

Op-ed: With right incentives, ranchers want to help sage grouse

BY MARY CONOVER AND KENYON FIELDS

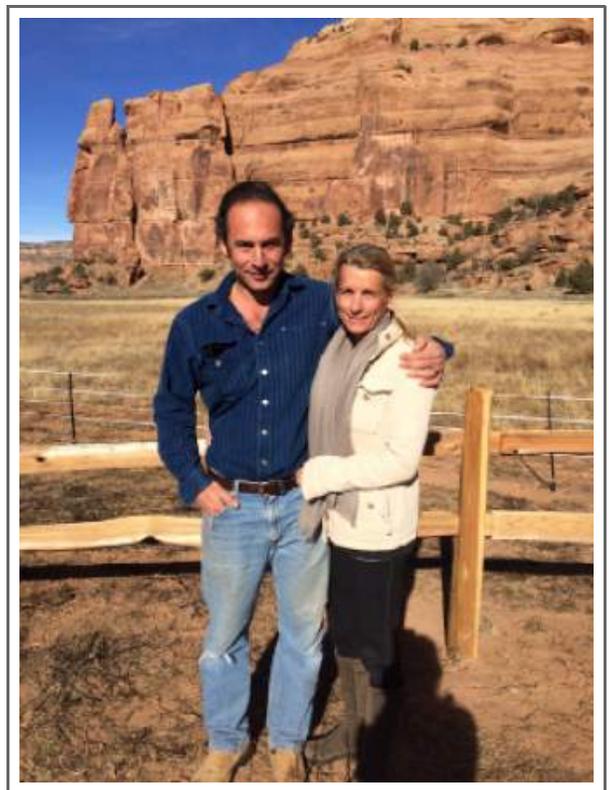
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We at Mountain Island Ranch have been working to help Gunnison sage grouse for 20 years because we care about our land and, to us, the idea of losing a species native to the ranch would mean we've not done our job as land stewards. In the late 1990s, neighbors agreed with this view, and collectively we developed a landscape-scale framework to guide our actions. Then in 2000 we all signed onto the Sage Grouse Conservation Plan in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Natural Resource Conservation Service and the Colorado and Utah wildlife agencies.

You could say that it's easy for our ranch to be relaxed about the recent threatened listing of the grouse because we are protected by a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances that we signed soon after these were made available. Another way to look at it is that we voluntarily agreed to suffer the effects of listing before it was even listed by agreeing to do management actions outside of our normal manner.

We brush-hogged around leks and did stripping of sage flats; we used our cows to create open areas; we roller-chopped pinyon and juniper; and we agreed not to graze around nesting and strutting sites. Some of this was on our deeded lands, and the rest on our BLM grazing allotments. About 90 grouse were transplanted to the ranch and surrounding area. We ended up making money doing this work. The lowest count of



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Kenyon Fields and Mary Conover

grouse was 54 and currently the population is at 152. We're proud of that.

So the reality was that not only did we not "suffer" management changes, we benefitted. With few changes to how we do business, we got a more robust and seemingly stabilized bird population.

Unfortunately, we have rancher friends elsewhere in the region who applied for CCAAs and have been waiting and waiting. Their eagerness to take voluntarily actions and restrictions for the sake of the bird and to join in partnerships with agencies to help get the work done was left unheeded due to resource shortages at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Now, that same underfunded and short-staffed agency is going to have to implement the threatened listing; good luck on that.

For the Endangered Species Act to work, and for dedicated state agencies to be able to effectively work with dedicated ranchers, we the public need to demand better funding for all those agencies and programs so our friends don't wait in line for years for tools like CCAAs. Even if that funding doesn't materialize, we can't give up hope.

We're not the only ranchers who care about their land. Far from it, in fact. But most of us need incentives and assurances that adding to our workload will pay off. With the future listing possibility of the greater sage grouse, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Congress ought to learn from this Gunnison grouse situation and make it possible for those of us who care to do what's necessary. In the meantime, we hope our fellow ranchers will stay the course, call for these changes and do what they can to work within this broken system for the benefit of the land and wildlife.

Mary Conover owns Mountain Island Ranch in Utah and Colorado, and runs it with her husband Kenyon Fields and son Nick Greenway.