

Ranchers profit from conservation

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Courtesy of Tom Page Work is done to reconnect a severed channel of Mill Creek in the Pahsimeroi Valley to benefit endangered fish. The land is ranched by Tom Page, who believes ranchers stand to profit by partnering in wildlife conservation programs that pay them to make improvements.

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A May, Idaho, rancher has received a large grant to continue improving his range land for the benefit of sage grouse, seeking to be proactive in case of an endangered species listing.

MAY, Idaho — Rather than a burden, Tom Page sees ranching with endangered species as an opportunity to increase profits. The 46-year-old Colorado transplant's ranch encompasses private, state and federal land with streams supporting endangered bull trout and salmon and acres proposed as critical habitat for sage grouse, which are under review for an endangered species listing.

Tom and his brother Michael, his business partner, have worked with conservation organizations and the federal and state governments to supplement their ranching income, selling development rights to much of their private property for substantial payments. They also hope to earn extra revenue by working with the Idaho Water Resources Board to enhance fish flows with water savings from the installation of a piped irrigation system.

Their grazing improvements and approach to water management have already brought sage grouse and elk back to the Big Creek drainage, which runs through their ranch.

"The value of the property doing what we're doing is increasing far faster than with how it was ranched in the past," Michael said.

Tom, who worked in Colorado as a staff member for a land trust and a watershed protection organization before implementing conservation improvements at his father's Montana ranch, believes his ranch will be well positioned if sage grouse are listed.

From 2009 to 2013, the brothers bought four ranches in the Pahsimeroi Valley with inheritance money, making certain they were the only permittees on public land to facilitate projects with the BLM.

Neighbors were initially skeptical of the outsiders, who spoke of conservation and letting irrigation water flow unused. The brothers were called communists and "threats to agriculture."

"I think they're starting to realize the things they're doing aren't so bad and are benefiting the threatened and endangered species, especially the salmon, the steelhead and the bull trout in the valley," said Rosana Reith, a range management specialist with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service who has worked closely with the brothers.

Their ranch was one of two Idaho recipients of funding through a new NRCS farm bill program. They were awarded \$1.77 million for the development easement to 1,922 acres of core sage grouse habitat. Though they had to consent to manage grazing to benefit sage grouse, the rest-rotation management plan they'd previously developed meets the program's criteria. Easement details are still being finalized.

Earlier this year, the brothers also gave up development rights to a 1,739-acre parcel and a 2,200-acre parcel for fishery benefits.

Tom believes the nation's best conservation work is occurring on private land, and policies must change to facilitate projects on federal allotments. It took him more than a year to complete a federal environmental review for his ranch's cooperative project to reconnect Mill Creek, a stream severed by over-irrigation to help endangered fish. Work on the channel should take about three weeks. BLM's environmental review is also moving slowly on another of his stream projects to restore salmon migration — reconnecting the main-stem Pahsimeroi River where it's blocked by a poorly constructed dam.

"If you don't want to do these things, I think you're reducing your chances for success in the future, and you're seeing some guys in the Pahsmieroi and Lemhi valleys starting to get it," Tom said.