

A Common Sense Approach to Sage Grouse Conservation

By Patrice Stewart

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My name is Patrice Stewart. I'm a senior at Albert Lowry High School here in Winnemucca. I wrote this speech, built my website, designed and made my promotional materials as my senior FFA and Ag Leadership Project, but mostly as a way to help save my family ranch from destruction caused by the BLM and US Forest Service imposing new and far reaching regulations restricting use of the public lands in the Great Basin to protect the sage grouse.

I've lived on my family's cattle ranch in Paradise Valley, Nevada all my life and represent the fifth generation of my family to do so. My great-great grandfather came to Paradise Valley in 1864, having immigrated to America from a small village in Germany.

Our ranch is in Northern Nevada's Great Basin just below its borders with Oregon and Idaho. It is a challenging environment. It's tough, high desert country. In the best of times we only get about 11 inches of rainfall per year. Lately, severe drought has reduced our annual moisture to between 7 to 8 inches.

From very early on, my family has believed that we shouldn't try to take more from the land than it can naturally produce. We work hard to keep that in mind when we farm, graze or otherwise use this ground.

We utilize grazing as a means of converting grasses and other plant material into meat, milk and the hundreds of other products made from cattle. These grasses and other plants grow on our privately owned land as well as on the public lands surrounding our ranch. We hold federally managed grazing permits to use these resources, and have used them responsibly and respectfully for over 150 years. Our use of this land pre-dates the federal agencies by many decades.

When our cattle graze through an area, it remains open and usable for wildlife, recreation, sportsmen and other industry. The water we have developed over 150 years has also increased the numbers and variety of wildlife throughout our range.

Our cattle graze the grasses and other small plants that grow under and surround much of the sagebrush and larger plants in our area, they deposit natural fertilizer, and they press new seeds into the ground. The disturbance their feet create helps to move, then secure new seeds and scatter fertilizer to aid in the growth of new plants and maintain and improve soil health.

Cattle grazing dramatically reduces fuel load on the range. Fuel load is the build-up of plant material that left untouched, can and does result in catastrophic wildfire.

Since the mid 1960's, federal land managers have cut the amount of cattle grazing in our area by over 50%. Overall, that has also led to a six-fold increase in catastrophic wildfire. Millions more acres have burned each year as the result of more fuel being left on the range.

Once these fast moving fires start, more dry grasses and undergrowth around mature plants like sagebrush make them difficult or impossible to stop. Once these fires get going, they kill everything in their path. Every plant, animal, insect that cannot run away is wiped out. Those animals that do survive find food scarce and many starve. Recent fires in the Great Basin have left wide expanses looking more like the moon, rather than anything recognizable here on earth.

I don't want you to think that grazing can prevent all fires, or that all fire is a bad thing. Just like grazing is a positive part of a healthy ecosystem, so is fire. Our challenge lies in finding the right balance.

I love my life on the ranch and out on the range. After college, I intend to make our ranch my life and career. I hope to raise a family there. I cherish the natural world I live in and I respect the need to do what is right when it comes to using the land. No one knows more about this country than the people who live and work on it every day. My family has earned a living here in this tough high desert environment for over 150 years. We have learned that to be successful, we must work with this land, that is how we live and that is how we try to manage this land.

Through 150 plus years, we have seen many changes and many approaches to living and working out here. The biggest changes I have seen in my lifetime are a drier climate and from a human perspective, a lack of respect from environmental groups and federal land managers for the ranching families who make the Great Basin their home.

Instead of wanted to learn from and partner with the people who live and work here, government and the environmental lobby seem to do everything possible to destroy our way of life without much regard for common sense or good science. Whether it is to fence off water sources, dictate the exact height of plant-stubble cattle must leave behind, or drastically limit grazing so that out of control wildfire has a chance to kill every living thing in its path, government seems to be doing everything possible to end our way of life out here.

Think about your own life. Imagine a federal agency or a political group from 3000 miles away descending on you, and telling you that YOU are the problem, without even knowing you. They impose a different, better way to do things. Heck, over the years, they'll impose a dozen different, better ways to do things.

You build and tear out the same fences, and have the same discussions like they are all new and improved just about every time a new Forest Ranger or BLM boss comes to town. You have little choice, so you try to be open-minded and you listen, you try it their way and along the way you try to share with them your experience and what you know, only to be treated like an outlaw in your own country. It's frustrating to say the least.

If government and the environmental lobby are allowed to continue their War on the West unchecked, people like my family and me will be gone in less than a generation, and with us, a way of life will be gone. Our cattle herds use a resource that is absolutely worthless for anything else.

We care deeply about the environment I live in and want to see it maintained and functioning forever. We are the true environmentalists out here. Whether you call us buckaroos or cowboys and cowgirls, we are great stewards of this land, because we love it, we understand it and we make our living here – so taking care of it is in our best interests.

The latest threat to our survival is a dwindling number of birds called sage grouse.

These are birds about the size of a small chicken that live among and eat sagebrush.

As a species, grouse are an ancient bird and in decline world-wide for over 1000 years.

Here in the Great Basin, their numbers started to plummet in the mid 1960's when cattle

grazing was reduced and wildfire began to destroy huge new swaths of their historic habitat. The cause and effect is direct. As federal land managers removed livestock from the range, more fuels built up, wildfires ravaged the Great Basin and sage grouse numbers fell. Today, 80% of the threat posed to the sage grouse is from habitat loss and destruction. The number-one threat to their critical habitat is wildfire.

The truth is: **the best, most natural and most responsible way to remove excess fuel from our rangeland is through responsible livestock grazing.** Our cattle can be grazed at rates that will remove the fuel load while minimizing disruption to sage grouse mating, breeding and lifecycle. This is a win-win if government bureaucracy will allow it. Even by their own numbers, the potential threat to sage grouse numbers caused by livestock grazing is less than 3% - and the benefits are huge. Over four times more grouse are killed by legal hunting, birds of prey, ravens, coyotes and bobcats than by all grazing combined. And of course, all of these losses are dwarfed by the enormity of loss caused by just one out of control wildfire.

Increased, responsible cattle grazing is a common sense solution to a real problem. It is sage grouse conservation that works. It is all natural, renewable, and part of a natural, healthy cycle of life. Cattle do not share a significant food source with the sage grouse, so they complement one another rather than competing for resources. The bonus is that cattle grazing also produces delicious, healthy products that feed and clothe people. Our family ranch produces enough beef in an average year to feed over 1000 people. When you throw in the hundreds of other useful products made from our cattle, the positive impact to our local and State economy reaches into millions of dollars.

Our operation has no full-time employees except my folks and me. We use neighbors, friends and part-time help during busy times of the year, like round-up, haying and brandings. We're not big agri-business; we are the real face of ranching in the United States. My family and I are active members of our community, we vote, we volunteer, we go to school, we rodeo, we pay our bills and our taxes. We don't employ illegal immigrants or lean on the welfare system, we drive American built pick-up trucks, like our food natural, healthy and fresh, and we still ride horses and herd our cattle from field to field on the ranch and out on the desert using our trusty saddle horses. We get up before the sun and we fall into bed every night, tired, but loving what we do...and knowing that what we do, and how we do it... is a good thing. Good for the land, good for the people who eat and use our use products and good for our Country.

I wouldn't change how I live for anything. It's a great way of life and its how I want to spend mine. If you believe like I do that not only the sage grouse, but also the Nevada ranch family is a species worth saving, log onto my website and sign my petition.

www.savethesagegrouse.org

My campaign aims to inform Americans about how ranch families like mine can help save the sage grouse through responsible livestock grazing. We know, and now you do too, that livestock grazing is sage grouse conservation that works! Its common sense and good science.

Thanks for your time today, if you would like to know more about our family ranching operation, visit www.stewartsninetysixranch.com And if you have a choice at the dinner table tonight, remember, EAT BEEF!!!! It tastes great and is great for you!