

## FSA's Conservation Program is Bringing Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse Back to Idaho

Idaho's SAFE (State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement) is about to enroll its 100,000 acre into this very successful USDA program and Idaho is pleased to announce that it currently has the largest allocation of acres enrolled in the United States. The program is based on a partnership between State government and USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). To be accepted by FSA, SAFE proposals had to be approved by qualified wildlife professionals and include a wildlife monitoring and evaluation plan. In Idaho this plan was established by conservationists and administered by Idaho Fish and Game. The proposals also had to be based in science, using accepted techniques.

SAFE programs vary nationwide but for Idaho it is concentrated on increasing habitat for Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse (CSTG) as well as other upland game birds. The program has been very effective and Idaho has seen a marked increase in nesting areas, known as Leks, for this bird. Sal Palazzolo of Idaho Fish and Game said, "Idaho has the largest remaining population of Sharp-tailed grouse in North America, CRP and SAFE are one of the main reasons why."



The popularity of the program has been obvious from the beginning. Idaho's original allocation of 6300 acres in 2008 quickly jumped to 24,300 in 2010 and then to 94,300 in 2012. In 2012 Deb Duba, FSA County Executive Director for Power County, remembers that producers were waiting in line to sign up. They even had producers at the office, hours before it opened, to make sure they got in.

Also in 2012 Idaho FSA added a second SAFE focus area in western Idaho, with Upland Game Birds as the targeted species. This brought the total acres available to 131,100. The total allocation for Sharp-tailed Grouse in Idaho is 106,100 acres with an additional 25,000 acres set aside for Western Idaho Upland Game Birds. Because of the commitment of Idaho Fish and Game to support the program we will enroll the 100,000<sup>th</sup> acre for CSTG by the end of September which will bring Idaho very close to its total allocation yet again. The first Idaho County to have a SAFE contract was established in Caribou County. The 100,000<sup>th</sup> acre will be on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation where the tribe is committed to enhancing habitat for this native bird.

FSA created SAFE to assist states' high-priority wildlife conservation objectives through the restoration of vital habitat. While still a game bird in Idaho, CSTG are considered a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Idaho State Wildlife Action Plan. Under the SAFE program Idaho producers elect to take eligible crop-land out of agricultural production and plant habitat beneficial to sharp-tails. These grouse were once considered the most abundant and well-known upland game bird throughout much of this region. Through SAFE we are hoping to bring it back to that status.

Throughout their historical range, the decline of Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse has been primarily attributed to the loss and degradation of native grassland and shrub-grassland vegetation types. Major portions of these communities were converted to agriculture within the Interior Columbia Basin which includes Idaho. To a lesser extent other land uses that are unsuitable for the birds were also instituted and suitable nesting areas continued to diminish. Because of the excellent partnership between FSA, NRCS, Idaho Fish and Game and Idaho producers the nesting, brood-rearing and wintering habitat for CSTG has been re-established in many Idaho Counties and the population of this bird is growing. FSA

anticipates reaching the full allocation of 106,100 acres before the end of 2014 and has submitted a request for additional SAFE acres, to continue building on this proven success.

FSA is proud to be a part of restoring this game bird in Idaho. A video was recently filmed on two SAFE contracts in the Malad area. Tim Torell made the video with the help of local land owners and Idaho Fish and Game. You can see clearly why so many people are working hard to bring this bird back to Idaho lands. Thanks to Tim for allowing us to link to this video. [Sharp-tailed Grouse Video link.](#)



A male sharp-tailed grouse - Photo by Tim Torell

Eligible counties for CSTG include: Bannock, Bingham, Bonneville, Caribou, Cassia, Clark, Franklin, Fremont, Jefferson, Madison, Power, Oneida, and Teton. For Western Idaho Upland game bird counties include: Benewah, Idaho, Kootenai, Latah, Lewis, Nez Perce, Adams, Gem, Payette, and Washington.