

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Natural Resources Committee:

My name is Dr. Jack Kirkley. I am a Biology Professor and an Ornithologist from Dillon.

I moved to Dillon in the summer of 1985, now almost 30 years ago. During my first year of teaching, some of my science colleagues and local biologists in the BLM were very anxious to show me (the new "bird guy" in town) the early spring spectacle of pre-dawn courtship displays of Sage Grouse. It is particular noteworthy that southwestern Montana is considered to be one of the major strongholds of this grouse species in the intermountain region. My interest was immediately "hooked" by this bird's apparently very risky ritual, where these tough, showy males congregate on open ridgetops exposed to the sometimes very severe weather, as well as being exposed to predators, such as Golden Eagles, during this several month display period. Sage Grouse truly are an amazing biological phenomenon.

In those early years, I also began to attend the occasional ad hoc meetings of concerned citizens and agency biologists, aimed at the question of what could be done to reverse the severe declines of these grouse in certain areas of southwestern Montana, such as the Centennial Valley. Old timers told stories of seeing as many as a hundred displaying males in certain areas where now only a couple of dozen were present or maybe none at all. Those discussions on how to fix that grouse decline problem were taking place more than a quarter century ago. So, this is an old problem which has not gone away.

On the bright side, we now hear and read about many success stories, of progressive ranchers and innovative area land managers teaming up and working together collaboratively, in common cause, to improve the condition of the rangelands, particularly the important riparian habitats that provide crucial brood rearing cover and food for each new generation of grouse.

We also now have decades of research on the ecology of this species and we have the knowledge and the tools that we need to make conditions better for these birds. Rest rotation grazing methods, improved pasture configuration, temporary electric fencing to protect riparian areas, improved stock water placement, the use of fence markers to reduce the risk of collision, are but a few of the techniques which are helping to improve grouse reproductive success and survival. Management policies that limit disturbances near sensitive areas such as grouse leks and brood rearing areas also must become a major focus for the long term conservation of this species.

The Sage Grouse Stewardship Act (SB 261), which is contained within HB 2 would provide the funding to support these pro-active kinds of management in a much broader, state-wide manner. The aim of this initiative is to greatly expand these kinds of collaborative success stories that promote rangeland habitat improvement, and which, in turn, will help to stabilize and even to increase the population sizes of Sage Grouse throughout its natural geographic range in Montana.

Taking this action now will demonstrate Montana's commitment to Sage Grouse conservation, and thus preclude any necessity for federal listing of this species under the Endangered Species Act. Montana and other neighboring states should make these efforts to prove that our management of this native species can be best accomplished by our state wildlife agencies, our local land management professionals and, most importantly, our local citizens who are ultimately the on-the-ground stewards of our land.

The Sage Grouse Stewardship Act is a win-win initiative for the folks who work in our rangelands and for the many species of wildlife, such as the Sage Grouse, that depend on our healthy sage-steppe habitats.

Thank you for your support for this important initiative. And thank you for your service to the State of Montana as our citizen legislators.

