

Conservation SHOWCASE



protect your way of life.



NRCS

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Ranchers Work to Restore Wildlife Habitat and Ranch Viability

Hines, Ore.—When both wildlife and vital natural resources began disappearing on their eastern Oregon ranch, Frank and Sharon Catterson made the decision to fight back against invasive plants and weeds and reclaim their land.

Today, with support from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its partners, the Cattersons are happy to declare success.

Above: Frank and Sharon Catterson

With technical and financial assistance provided through the Mule Deer Initiative and the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI), the Cattersons have successfully eradicated 650 acres of invasive western juniper from their ranchland.

A single juniper tree can consume up to 50 gallons of water each day, robbing arid ranchland of vital moisture, according to experts at Oregon State University. Removal of the thirsty trees leaves more water in soils and creeks.

“The eradication of juniper on the Catterson ranch has already made a positive difference,” said Cyndee Hill, USDA-NRCS Range Management Specialist. “It has helped restore the habitat and brightened the future of the ranching operation.”

In addition to the removal of juniper, an invasive annual rye known as medusahead is also scheduled for treatment.

“We are throwing a one-two punch to knock out both these threats to the land,” Cyndee said.

Frank hopes these efforts will not only improve the land but also help restore mule deer populations. “In the 70’s there were lots of deer around,” Frank observed. “But lately we have seen very few.”

Declines in mule deer population can be attributed in part to the expansion of juniper, which in addition to soaking up vital water resources, crowds out the aspen, bitterbrush and other high-quality forage plants mule deer depend on for food. In a targeted effort, juniper removal was focused on areas known to support these preferred plants.

Juniper suppression is not only beneficial for mule deer, but also for sage-grouse, a medium-sized, ground-dwelling bird native to the sagebrush steppelands of central and eastern

Oregon. Threats to the bird’s natural habitat have increased over the last several decades putting sage-grouse on a list of candidate species awaiting consideration for Endangered Species Act protections.

“We are throwing a one-two punch to knock out both these threats to the land.”

—Cyndee Hill
NRCS Range Management Specialist

Juniper encroachment on the bird’s natural breeding grounds, known as leks, have forced sage-grouse to abandon nesting in many areas, making them susceptible to predators and other threats. By removing juniper on their land, the Cattersons hope to thereby restore the bird’s breeding grounds and natural habitat.

The removal of juniper alone may not be enough to restore sage-grouse populations. Medusahead rye, a grass that challenges the viability of range systems because of its fast



Mule deer



Frank and Sharon Catterson survey downed juniper on their ranch.



Greater Sage-Grouse

growth-rate, high-speed production and ability to out-compete other grass species, poses a new threat to sage-grouse habitat. Unpalatable to grazing animals, the plant smothers other vegetation and spreads rapidly.

“Medusahead is an invasive grass and when it takes hold, it wipes out all native grass vegetation underneath,” Cyndee explained. When medusahead invades rangeland, forage use is decreased by 85 percent. This forces grazers to focus on the remaining 15 percent and puts increased pressure on those native grasses, resulting in a decrease in shelter for wildlife such as the sage-grouse. Medusahead’s thick thatch also burns easily because of its high fuel content.

“There have always been fires, but if they come too often, the sagebrush, bunch grasses and other native understory can’t recover,” Cyndee said. “That leaves you with a monoculture of annual grass such as medusahead.”

In an effort to control medusahead outbreaks, the Cattersons plan to spray affected areas with an herbicide by helicopter. Because earlier rangeland treatment removed most of the

invasive junipers on the ranch, it will be easier to see and treat the medusahead by air.

“We don’t know how medusahead came here,” Sharon said. “Weed seeds can be transported by vehicles, equipment, wind or animals can spread it.”

To ensure precision application of the herbicide, NRCS representatives tracked and entered the location of medusahead patches on the Catterson ranch using GPS units. Upon completion of the survey, a map will be generated pinpointing the exact locations requiring treatment.

“NRCS has been great for us,” Frank said. “There are so many things that ranchers have to take care of, that doing these extra things is just one more thing on the task list to do; if it was up to us, we wouldn’t be able to get it all done.”

With NRCS technical and financial support, the Cattersons developed a conservation plan and received cost-share payments to hire contractors to carry out their plan so they could concentrate on their ranch work.

“The conservation work is important,” Frank said. “I think the ranchers out here are the best conservationists, because if they don’t take care of their land, it is only hurting them. If you don’t take care of your land year after year, then you won’t be productive.”

The Cattersons hope to keep their ranch productive for generations to come. “We plan to keep this land in our family after we’re gone,” Sharon said. “As a family, we like to visit the old original cabin. It’s just a shack, but it’s our cabin.” And with NRCS assistance and the family’s continued conservation efforts, the Cattersons are sure to own that cabin for a long time.