



## **#FridaysOnTheFarm: Restoring Sagebrush Country With ‘Modern Wildfire’**

From the kitchen table to the boardroom table, the USDA brings people together across the nation for: healthier food, natural resources and people; a stronger agricultural industry; and economic growth, jobs and innovation.

Each Friday, meet those farmers, producers and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, meet second-generation Oregon landowner, Robin Laakso, who is personally responsible for restoring hundreds of acres of sagebrush.

### **‘Modern Wildfire’**

For centuries, wildfire regularly swept across the sage, keeping juniper trees in check and maintaining a natural balance.

However, decades of overgrazing and wildfire suppression have let juniper trees grow large and spread far across sagebrush country, reducing habitat for sage grouse and other wildlife, and creating conditions for catastrophic wildfires.

In areas where fire is no longer a safe treatment, many landowners are stepping up to fill the role once played by wildfire.

One such landowner is Robin Laakso, who helps her parents manage the Cornelia B. Ranch near the rural community of Paulina, Oregon.

The ranch includes private land as well as adjacent sections of public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

*“In a way, we’re doing the same work as a wildfire. Modern rangelands operate in a controlled environment, where we no longer have naturally-occurring, low-burning wildfires that would keep the juniper in check.” -Robin Laakso*



## A History of Conservation

Robin's parents purchased the ranch in the late '70s and named it after Robin's mother, who was viscerally attracted to the landscape and open spaces.

"Our conservation ethic all started with my mom," Robin said. "She is very attached to this land and to this ranch. She wants it to remain as natural as possible."

Robin's parents are no strangers to voluntary conservation. They worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to implement conservation activities on the property, such as installing some of the first sage grouse-friendly fencing in the state, and had a positive experience.

## Strategic Approach

Robin has continued to pursue the conservation efforts started by her parents.

During the last eight years, Robin and her neighbors in the Paulina / 12 Mile focal area, located on the eastern side of Crook County in Central Oregon, have treated a combined 100,000 acres of core sage grouse habitat.

By removing invasive juniper trees, installing wildlife-friendly fencing and livestock watering facilities and implementing prescribed grazing plans, they've created ideal sage grouse habitat.

This strategic, targeted conservation work has transformed the landscape in Eastern Crook County, providing connectivity of restored habitat across multiple land ownerships including Bureau of Land Management lands.

## Restoring the Sage

Robin, along with her partner, Oleg Katsitadze, started working with NRCS a few years ago through the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) to address invasive conifer encroachment on the land.

Robin and Oleg took training on juniper removal techniques and have cut nearly 1,000 acres of juniper themselves. They wanted to do the work themselves to learn more about range conservation practices and to deepen their connection to the land.

"When we're walking the land and cutting the trees, we really get to know the property in an intimate way," Robin said. She and Oleg have observed a wide array of wildlife on the property, including sage grouse, mule deer, coyotes, owls, badgers, snakes and much more.

## Before & After

In total, Robin's family has completed 3,610 acres of conifer removal for sage grouse habitat on their property since 2011. Their neighbors have completed an additional 30,000 acres of habitat restoration that connect to the Cornelia B. Ranch.

It's important to Robin and Cornelia to leave some juniper trees intact and not to clear cut everything, especially trees that have a historic value to the land and to the family. NRCS worked closely with the Cornelia B. to develop a cutting prescription that achieved the agency's goals for sage grouse habitat while also satisfying the owner's desire to maintain aesthetics and cultural value.

"It has been a meaningful experience to be a part of the conservation effort for sage grouse as well as for the health and vitality of the Cornelia B. and beyond," Robin said.

*"Even though it has been a whole lot of hard work, the sense of doing right for the land and all the inhabitants is never far from our mind. We also get to see and hear a lot of wildlife up close, which is an amazing and lasting bonus!"*

"I absolutely love seeing the ever-changing display of wildflowers on the ranch, which are likely to become even more abundant as various areas are treated," she added.

## Why Juniper?

Encroachment of conifer trees, primarily western juniper but also ponderosa pine, into sagebrush ecosystems has been identified as a threat to every sage grouse population in the state.

Since the late 1800's, western juniper has slowly been expanding its range across Eastern Oregon into sites previously dominated by grasses, forbs and shrubs.

Although juniper is a native plant, a combination of conditions, including fire suppression and historic overgrazing, allowed this species to spread dramatically beyond the fuel-limited sites it historically occupied.

"Conifer encroachment in sagebrush communities poses multiple problems for wildlife that depend on this ecosystem, such as sage grouse, which have been documented to avoid areas with trees," said Chris Mundy, district conservationist for Crook County.

"Sage grouse are dependent on vast, open landscapes with sagebrush for survival and reproduction," he said.



“As conifers invade, sagebrush declines and the plant community transitions to woodland that becomes increasingly unsuitable for grouse. Ultimately, this transition results in habitat loss for a species that depends upon sagebrush for food and cover and that evolved in landscapes relatively free of tall vertical structure.”

By removing invasive conifers, landowners like the Laakso family are allowing the landscape to regenerate back to a native sagebrush ecosystem.

They are even seeing an increase in sage grouse counts at the leks on their property. The latest count in 2018 by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) documented 25 male sage grouse on the site, the highest recorded in the last 9 years since the Sage Grouse Initiative began.

“This program is a win-win,” Robin said. “It’s good for sage grouse and for many other native species. It’s good for bunch grasses and native grasses, restoring the steppe to what it used to look like.”

## **About SGI**

The Sage Grouse Initiative is a partnership of ranchers, agencies, universities, nonprofit groups and businesses that embrace a common vision: Wildlife Conservation through Sustainable Ranching.

It started in 2010 in response to increasing threats to sage grouse habitat across the West. To avoid a potential endangered species listing, partners came together through SGI to implement voluntary conservation activities across the bird’s habitat range. Six years later, the partnership has evolved to encompass a wider breadth.

Today, SGI isn’t just about the bird—it’s about sustaining overall rangeland health and local rural economies. That means improving the diversity, health and vigor of rangeland ecosystems, which provides multiple benefits to both the landscape and people—benefits such as reduced wildfire risk, improved water quality and enhanced habitat for over 350 species that depend on the sagebrush steppe.

NRCS works at the local level, helping communities and individual farmers achieve their conservation goals.

For more information on how NRCS helps ranchers restore sage grouse habitat and other conservation practices, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).



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*Pictures:* Spencer Miller (USDA), Robin Laakso (landowner)