-joining tree constructed using the genetic distances for 45 populations of the greater sage-grouse (longer lines represent a greater genetic distance). Population names correspond with the map shown in Fig. 7 (Oyler-McCance et al. 2005).

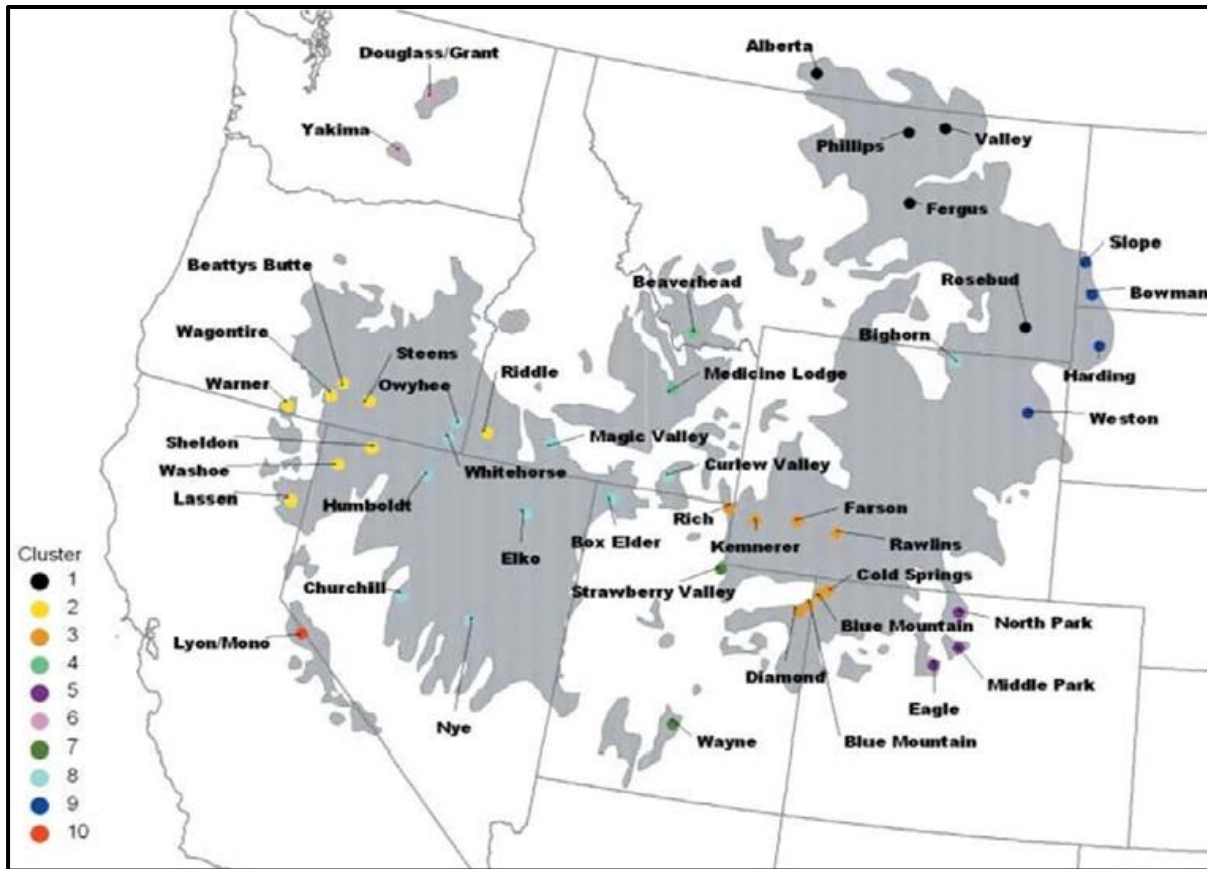


Fig. 7. Map of 45 sampling sites for a microsatellite analysis of greater sage-grouse. The populations are color coded by the cluster to which each population was assigned (Oyler-McCance et al. 2005).

Despite the slight differences between Washington sage-grouse and those found elsewhere, Oyler-McCance et al. (2005) recommended augmentation of Washington populations from the geographically closest populations (in this case southern Oregon and northern Nevada). Their recommendation for augmentation was based on a clear conservation concern supported by the lack of genetic heterogeneity in Washington. With these factors in mind, it was hoped that birds could be obtained from previously used sources in northern Nevada and southern Oregon.

STAGE 3: CAPTURE AND TRANSLOCATION

Sage-grouse are generally captured during the spring breeding period (late March/early April) or in late summer or early autumn (e.g., October), but only when the situation proves favorable. Capture with the aid of night lighting (Giesen et al. 1982, Wakkinen et al. 1992) has proven to be very successful when birds are attending leks and spring releases have been determined to be more successful than other periods (Reese and Connelly 1997).

All birds destined for translocation receive a health certificate from a veterinarian that is accredited within the donor state. The US Department of Agriculture maintains a disease list for which all translocated birds are screened. West Nile Virus (WNV) has recently been documented in greater sage-grouse from Wyoming, Montana, Oregon, and Alberta, Canada. Because infected

birds either die or clear WNV and develop antibodies within 10 days, all areas where populations have had an outbreak of WNV within 10 days of the translocation are eliminated from consideration (K. Mansfield, WDFW Veterinarian, pers. comm.). This is not a concern since the vector of WNV, mosquitoes, are not active in early spring.

Sex and age are determined for all captured birds (Beck et al. 1975). Blood samples are obtained for both disease testing and genetic analysis. Birds are banded with a unique numbered metal band; necklace-mounted, battery-powered radio transmitters (predicted duration of 24 months) are placed on birds prior to release. Birds are transported by car in individual boxes that are small enough to contain the birds' movement. The bottom of each box is lined with a material to reduce contact between feces and the birds' feet. The birds are released within 36 hours of capture, preferably as soon as possible. They are released at first light on the newly established lek with the aid of a special box that permits the simultaneous remote release of multiple birds following a quiet acclimation period of at least 15 minutes.

This project was initiated in 2008 with a 5-year timetable. The first translocation in 2008 had multiple purposes. First, it was hoped the translocated birds would 'search' for other sage-grouse and high quality habitats near the release site, and thus they would provide some additional certainty about the current lack of sage-grouse in the area. Second, the released birds would help identify areas of suitable seasonal habitat, which would therefore enable refinement of the release site in subsequent years. Third, the released males would have the opportunity to develop a small lek that could provide a focal point for subsequent releases. Fourth, the released birds would provide an opportunity to evaluate the monitoring protocols as well as the potential for highlighting risk factors for the area, which may have been overlooked.

The original goal was to translocate 40 greater sage-grouse each year (2008-2011), with an even sex ratio. The purpose of the even sex ratio was to facilitate the establishment of lek sites, encourage competition among males for breeding opportunities, and to compensate for the higher mortality of males. This is in contrast to an augmentation in which a higher number of females is usually preferred. Because of higher mortality of sage-grouse in the first years of the project, and smaller numbers of translocated birds, we now believe translocations through at least 2014 will be beneficial.

Two hundred two greater sage-grouse were released on the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area during 2008-2013 (Table 3). All grouse in 2008 were captured with the aid of night lights on the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, Oregon and released in the middle of SLWA (Fig. 8). In 2009, grouse were captured north of Plush, Oregon. The release site was moved about 3 km to an area closer to where the previous radio-marked birds were spending most of their time and where a lek eventually formed (Fig. 8). In 2010 and 2011 grouse were captured in two locations in Oregon, north of McDermitt, NV and southwest of Vale, Oregon. In 2012, grouse were captured on Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge and on Steens Mountain, Oregon. In 2013, grouse were captured north and west of Plush, Oregon. The birds were released within 36 hours of capture. Starting with the Autumn 2008 release, birds were placed in a settling box for about 15 minutes and the box opened remotely to allow the birds to exit calmly on their own, and minimize the chances of panic flushes that could ultimately result in longer movements away from the release area. Since the release site was moved to the proximity of the newly-formed lek,

males have been observed walking out of the settling boxes and immediately joining other displaying males.

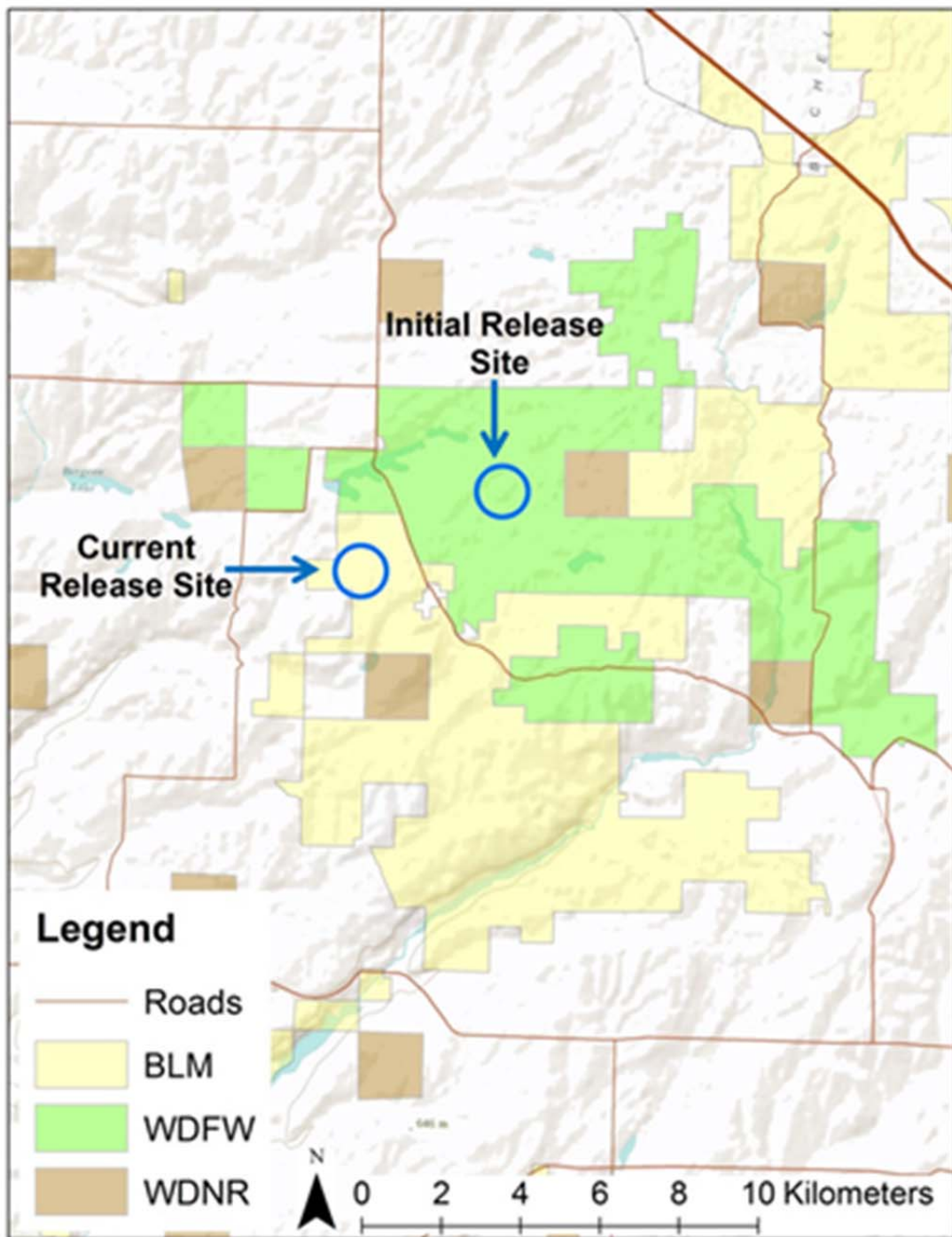


Fig. 8. Release sites for greater sage-grouse in Lincoln County, Washington. The initial location was selected because of habitat quality, lack of nearby fences, accessibility, and its location within a large patch of state (WDFW) and federal (BLM) land. The current site was selected because it was close to previously released grouse.

Table 3. Number of greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County, Washington, 2008-2013.

Sex and age category	Spring 2008	Autumn 2008	Spring 2009	Spring 2010	Spring 2011	Spring 2012	Spring 2013	Total
Males – total	10	7	15	23	20	20	10	105
Adult	7	0	12	18	15	20	8	80
Yearling/Juv	3	7	3	5	5	0	2	25
Females – total	7	17	13	15	17	18	10	97
Adult	6	6	7	4	11	10	6	50
Yearling/Juv	1	11	6	11	6	8	4	47
Total	17	24	28	38	37	38	20	202

STAGE 4: MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The success or failure of the reestablishment effort can be evaluated on and near the release site. Although establishment of the population over the long-term is the ultimate objective, success will also be addressed during this 5-year window. The specific objectives include examinations of movement, habitat use, productivity, survival, and population size. These evaluations provide essential information to determine whether additional translocations, habitat improvements, release locations, and/or translocation methodologies are necessary (Toepfer et al. 1990, IUCN 1995, Connelly and Reese 1997). Because these data are currently being collected, the following analysis is brief and incomplete. Nevertheless, it provides some indication of the progress.

Movement

Radio-marked sage-grouse are located with the aid of portable receivers and 3-element Yagi antennas. Birds are located daily either visually or with triangulation during the first two weeks following release and at least once each week for the duration of the research. For triangulation, three or more azimuths are obtained < 1.5 km of target transmitters and at angles-of-incidence greater than 35° and less than 145°. All locations are recorded with a GPS unit using Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates (nearest 10-m interval). An attempt is made to avoid disturbance of birds, particularly at nest sites. Fixed-wing aircraft are used to locate lost birds on a regular basis throughout the year.

Between 2008 and 2012 5,446 locations were obtained for radio-marked birds (Fig. 9). The maximum observed dispersal distance from the point of release was 85 km by a female released in the spring of 2011 and observed within the Douglas County population. The average maximum observed dispersal from the release site for all animals with 2 or more locations was 13 km with no significant difference between the sexes or between years (Table 4). Average home range size (using minimum convex polygons) was 88 km² for 66 males and 71 km² for 64 females (difference not statistically significant). Although the longest movements and larger home ranges were observed following the spring releases, the autumn birds tended to die early and this likely affected the results. The smaller home ranges in the Spring 2008 release is likely due to radio collar malfunction limiting the range and lifespan of the collars.

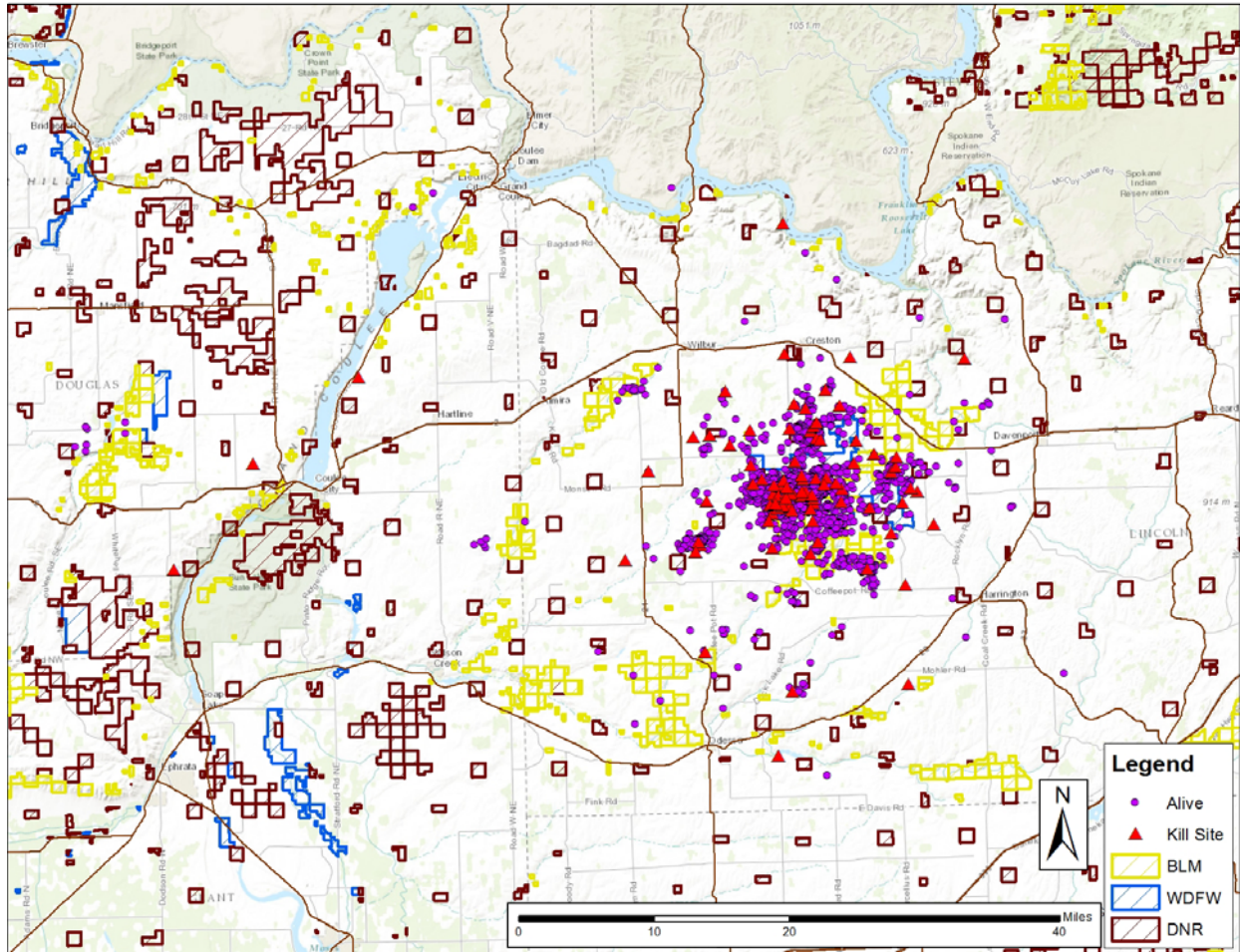


Fig. 9. All locations for sage grouse from initial release on March 31, 2008 through October 2013.

Table 4. Average maximum dispersal and average home range size (minimum convex polygon) for greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County, Washington, 2008-2012.

Category	Spring 2008	Autumn 2008	Spring 2009	Spring 2010	Spring 2011	Spring 2012	Total
<i>Average maximum dispersal (km) ± Standard Error (n)</i>							
Males	10±4 (9)	9±0 (7)	17±3 (15)	14±2 (20)	17±2 (19)	11±2 (15)	14±1 (85)
Females	14±5 (6)	11±1 (17)	13±1 (13)	13±2 (15)	19±4 (17)	21±4 (18)	15±1 (86)
<i>Home range size (km²) ± Standard Error (n)</i>							
Males	21±13 (6)	7±1 (7)	114±47 (15)	127±36 (20)	83±17 (19)	38±10 (13)	81±13 (80)
Females	67±26 (4)	26±7 (16)	87±23 (13)	73±29 (15)	100±26 (17)	69±14 (15)	71±9 (80)

Habitat use

Thirty nests for translocated greater sage-grouse were documented between 2008 and 2013. The primary protective cover was big sagebrush for 70%, gray rabbitbrush for 7%, big sagebrush and gray rabbitbrush for 3%, intermediate wheatgrass for 3%, and basin wildrye for 17%. The vast majority of observations (96%) for radio-marked grouse were in shrubsteppe habitat types. Twenty-three percent were in scabland, 5% were in shrubsteppe with dense (>25% cover) shrub, 25% were in shrubsteppe with moderate (5-25% cover) shrub, and 43% were in shrubsteppe with sparse (<5% cover) shrub. Most areas with sparse shrub cover used by sage grouse were CRP restored with native vegetation.

Productivity

Nest success is examined each breeding season (Schroeder 1997). Nests are considered successful if a minimum of 1 egg hatches. Specific evidence of possible predators is examined at unsuccessful nest sites. Brood success is estimated using radio-marked females that successfully produce broods and survive at least 50 days following hatch (assuming chicks can survive on their own after 50 days).

Due to radio failure no nesting was observed in the 2008 release. In 2009 all 3 nesting attempts failed (Table 5), 2 were predated and 1 nest contained unfertilized eggs. Since 2009 the translocated population's apparent nest success has ranged from 45% to 62% well within the normal range for sage grouse. Percent fledged has been $\geq 50\%$ each year also in the normal range for the species.

Table 5. Observed nest and brood success for greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County, Washington, 2009-2013.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Totals
Nested	3	8	11	13	9	43
Chicks hatched		4	5	8	5	22
Chicks fledged		2	3	4	4	13
Broods with unknown success		1 ^a		1 ^b		2

^a Although the hen was found dead the day of the scheduled flush, it was observed with 4 chicks and another hen 7 days earlier.

^b The radio transmitter died before the scheduled flush.

The presence of unbanded birds at leks has shown that there has been successful recruitment of new birds into the population. These occurrences have been further supported by the observations of brood hens without radio transmitters (1 brood in 2011 and at least 1 brood in 2012).

Survival

Monthly survival was estimated for radio-marked sage-grouse using the Known Fate model in Program MARK 6.1 (White and Burnham 1999). A-prior models containing sex, age, release cohort, and season were assessed (Table 6). Seasons were modeled as follows Spring (March-May), Summer (June-August), Fall (September-November), and Winter (December-February). The top model contained only an effect for spring of the first year post release (first Spring), with an estimated monthly survival of 0.92 ± 0.01 during the first Spring and 0.96 ± 0.01 for the remaining months. The first Spring effect is present in all of the models within 2 AICs of the top model and has a combined model weight of 0.84. The second ranked models contained an effect of sex interactive with the first Spring and indicated that males (0.91 ± 0.02) had lower survival than females (0.93 ± 0.02) during the first three months, but were the same for all months following. The third ranked models contained an effect of age interactive with the first Spring and indicated that adults (0.91 ± 0.02) had lower survival than juveniles (0.94 ± 0.02) during the first three months, but were the same for all months following. Annual survival estimates, from model averaging of the top three models (Table 7), indicate that though survival is lower in the first year post release it is well within the range for the species and in the years following it is on the higher side of the observed range (Schroeder et al 1999).

Table 6. Results from the Known Fate analyses of greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to Lincoln County, Washington, 2008-2012. Seasons modeled as follows Spring (March-May), Summer (June-August), Fall (September-November), and Winter (December-February).

Model	AICc	Delta AICc	AICc Weights	Number parameters	Deviance
1 st Spring	544.3	0.0	0.37	2	219.9
1 st Spring * Sex	545.3	1.1	0.21	3	219.0
1 st Spring * Age	545.7	1.4	0.18	3	219.3
Spring	547.7	3.5	0.06	2	223.4
1 st Year	548.0	3.7	0.06	2	223.6
1 st Spr, Sum, Fall, Win	548.2	3.9	0.05	5	217.8
1 st Spring * Sex * Age	549.1	4.8	0.03	5	218.7
Constant	551.4	7.2	0.01	1	229.1
All Seasons	551.5	7.3	0.01	4	223.1
Sex	552.7	8.4	0.01	2	228.3
Age	553.3	9.0	0.00	2	228.9
Age + Sex	554.7	10.4	0.00	3	228.3
Age * Sex	555.2	10.9	0.00	4	226.8
Monthly	557.3	13.1	0.00	12	212.8
Release Cohort	559.3	15.0	0.00	5	228.9

Table 7. Model averaged results for the top 3 models from the Known Fate analyses of greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to Lincoln County, Washington, 2008-2012.

Sex	Age	Monthly survival		Annual survival	
		First Spring	Post first Spring	First year	Post year one
Male	Adult	0.915 ± 0.018	0.962 ± 0.006	0.539 ± 0.030	0.626 ± 0.031
	Yearling	0.920 ± 0.021	0.962 ± 0.006	0.548 ± 0.030	0.626 ± 0.031
Female	Adult	0.922 ± 0.018	0.962 ± 0.006	0.552 ± 0.030	0.626 ± 0.031
	Yearling	0.928 ± 0.019	0.962 ± 0.006	0.562 ± 0.030	0.626 ± 0.031

Sage-grouse illustrated some distinct tendencies following translocation. Mortality was particularly high for the autumn translocation, with 20 of the known mortalities occurring in the month following release (Table 8). It is not clear why this high mortality occurred, but one possible explanation is that most of the translocated birds were juveniles (Table 3). Most movements were concentrated in and around WDFW Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area and BLMs Twin Lakes Area, which tends to have greater sagebrush cover (Fig. 9). When birds did move long distances off the primary study area, their risk of mortality appeared to be relatively high. There were also 11 mortalities in which the entire bird was recovered. Based on field notes and necropsies they have been attributed to: 2 collisions with manmade objects (e.g. fences); 5 predators that lost or abandoned their kill; 1 disease; 1 human hunter; and 2 were too decomposed to determine cause of death. As a result of these observations, additional management efforts have been directed toward marking of fences to make them more visible, removal of unnecessary fences, and posting of additional signs to educate hunters in areas with endemic and reintroduced populations of sage and sharp-tailed grouse.

Table 8. Mortality of greater sage-grouse translocated from southern Oregon to the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in Lincoln County, Washington, 2008-2013.

Category	Spring 2008	Autumn 2008	Spring 2009	Spring 2010	Spring 2011	Spring 2012	Spring 2013	Total
Mammalian (e.g. coyote, badger)	1	2	4	6	3	0	1	17
Great horned owl	0	6	1	1	1	0	1	10
Raptor	0	4	4	2	4	4	0	18
Disease	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Manmade Structure (e.g. Fence)	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	3
Human Hunter	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Unknown	3	8	8	9	17	7	2	54
Total	4	23	17	18	25	13	4	104

Population monitoring

Radio-marked males are located during the morning period to determine the locations of temporary and permanent leks. An attempt is made to regularly monitor these leks without disturbing the birds. In addition, all potential sage-grouse habitat within 20 km of the release site is inventoried to estimate lek density and attendance of males (Connelly et al. 2003). Surveys are conducted during March and April of each year. No lekking activity was documented in 2008 or 2009. In 2010 on two occasions banded males were seen strutting together with females seen or heard in the area. No unmarked birds were seen strutting with the banded males. In 2011 a lek site was established by males from previous years' releases, just north of the 2010 area. The highest count in 2011 was 7 males pre-release. The same lek was active again in 2012 and 2013, with high counts of 7 and 12 pre-release and 14 and 18 post-release, respectively. Additionally, 2012 a lone sage grouse male was observed strutting ~8 km from the established lek. This was notable because several nests were located in the vicinity and at least one other male was known to be in the area (based on telemetry). No males were observed strutting in this second area in 2013, but hen were tracked in the area.

ADDITIONAL PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND BENEFITS

Agreement number 13410-B-G011 with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, *2011-2012 Lincoln County Sage Grouse Reintroduction* identified the project objectives and benefits listed below (in italics). In addition to re-establish a sage-grouse population Lincoln County, fence marking, removal, and habitat restoration objectives were desired to reduce the potential for grouse injuries and mortalities caused by fence collisions and to improve habitat condition by restoring former grain fields to native steppe vegetation.

1) Release 40 sage-grouse in 2011 and again in 2012 and monitor survival, movements, reproduction.

Sage-grouse releases in Lincoln County during the agreement period included 37 in 2011, 38 in 2012, and 20 in 2013. The results of monitoring are detailed in the preceding pages of this report.

2) Mark ≥ 10 km of fenceline with pvc and reflective tape markers.

In 2011, BLM funded a project to mark 88 km of fences on WDFW lands and 114 km of fences on adjacent BLM lands in Lincoln County to reduce grouse collision mortalities. Fence collisions can be a major source of mortality for sage-grouse, and making them more visible can dramatically reduce collisions.

3) Remove 24 km of unneeded fences on Swanson Lakes WLA in 2010 (LCCD ALEA grant).

WDFW assisted the Lincoln County Conservation District with an ALEA grant to remove 24 km of unneeded fencing in 2010 and an additional 8 km in 2011.

4) Restore 31 ha of wheat fields to native vegetation (BLM funding)

In 2012, WDFW completed restoring native vegetation to 41 ha in the Telford area. Since 1996, WDFW has restored almost 1,000 ha in Lincoln County.

Goals have been expanded for the 2014-2015 period and include the following. In part, these goals are based on the successes of previous efforts.

1) Release 40 sage-grouse on or near the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area in 2014 and again in 2015. The additional releases are needed in part because of the issues that were noted during previous efforts including smaller numbers of birds released and larger movements than expected. It is believed that these translocations will end in 2015.

2) Continue habitat restoration and management efforts within sage-grouse range, particularly in and near the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area.

3) Continue monitoring survival, movements, and reproduction of greater sage-grouse in and near the Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area.

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