The ranch economics of greater sage-grouse conservation practices

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Issue: The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been promoting a number of ranching practices (e.g., prescribed grazing) to preserve or improve habitat for the greater sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus), a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act until 2015. These ranching practices have associated costs, benefits, and incentives, which, until now, have not been thoroughly analyzed for their economic merits at the ranch level. Among the incentives are payments through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Goal: Assess the economic impact of the adoption of a set of conservation practices on four representative types of cow-calf ranching operations in at least nine major land resource areas. (MLRAs are geographically associated land resource units across the U.S. MLRA 34A, for example, generally covers much of the desert and plains of southern Wyoming, an important area for sage grouse. To learn more about MLRAs and the specific MLRAs in Wyoming, put NRCS and “Major Land Resource Area” in your Internet search engine.)

Objectives: Evaluate NRCS-promoted conservation practices in terms of their effects on cow-calf operations, forage supply, and ranch performance indicators by ranch type in each of the targeted MLRAs.

Expected Impact: Enterprise budgets developed in cooperation with university extension educators and validated by ranchers in the geographic areas of interest should assist ranchers in benchmarking their performance in the use of different forage sources and other inputs. Results from ranch economic optimization models should inform policy- and decision-makers with respect to the impact these policies would likely have on ranching operations across rangelands in Wyoming and the West.

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Keywords: sage grouse, prescribed grazing, EQIP incentives

PARP: V:7, VI:3, VII:2,4,6,7, IX:1,3,6,7