



Excellence in Range Management: Conner Ranch

Go north (or west or east) from Belle Fourche and you will find an endless, open prairie. Cattle and sheep have grazed this country for the last 100 years or so. Before domesticated livestock, the bison, elk, pronghorn, and deer were the major players on the landscape. Along with these major players, minor players existed as well – these were the smaller mammals and birds that lived on the prairie. These minor players included grassland nesting birds like the lark bunting, McCown’s longspur, and Baird’s sparrow – and maybe most importantly: the sage grouse.

Over the years, the sage grouse has seen a decline in population. This population decline is due to many different factors including: grassland conversion to cropland, development of infrastructure, and fragmentation of habitat. Ranchers across the sage



Mitch Faulkner (NRCS) discusses sage grouse habitat requirements on the Conner Ranch (Photo by Sandy Smart).

grouse range have been working to increase the bird’s presence on the landscape by installing conservation practices and using grazing management to improve sage grouse habitat.

The Conner Ranch, located near Belle Fourche and owned by Dan and Cindi Connor, is one of these ranches. The ranch has prime sage grouse habitat which includes areas of big sagebrush and healthy riparian zones. They also have a lek activity occurring on their property – which include male grouse dancing their ancient mating rituals.

The Connors have implemented conservation practices to help protect sage grouse habitat while also increasing the value of their grasslands. They make sure to leave enough grass at the end of the year for wildlife habitat and soil health. They utilize a deferred rotational grazing system which allows plants to recover after being grazed during the growing season. To help implement their grazing management, they have installed pipelines and water tanks to ensure each pasture has a dependable water source whenever grazing will occur in that area. Grazing land infrastructure is important to help facilitate good grazing management.

The Connors also focus on managing for healthy riparian areas – the interfaces between

grassland and creek water. Their riparian areas teem with well-vegetated creek banks and a wide floodplain. The management of these zones consists of exclusively grazing the area in the winter period after the riparian vegetation has gone dormant. Healthy riparian areas are important to sage grouse habitat because this is where the grouse find bugs and other food during the hot summer days.

The Conners have been featured by the SD Grassland Coalition in their “Amazing Grassland” video series and 2019 Grassland Planner. They were also awarded the Society for Range Management Excellence in Range Management award at the state level in South Dakota and at the International level as well. Check out their Amazing Grassland video on YouTube by searching for ‘Dan and Cindi Conner’ or look them up with the rest of the Amazing Grassland videos on the SD Grassland Coalition website <https://www.sdgrass.org/amazing-south-dakota/>.