

Advancing Collaborative Solutions: Lessons from the Oregon Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership, also known as “SageCon,” was an unprecedented collaborative effort among federal, state, and private stakeholders to address landscape-scale threats to greater sage-grouse while also acknowledging rural economic and community interests across eastern Oregon’s sagebrush range. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) preliminary finding that the sage-grouse warranted listing under the endangered species act, and a subsequent court settlement setting a deadline for a final listing decision were key drivers for SageCon participants to seek proactive solutions to protect the bird. A cadre of diverse Eastern Oregon stakeholders with experience working collaboratively on related public lands issues helped set the stage for the collaborative effort.

As part of what the Department of the Interior described as a historic outcome, SageCon produced the 2015 Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan, which details voluntary and state-regulated conservation measures to preserve habitat and protect Oregon’s sage-grouse population from threats on public and private land. SageCon—as one part of a broader multi-state collaborative effort—led to a subsequent USFWS finding that the sage-grouse no longer warranted listing as endangered.

In our study of this collaborative effort, we interviewed seventeen SageCon participants to identify collaborative approaches that may offer promise for other conservation and public policy efforts. We explored participant motivation for engaging in the process, collaborative process design, integration of science into the SageCon deliberations, and other experiences that interviewees found relevant.



What We Heard

Our study suggests that SageCon’s success was due in large measure to the composition of the group, context of the events, and the design and implementation of the collaborative process. Key lessons include the following:

Urgency, experience and engagement.

Interviewees reported being motivated to engage in the process by a number of factors, including a sense of urgency to avoid having the bird listed as endangered, the involvement of committed high-level leaders, a desire to build working relationships, a wish to integrate good science into the process, and a belief that the SageCon effort was meaningful and impactful. Many had also developed experience working collaboratively with each other on a spectrum of related issues.

Well-vetted science. Having a mechanism to bring credible scientific information into the dialogue—along with the availability of a well-articulated technical statement of needed conservation objectives—helped prevent things from getting bogged down in scientific debate. Interviewees reported that the science had generally been well-vetted on the ground and reflected conditions in the

field. Also, developing and reviewing technical information collaboratively during SageCon meetings helped establish a shared scientific framework.

Neutral facilitation and project management.

Interviewees felt that having a neutral facilitator and an engaged project manager created an environment of mutual respect, fostered trust, mitigated power differentials, and helped convey a commitment to timely results. Having a dedicated project manager moved the process forward by providing a practical problem-solver and someone to conduct shuttle diplomacy and help subgroups negotiate components of the overall outcome. The SageCon leadership group, which was composed of the facilitation team, the project manager, conveners, and a few key members of the full group, also helped the project adapt nimbly to internal and external policy developments.

High-level and well-connected conveners.

Having conveners and participants who were high-level decision-makers and well-connected inside and outside their agencies conveyed the importance of the effort and encouraged others to remain engaged. These leaders also assisted in bringing resources to the table, helped with ongoing problem solving, and ensured commitment to follow through. It was also helpful that institutions enabled personnel to take risks and explore innovative approaches.

Collaborative participants. Interviewees saw SageCon participants as inclined toward collaboration, able to move beyond positional thinking, and creative in their problem solving.

Balancing structure with adaptability. The interviews revealed that the ability of the process to adapt to address evolving or emerging issues (e.g., through delegation to work groups or subcommittees) was viewed as a strength and reduced the perception of top-down control. On the other hand, some

interviewees felt that the ad hoc approach led at times to a lack of transparency and that more effort (especially early on) to describe the purpose, structure and roles would have helped provide clarity and improved transparency.

Communication and outreach. Some interviewees felt that a more robust and deliberate communication effort could have helped keep participants informed and brought newcomers up to speed more quickly. Strategic communication might also have engaged affected communities more effectively and strengthened their commitment to SageCon outcomes; holding more meetings in affected communities could also have assisted in this effort.

Resources to participate. Finding time and adequate funding to participate was a particular challenge for smaller agencies and organizations. In particular, the participation of high-level leaders from key decision-making agencies triggered a perceived need for other groups to have their highest level leaders present. Resulting time demands were a strain. Distance from meeting locations also exacerbated time and resource concerns for some participants. Finding ways to help smaller organizations defray costs of transportation, lodging and staff time could allow them to participate more fully in the process.

Suggestions for Collaborators

The SageCon process illustrates a model for successfully addressing complex issues across a broad landscape. Overall, SageCon participants shared a sense of accomplishment in their ability to agree on sage-grouse conservation actions based on the best available science while also considering the needs of rural Eastern Oregon communities. The agreements were sufficient to avoid an endangered species listing, and have shown initial strength and signs of durability in Oregon. In a sense, through their collaborative efforts, SageCon

participants have developed a shared vision for the future in Eastern Oregon.

Our examination produced the following list of possible considerations and approaches for collaborative groups wishing to apply what we've learned from SageCon's success:

- ***Make the most of context***
Recognize situations where the legal or regulatory context creates a meaningful but time-limited opportunity for stakeholders to create an alternative outcome better suited to their interests. Such a context—in which the issues are both important and urgent—supports collaboration.
 - ***Build on experience and relationships***
When identifying necessary participants (decision makers, affected parties), seek to engage individuals who understand the potential benefits (and costs) of a collaborative approach and who can think creatively about solutions. Also seek to engage individuals with previous collaborative experiences or working relationships across areas of interest.
 - ***Highlight benefits of collaboration***
Remind people that a collaborative solution may reduce the likelihood of an outcome being imposed from outside the stakeholder group.
 - ***Use high-level conveners***
Seek the involvement of high-level committed project conveners, participants, sponsors or advocates who can do the following:
 - Give the project gravitas.
 - Signify high-level commitment to project goals.
 - Enhance visibility and transparency.
 - Make decision-makers more accessible.
 - Connect project members and project issues to broader constituencies,
- wider issues, or extended geographic regions.
 - Enhance the group's access to funding and other resources.
- ***Use a neutral facilitation/project management team***
Use a neutral facilitator to balance power and input. Use a nonaligned project manager to monitor group and subgroup work and outside events, conduct shuttle diplomacy, lead meetings, be the point of contact, and balance the focus between process and work. Consider choosing a project manager who has significant knowledge of the subject matter and related politics, and who has existing relationships with key actors and familiarity with their interests and positions.
- ***Keep the process adaptable but clear***
Balance the level of structure and flexibility in the collaborative process. Ensure that group purpose, roles and expectations are clear at the outset, but also help group members recognize the value of remaining flexible about the process. Discuss how any need for process adjustments would be determined, and how adjustments would be devised, communicated, agreed upon, and implemented. Take care not to foster the misperception that an outcome is preordained.
- ***Use a planning team***
For large or geographically-dispersed efforts that may rely on subcommittees, use a core planning team to collaborate on meeting design in coordination with the project manager. Make sure the core team is representative of the interests at the table.
- ***Use technical subcommittees and expertise***
Consider using subcommittees (or funded or in-kind staff) who can do a deep dive on technical policy issues or science and

report back to the full group. In addition, seek to include some participants with subject matter expertise as well as some participants with special sensitivity to the dynamics of the group.

- ***Think outside the box***
Encourage participants to seek novel solutions by thinking outside of the constraints of precedent or their organization's limitations. Where appropriate, encourage participating leaders to ease their control of the process and outcomes in order to allow their participating staff to take risks and consider adaptive solutions.
- ***Help remove participation barriers***
Seek ways to help small organizations defray costs of participation to ensure balanced representation at the table. While exploring opportunities for remote participation may be one avenue, finding ways to allow small organizations to fully participate in face-to-face meetings is also important. Carefully consider meeting location to improve participation and access and to demonstrate attention to local concerns and impacts.
- ***Vet the science on the ground***
Encourage participants to bring well-vetted science to the process; ideally, in addition to being vetted by experts, science should be evaluated in the field with impacted communities. Ensure that participants have the freedom to scrutinize and challenge the science and to offer additional data. Help participants identify commonalities in science contributed by different interests.
- ***Strive for continuity in participation***
Strive to maintain continuity in who attends meetings, minimizing use of substitute attendees when practical so that the group can build trust and construct a shared understanding of where they have been and where they are going. Give attention to thorough on-

boarding of participants who join the group in progress.

- ***Listen to communities***
Fully acknowledge the concerns of communities who will be most impacted by the outcome of the process; ensure they feel their voices are heard and given due consideration.
- ***Communicate vigorously***
Have a clear communication strategy that does the following:
 - Communicates purpose, roles and expectations of the effort at the start.
 - Promptly conveys any changes in purpose, roles, and expectations.
 - Keeps all participants informed of subcommittee developments.
 - Keeps all participants informed about related efforts or relevant political or substantive developments.
 - Ensures effective onboarding of new team members.
 - Keeps the collaborative group informed about subsequent phases of a project that follow close on the heels of the project.
 - Creates project visibility that:
 - encourages confidence and investment of resources from leaders and decision makers;
 - keeps affected communities connected to the effort;
 - gives the project an identity or brand that is easy to communicate about; and
 - fosters confidence that the groups' work product will have visibility after the project ends.
- ***Seek timely feedback***
Have participants evaluate the process while it is fresh. Use evaluation results to inform discussion of how any subsequent phases of the project could be supported or improved. ■

1. INTRODUCTION

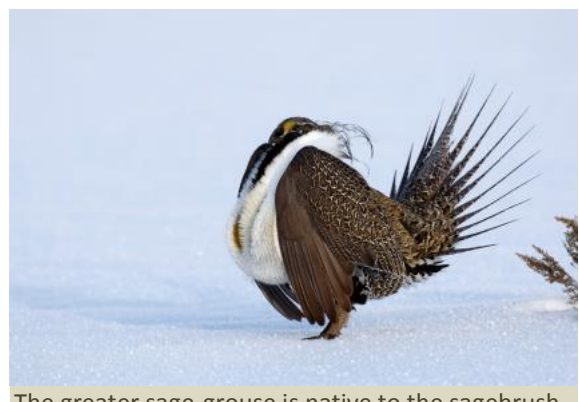
In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that the Greater Western Sage-Grouse¹ warranted listing as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) based on statutory factors that included threats to habitat, and inadequate regulatory mechanisms for conservation. But due to higher-priority listing actions, the bird was precluded from listing at the time. Soon after, however, a federal court approved a settlement that established deadlines for USFWS to make final determinations on ESA status for hundreds of species with the warranted-but-precluded status.² A deadline for a final determination on the sage-grouse was set for September 2015.

“A truly historic effort—one that represents extraordinary collaboration across the American West.”
—Sally Jewell, U.S. Secretary of the Interior

In response to the warranted-but-precluded finding and the subsequent deadline, organizations involved in public land management across the western United States set about to find collaborative solutions to protect the bird while also accommodating working landscapes and rural economies. In Oregon, this work ultimately took shape as the Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon), a group of public and private organizations and individuals who worked together to develop conservation strategies that spanned diverse physical and political landscapes. SageCon produced and garnered support for the 2015 Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan.³ The plan will guide management of Oregon’s nearly eighteen million acres of sagebrush habitat

using voluntary and state-regulated conservation measures on public and private lands. Adopted by gubernatorial executive order,⁴ the plan was central to a September 2015 USFWS determination that protecting sage-grouse under the federal Endangered Species Act was no longer warranted. The determination averted potential outcomes that many feared could not only signal the decline of a landmark species but could also result in significant restrictions on land use and development opportunities with an estimated economic impact in the billions of dollars.^{5 6}

The U.S. Department of the Interior described the effort to conserve sage-grouse (of which SageCon was a significant component) as “the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history.”⁷ Interior Secretary Jewell heralded it as a “truly historic effort—one that represents extraordinary collaboration across the American West.”⁸ According to USFWS, it was an “unprecedented, landscape-scale



The greater sage-grouse is native to the sagebrush steppe of the intermountain and western plains regions of North America. The birds depend on sagebrush for survival, relying on these large plants for food and shelter in fall and winter, congregating nearby for elaborate courtship displays in spring, and hiding nests and chicks from predators.⁹

conservation effort” that “significantly reduced threats to the greater sage-grouse across 90 percent of the species’ breeding habitat.”¹⁰ While some may debate the overall success of the multi-state sage-grouse conservation effort, the process was nevertheless noteworthy in its ability to gain commitments from diverse actors to manage the species at the landscape scale and therefore avoid a more rigid regulatory outcome. SageCon, with its proactive collaborative effort to define a comprehensive and statewide approach to sage-grouse conservation, positioned Oregon as a leader in the range-wide effort.

Our study examines the collaborative process underpinning the SageCon Partnership to identify lessons relevant to other collaborative efforts. Many of these lessons suggest an emerging Oregon model for collaborative management of public lands.

This report is a tool for anyone who seeks to foster collaborative approaches to conservation and other complex public issues. In it, we situate SageCon in its socio-political and historic context, describe the collaborative structure and process underpinning SageCon, discuss the results of our stakeholder interviews, and offer suggestions for groups undertaking collaborative policy work.

SageCon produced and garnered support for the 2015 Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan. The plan will guide management of Oregon’s nearly eighteen million acres of sagebrush habitat using voluntary and state-regulated conservation measures on public and private lands.

The report is organized as follows:

- Section two provides background about SageCon and related processes that may have shaped SageCon relationships and outcomes.
- Section three examines the structure and implementation of the collaborative process, and identifies lessons learned.
- Section four examines events since the SageCon process that build on and further illuminate lessons learned.
- Section five draws on lessons learned to offer suggestions for other groups that are designing a collaborative policy-making process.
- Section six offers our final reflections. ■



A Declining Species

Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), with an estimated North American population of 100,000 to 500,000 in year 2000,¹¹ occupy 173 million acres¹² in eleven western states and two Canadian provinces. Due to habitat loss since European settlement, the species has declined from an estimate of between two and sixteen million birds that once ranged sixteen states and three provinces.¹³ In Oregon specifically, the sage-grouse population was estimated at 30,000 birds in 2003.¹⁴ Those birds, representing six percent of the entire species’ population, inhabit seven counties in

southeast and south-central Oregon (having disappeared from the Columbia Basin and the Oregon side of the Klamath Basin.)¹⁵ Since European settlement, Oregon’s nearly eighteen million acres of sagebrush habitat have been reduced by 21 percent due to ranching, agriculture, invasive species, energy production, infrastructure development and urbanization.¹⁶ Although Oregon’s sage-grouse population has declined steadily for twenty years, large swatches of intact habitat remain. The state is considered a stronghold for the species.¹⁷

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The SageCon Process

In June 2012, the Oregon Governor's Natural Resources Office (GNRO), the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the regional leadership of the U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) convened SageCon to develop a collaborative approach to sage-grouse conservation that could alleviate the need for listing the bird as endangered. The group's agreed upon objectives were as follows:¹⁸

- Provide a forum to coordinate federal, state, local, and private efforts to conserve Greater Sage-Grouse in Oregon.
- Inventory existing strategies and approaches and, where appropriate, identify additional means to address the full range of threats to sage-grouse viability and recovery in Eastern Oregon.
- Coordinate with USFWS requirements and the schedule for the sage-grouse ESA listing decision, in order to provide timely and relevant input on Oregon's sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat conservation strategies and approaches.

2.1.1. SageCon Partners

SageCon was supported and funded by several partner organizations as follows:

- The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) contributed resources to support a collaborative focus on state policy and conservation planning.
- BLM and NRCS funded high-level coordination and communication around sage-grouse conservation efforts.



- The Oregon Legislature and state agencies funded activities focused more specifically on state policy development and regulation.
- The National Policy Consensus Center at Portland State University provided facilitation and staff support for SageCon meetings.
- The Oregon Governor's Office provided funding for a project manager to coordinate planning related to state and private lands, and a technical lead person (engaged through Oregon State University) to oversee data, mapping, and scientific analysis.

A full list of stakeholders involved in the SageCon Partnership is available on the Oregon Explorer website.¹⁹

2.1.2. Collaborative Structure of SageCon

The full SageCon Partnership met fifteen times through September 2015. Several subgroups met between meetings. Subgroups serving the team included the following:

- **Core team**—A project facilitation and support group, plus lead staff for federal and state agencies, and NGO partners, all of who met bi-monthly from 2012–2015 to coordinate federal-state policy issues;

share information on state, regional and national conservation planning; conduct planning; oversee development of the Sage-Grouse Action Plan; and develop agendas for full SageCon meetings and subgroup meetings.

- **Technical team**—Technical experts who managed the data, maps, graphics, reports, and associated analyses needed to support the state’s Action Plan.
- **Mitigation working group**—Experts in designing and developing tools and programs for tracking and accounting for habitat impacts and conservation benefits tied to incentive and regulatory programs. They helped develop and build agreement around a mitigation protocol.
- **Policy coordination working group**—Policy staff from key SageCon participant groups who collaborated to ensure policy recommendations were vetted across the many interests at the table.
- **Fire and invasive species working group**—A range of experts who addressed the two most significant non-anthropogenic threats to sage-grouse habitat in Oregon and the Great Basin, drawing on scientific data and analysis including field research and tests conducted by federal, state, private, and university partners. SageCon contracted regional-level experts for this team, who worked to ensure that SageCon efforts coordinated with concurrent projects that were addressing fire-and-invasive species at the range-wide level (including a project to create a Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool, and another to establish Resilience and Resistance science principles.)
- **Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission (OFWC) rules advisory committee**—Established near completion of the SageCon process pursuant to state administrative law rulemaking process,

this committee assisted in developing OAR 635-140-0000 Sage-Grouse Mitigation Rules.

- **Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) sage-grouse rules advisory committee**—Established near completion of the SageCon process pursuant to state administrative law rulemaking process, this committee assisted in developing OAR 660-023-0115 providing land use protection for sage-grouse habitat.
- **Additional ad hoc work groups**—The Energy/Siting Working Group and the Conservation Work Group met as necessary to get input from key stakeholders when work products were close to completion.

SageCon was overseen by a project manager (lead staff for the state) with a mission to complete a plan that would provide conservation measures adequate to meet the needs of USFWS while protecting rural community economies. The individual who served as project manager had strong subject matter knowledge and existing relationships with many participants. She performed shuttle diplomacy when needed, working behind the scenes to solve problems, and serving as a key point of contact.

SageCon was staffed, on the process side, by individuals from the National Policy Consensus Center (NPCC) at Portland State University. A senior level facilitator from NPCC facilitated all of the full SageCon Partnership meetings in cooperation with the process conveners (GNRO, BLM, and NRCS) and the project manager. NPCC staff also drafted agendas, provided for meeting logistics and drafted meeting summaries. Subgroup meetings were led or facilitated by the project manager with NPCC providing meeting support and drafting meeting summaries. Full SageCon Partnership meetings were held in locations across the state, including Prineville, Bend and Salem.

Subgroup meetings were also held in various locations, including as far east as Burns.

2.1.1.3. State Action Plan and Executive Order

SageCon’s work culminated in the Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan, published on September 17, 2015. The Action Plan, which focused on both state and private lands with an eye toward future coordination with federal land management, had the following objectives:

- Create a framework for action and accountability among private, nongovernmental, local, state, and federal partners in advancing immediate and long-term efforts.
- Work to achieve sage-grouse population and habitat objectives by building upon and enhancing past and ongoing efforts, including ODFW’s Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon (2011).²⁰

In addition, the Action Plan emphasized the need for implementation to be adaptable and to be sustained by stable, long-term funding and commitments.

Additional state-specific measures to ensure effective implementation of the Action Plan are as follows:

- Adoption of rules by OFWC regarding mitigation for habitat impacts, and adoption of rules by LCDC regarding land use protection for sage-grouse habitat.
- Issuance by Governor Kate Brown of Executive Order 15-18 directing state agencies to implement and adhere to the Action Plan.
- The 2015 Oregon Legislature’s advancement of over \$3 million in 2015–17 biennial funding for sage-grouse and Action Plan-specific items tied to state agency budgets, as well as a commitment by OWEB to provide \$1 million in state lottery funds over ten years. These funds were in addition to existing state agency program budgets that support work related to sage-grouse. They were also in addition to significant funding and in-kind commitments from NGOs, landowners, and local and federal agencies.

These implementation commitments—through rules, gubernatorial executive order, and state and partner funding—played an important role not just in implementing the agreements reached through the SageCon process and documented in the Action Plan, but also in communicating to USFWS (before its listing decision) that SageCon partners were meaningfully and responsibly



2015 Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan: An All-Lands, All-Threats Approach

The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan moved beyond an issue-specific approach to sage-grouse conservation to a broader landscape-scale approach that addresses impacts to sage-grouse and their habitat on all lands—federal, state, and private. Also, unlike other efforts, it addresses all types of threats to the bird and its habitat, ranging from energy development to invasive plants and wildfire.

addressing threats to sage-grouse and sage-grouse habitat in Oregon.

The administrative rules developed in conjunction with the Action Plan provided regulatory commitments focused on threats posed by humans and threats that are less responsive to regulation (i.e., wildfire, and invasive grass and juniper encroachment). The funding ensured advancement of voluntary habitat actions and other actions by agencies and partners. Funds amassed around the Action Plan are important for leveraging federal dollars for jointly funded state-federal actions to address wildfire and invasive plants across the entire Great Basin. The funds also advanced work of economic and social value to partners and rural communities (e.g., jobs, rangeland and forage health, and local capacity to address fire).

2.1.4. SageCon Achievements

In sum, this multifaceted state response to the threat of an ESA listing, engineered through a broad-based collaborative effort, and reaching an alternative outcome acceptable both to the federal regulatory agency charged with making the decision whether to list, and, for the most part, to a very diverse set of stakeholders affected by the decision, was the crowning achievement of SageCon. On the way there, it helped to construct highly functional working relationships—and while those relationships will be tested over time, they form a foundation for the continued collaboration that will be necessary to keep an ESA listing at bay in the face of continually dynamic species ecology and political and regulatory scrutiny.

2.2. Contextual Factors Influencing the SageCon Process

This report focuses on the SageCon process itself, but SageCon took shape within a context of statewide, regional and national conservation efforts that may have shaped SageCon outcomes by building the experience, relationships, and expectations of

To better manage stakeholder engagement, REECon enlisted Oregon Solutions from the National Policy Consensus Center to help develop a Declaration of Cooperation that articulated REECon’s objectives, principles, and commitment to collaboration.

SageCon participants. This section provides background on those early efforts.

2.2.1. Oregon Conservation Strategy

The scientific, political, and legal debate over the status of the greater sage-grouse dates back to 2005 when Oregon prioritized sage-grouse in its landscape-scale planning, management and monitoring efforts as part of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s (ODFW) Oregon Conservation Strategy.²¹ The strategy, Oregon’s first overarching conservation plan for fish and wildlife, listed sagebrush as one of eleven “strategy habitats” and sage-grouse as one of 294 “strategy species.” By 2010 ODFW was leading development of the Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon, which aimed to identify threats and opportunities for conserving the sage-grouse in particular.

2.2.2. Renewable Energy and Eastern Oregon Landscape Conservation Partnership

In 2011, interest in wind energy development was booming in Eastern Oregon. In response, the Oregon Governor’s Office convened state and federal agencies in Oregon to form the Renewable Energy and Eastern Oregon Landscape Conservation Partnership (REECon). The group focused on how to approach renewable energy siting and development in Oregon’s sagebrush country, and soon expanded to include representatives from county government, conservation groups, and industry.²²

To better manage stakeholder engagement, REECon enlisted Oregon Solutions from the National Policy Consensus Center²³ at Portland State University (PSU) to help develop a Declaration of Cooperation (DOC) that articulated the group’s objectives and principles and each agency’s commitment to the collaboration.²⁴

Several years later, interest in renewable energy siting in Eastern Oregon diminished, and REECon broadened its focus to address other sagebrush threats, including invasive annual grasses, juniper, wildfire, and development not related to renewable energy. A more diverse set of participants was attracted by these issues. The REECon process eventually developed into the SageCon process.

2.2.3. Regional Sage-Grouse Task Force

Across the west, efforts similar to REECon were underway. In 2011, to better coordinate state and federal efforts, DOI and the Wyoming Governor called for eleven Western states to form a Sage-Grouse Task Force.²⁵ The task force became a forum for government leaders to share information about conservation actions and to identify a strategy to restore sage-grouse habitat while preserving social and economic opportunities in rangeland communities. Oregon played a leadership role in this multi-state effort, and SageCon—focused at the state level—was informed by the work of the regional task force and served as a model for other states.

2.2.4. Conservation Objectives Team Report

In 2013, at the request of the states, USFWS convened a Conservation Objectives Team (COT) including state and USFWS biologists to compile the most recent range-wide conservation science about sage-grouse and to delineate reasonable conservation objectives. The COT Report²⁶ informed state-level efforts such as SageCon about what to address based on current science by helping to define the challenges facing sage-grouse with population-scale information. To a



certain extent, this information provided a roadmap for SageCon and others to use in fashioning plans that would meet the USFWS needs for making a no-list finding. This was also reflective of the in-the-room role that USFWS took in helping states fashion adequate plans for sage-grouse conservation.

2.2.5. BLM Resource Management Plan Amendment

During development of state-led conservation plans, BLM undertook its Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) process, affecting most of sagebrush country in the West, including ten million acres in Oregon. The planning effort had strong bearing on the ultimate ESA-listing decision for sage-grouse. Individual SageCon members engaged with BLM’s process, and the SageCon table provided a venue for information sharing and coordination of the RMPA and SageCon processes. As part of its RMPA work, BLM issued a Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management and Restoration.²⁷ That work informed SageCon’s approach to fire and invasive plant management and is specifically referenced in the Action Plan.

2.2.6. Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances

In Oregon, the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), in cooperation with USFWS, convened local stakeholders to identify a menu of conservation measures that landowners could agree to take as part of enrollment in Candidate Conservation

Agreements with Assurances (CCAA). CCAAs are formal, voluntary agreements between the USFWS and non-federal landowners in which landowners agree to reduce threats to a species that is or may soon be a candidate for listing as endangered. In exchange, participants receive legal assurance that they will not be required to take additional measures if the species is later listed.²⁸ USFWS has found that CCAAs protect land from large-scale development and advance actions that improve rangeland health to the benefit of sage-grouse as well as livestock forage.

Following Harney County's example, several Oregon counties developed similar CCAAs, enrolling millions of private land acres in agreements to conserve sage-grouse habitat. In addition, the Oregon Department of State Lands crafted a CCAA covering its more than 600,000 acres of state-owned lands within sage-grouse habitat.

Complementary to the CCAA effort, the NRCS created the Oregon Model to Protect Sage-Grouse,²⁹ a multi-million dollar commitment to help private landowners implement conservation measures committed to in the CCAAs. Throughout the SageCon effort, the NRCS was actively supporting significant habitat restoration efforts (such as juniper removal) on primarily private lands throughout the bird's range, as well as research on the effectiveness of these efforts.

While much of the substantive work relating to CCAAs occurred outside of SageCon meetings, SageCon and its workgroups provided a forum for communication and coordination related to CCAA development in Oregon, and CCAA's have become an important component of the all-lands, all-threats approach that SageCon articulated in the state Action Plan.

Overall, the related efforts described above either laid important groundwork or provided important contemporary context for the SageCon process as it evolved. The early work done by ODFW on the Oregon Conservation Strategy and the efforts made in the REECon process provided a base of scientific understanding and helped future SageCon participants build relationships and knowledge about the complex ecological, legal and political environment. The Regional Task Force and the COT Report helped provide early guidance and direction for SageCon's efforts. Coordination with the RMPA process and the development of CCAAs helped shape and realize SageCon's efforts to craft an outcome that reflected an all-lands, all-threats approach. SageCon was a unique effort, but its uniqueness was shaped by these external factors (including, of course, the pending regulatory deadline) as well as by SageCon's own internal dynamics. ■



3. UNDERSTANDING THE SAGECON PROCESS

To explore the dynamics of SageCon’s collaborative process, the National Policy Consensus Center, in partnership with other researchers from Portland State University, interviewed seventeen SageCon participants throughout summer 2016.³⁰ The pool of interviewees reflected a balanced representation of the interests at the SageCon table. A description of the interview methodology is available in appendix A.

The interviews provided insights into what participants felt contributed to the success of the planning effort as well as what could have been improved. Consistent engagement of leadership, widespread commitment to a collaborative process, and effective facilitation and process management were some of the most important elements of the SageCon process according to interviewees. Clarifying roles, investing in a communications strategy to keep people informed and enhance transparency, and mitigating the resource constraints faced by some participants were seen as key areas for improvement. Interview responses are summarized in full in appendix B.

This section includes our analysis of interviewee’s observations and integrates reflections from our own experiences with SageCon. In our discussion, we examine the structure and implementation of the collaborative process and tease out lessons that can be generalized to help inform other collaborative efforts.

3.1. Process Design and Structure

The urgency of the SageCon process helped keep participants focused and engaged. The level of concern about alternative outcomes (and endangered species listing) may have



been significantly more important in this situation than other natural resource issues. However, these dynamics do not alone explain the complex mix of factors that supported collaboration among SageCon participants. The design and implementation of the collaborative process are keys to understanding what made SageCon a success and how other collaborative groups can replicate that success.

We learned the following about the design, structure and implementation of the SageCon process:

The urgent need for action to avoid adverse regulatory consequences combined with an evolving history of collaboration and relationship-building in Eastern Oregon created a crucial context for the SageCon process.

- Together, the prospect of an ESA listing, a foundation for constructive working relationships, and participants’ familiarity with the collaborative process provided a context that was supportive of and perhaps crucial to the project outcomes.
- The possibility of an ESA listing for the greater sage-grouse was perceived by

participants from all sides of the issue as an outcome that was not ideal—either because it would create onerous burdens, or because it would limit options or opportunities for positive conservation actions. The apparent inevitability of a listing absent a collaborative effort to develop an alternative was a strong motivation for participation.

- At the same time, many of the affected or interested participants had engaged in various collaborative efforts around natural resources issues in Eastern Oregon—including efforts related to species, habitat and sagebrush. (For example, the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) was developed through a collaborative process that brought a range of stakeholders—scientists, ranchers and farmers, elected officials, environmental groups, and others—together with USFWS staff.) These collaborative efforts and the relationships they fostered accelerated formation of good working relationships and trust during SageCon and demystified the collaborative process.
- Pre-existing relationships helped the group engage more quickly in open and constructive interactions, avoid surprises (because participants were comfortable sharing information), and stay on course, even when the conveners or project manager offered ideas that were not particularly in line with the group’s direction.

The combination of neutral facilitation, strong project management, and high-level decision-makers as conveners was instrumental to moving the process forward.

- Having a neutral forum and facilitator contributed to the success of the process by doing the following:

Engagement of key decision makers as conveners or active participants who were committed to a collaborative process encouraged others to participate and stay engaged in the process.

- Giving the participants confidence that they would be heard.
 - Creating the space to build trust, particularly in early stages when participants were still assessing their willingness to engage and gauging how they fit in.
 - Mitigating power differentials among participants.
 - Easing tensions as the group navigated difficult issues, even after the group was well-established with a clear shared direction.
- Having a dedicated project manager moved the process forward by providing a point of contact, a practical problem-solver, and someone to conduct shuttle diplomacy and help subgroups negotiate the components of the overall outcome.
 - Engagement of key decision makers as conveners or active participants encouraged others to participate and stay engaged. The stature of leaders, their dedication to collaboration, and their commitment of time and resources conveyed the importance of the effort and the commitment to follow-through.
 - Some participants felt some of their concerns were dismissed without being addressed. While overlooking some issues is somewhat unavoidable when participants bring a complex set of interests, there may be ways to ensure that concerns that cannot be fully addressed are better acknowledged and flagged for future consideration or action.

- Some participants felt that interests were sometimes over-represented by a disproportionate number of attendees from one organization. Imposing limits on the number of attendees from an organization would have conflicted with SageCon’s “welcome all-comers” approach. In addition, such limitations might have forced organizations to focus on high-level attendees while omitting subject experts. In such situations, where the number of representatives is not balanced, a neutral facilitator plays a critical role in balancing participant power (real and perceived).

Maintaining a balance of structure and flexibility in the collaborative process helped participants engage comfortably but also allowed the process to adapt to new information and external factors in a shifting political environment.

- Time revealed that SageCon’s function was primarily to be an information-sharing forum, not a decision-making venue. However, working in the early stages to clarify the purpose, as well as roles, responsibilities and logistics might have avoided some confusion.
- At the same time, there was value in allowing flexibility in the process, since over-structuring it might have limited participation and created the appearance that outcomes were pre-ordained. (For example, the process structure allowed for the efficient and timely convening of relevant individuals—offline and between full SageCon meetings—to address a rapidly emerging issue. The outcome of that meeting would then be reported to the full group at the next meeting.
- Participants vary in their level of comfort with a firmly-structured process versus a flexible or ambiguous one; therefore, it is important to find ways to engage people with varied needs for structure.

- By relaxing their control of the process, high-level leaders largely allayed perceptions of top-down control and allowed for adaptive decision-making.
- The project manager, convener and decision-makers helped convey a commitment to achieving meaningful outcomes in a timely manner; thereby allaying any concerns that the neutral facilitators might focus too heavily on process for its own sake.
- While some participants reported discomfort with sometimes not receiving meeting materials until the meeting, staff reported that delays often accommodated up-to-the-minute information or a need to provide context in-person to avoid confusion or undue concern. Keeping participants better informed about when to expect materials might have been helpful.

3.2. Process Implementation

Having a dedicated cross-sector core team advance the project by nimbly adapting the process to internal and external policy issues and other changes was valuable.

- A leadership group comprising the facilitation team, the project manager, conveners, and a few key members of the full group (representatives balanced across sectors) helped the project progress. They collaborated on developing meeting agendas, tracking subcommittees and related outside projects, assessing the full group’s readiness to take on issues, and adapting process structure as issues arose.

Maintaining consistent involvement of the same individuals (even when they were representing a larger organization) helped the group align on component pieces of the overall outcome as the work progressed.

- Consistent involvement of the same individuals contributed to:
 - relationship building and trust;
 - development of a shared knowledge base regarding the technical and political aspects of the issues;
 - a shared understanding of the evolution of the group’s discussion and thoughts on issues over the course of the effort; and
 - Formation of a solid relationship base that will not fray during the Action Plan implementation phase.

■ *Having participating leaders engaged who were well connected within their agencies or communities of interest gave the project gravitas and fostered outside connections that helped validate and inform the project.*

- Federal agency leadership and engagement in SageCon were instrumental in enhancing the work and political dynamic between multilevel stakeholders at the SageCon table and the regional coordination efforts each agency was beholden to. Counties engaged at the highest levels as well, with several county commissioners in regular attendance. Similarly, leaders from key nongovernmental organizations regularly participated. This consistent, high level engagement added gravitas and momentum to the effort.
- Well-connected leaders in the group took issues up their chain of command or out to their constituencies when needed. Those connections helped with ongoing problem solving (e.g., when a policy issue arose that required higher authorities to weigh in). These connections to senior leadership also helped bring validation and encouragement at critical moments (e.g., when Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Oregon Governor Kate Brown conducted site visits in March 2015).

Developing and reviewing technical information collaboratively during SageCon meetings helped establish a shared scientific framework, avoiding a “my science versus your science” dynamic.

■ *Having staff from participating agencies and organizations think flexibly about options, even when at times constrained by the parameters of their organizations, helped produce workable solutions.*

- It was important that institutions enabled personnel to take risks and explore innovative approaches.
- It was valuable to have agency participants who were simultaneously technically capable *and* sensitive to the dynamics of the policy process and thus could think creatively and flexibly about options in an informed way.

■ *Having mechanisms to bring credible scientific and technical information into the dialogue, and the availability of a well-articulated technical statement of conservation objectives, helped prevent things from getting bogged down due to a lack of data, and helped foster shared understanding of what was known.*

- Mechanisms for integrating science into the process included having a full-time technical coordinator and a focused technical team that helped process and apply data to inform discussions about conservation and policy. Participants were willing—and often eager—to bring their data to the table, and it was helpful to have an easy to identify point of access.
- In addition, the availability of a well-articulated technical statement of population-scale conservation objectives that would help ensure successful

sagebrush and sage-grouse conservation—the Conservation Objectives Team Report—provided a useful touchstone or roadmap for SageCon participants to assess the adequacy of developing strategies.

- Developing and reviewing technical information collaboratively during SageCon meetings helped establish a shared scientific framework, avoiding a “my science versus your science” dynamic. ODFW, USFWS, and other organizations all came to the table with or supported basically the same set of data and information, which provided a foundation for policy agreements.³¹
- At times stakeholders did take issue with the currency and accuracy of data, mapping, and basic ideas about what factors affect sage-grouse numbers and viability. However, having an environment where everyone was able to voice their concerns about what the science suggested helped the group move through some of these challenges and overall there was minimal push-back on the science.
- During this process, it became clear how important it is that science be more than a modeling exercise—that it be vetted on the ground, in order to provide an understanding of distinct land conditions and to engage with the people who live and work there.

Having a clear communication strategy and more proactive outreach—both internally to process participants and externally to the broader public—would have helped foster a greater sense of transparency during and immediately following the process.

- The primary vehicles for communication with SageCon participants were the meetings themselves (and associated materials provided before or during the

meetings) and a website with archived meeting materials. The Oregon Solutions staff maintained the website and kept a comprehensive email list of individuals and organizations that had participated or expressed interest in the SageCon process. Staff sent meeting notices, materials and information to everyone on the list. For participants who attended meetings regularly this communication approach was reasonably effective at keeping participants up to date, and it helped encourage meeting participation. It was most effective during periods when the full SageCon group was meeting more frequently. Those who were involved in other associated work groups or ad hoc meetings had more opportunity to be informed on all that was happening between meetings. There was no formal or routine strategy for otherwise communicating with or updating participants or interested parties about ongoing SageCon-related efforts.

- Consequently, some participants felt the process was not as transparent as it could have been. Most acknowledged the necessity of getting work done through small-group meetings between full SageCon meetings, but also suggested that communication about what was happening between SageCon meetings could have been much more robust, engaging and proactive.
- The need to engage and incorporate new participants during a process of this length and complexity is not uncommon. A communication strategy could have assisted with developing an orientation for incoming participants.
- A more robust communication strategy for participants would also have been helpful during the final stages of Action Plan development when full SageCon meetings were less frequent and a lot of work was happening quickly between meetings. For example, some participants

noted that it would have been helpful during preparation of the final project report to set clear group-editing expectations so people could track how their input was addressed and why.

- There was no formal strategy for communicating about the SageCon process to the outside world. The process relied on participants to communicate news and progress to their constituencies, but made no independent effort to communicate beyond those on the comprehensive email list. Interviewees suggested that having a communication plan for broadly informing the public and affected communities about the process would have been beneficial.
- Among other benefits, an external communication plan that raised public awareness about the SageCon effort could have done the following:
 - Fostered a common lexicon and a “brand” for the effort for use throughout the process and the implementation phase.
 - Helped with onboarding new individual or organizational participants.
 - Communicated the potential long-term benefits of successful collaboration on sage-grouse conservation to communities in sagebrush country and thereby secured broader support for SageCon outcomes.

■ *Finding ways to help smaller organizations defray costs of transportation, lodging and staff time could allow them to participate more fully in the process.*

- Some of the smaller organizations and local governments had limited time and resources to participate. Consequently, they felt frustration and may have been

constrained in their ability to participate. Possible solutions might include a more robust effort to enable remote meeting participation, including live video conferencing and real-time presentation sharing. A substantial commitment of resources would be needed for technology support. On the other hand, encouraging remote participation can hinder person-to-person interactions, relationship building, and trust that can be crucial to successful collaboration.

■ *Fully embracing the concerns of the communities and participants that are likely to be the most affected would have better promoted fairness and confidence in the process.*

- Efforts were made to hold meetings in central Oregon aimed for locations that were equidistant for participants from eastern Oregon and the Salem/Willamette Valley area; however, not holding full-SageCon meetings in Eastern Oregon exacerbated perceptions of power imbalance and insensitivity to the most affected communities.
- Taking the SageCon process to communities most likely to be affected (by holding meetings there, doing more public outreach and education, or even providing a forum for public input) might have helped demonstrate more clearly that the process valued local knowledge— anecdotal, practical, and scientific.
- Analysis of social and economic impacts—an issue of significant importance to local affected communities—was not as thorough as some participants wanted. Making the effort to provide more robust analysis and incorporate it into the discussion would have provided assurances to some participants that the process and outcomes were fair. ■

4. ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION AND BEYOND

This study focused on the SageCon process that led up to the decision not to list the Sage-Grouse; however, due to the timing of the study, a number of interviewees raised issues related to the subsequent implementation of the Action Plan and the role of the SageCon Partnership going forward. This section of the report provides an update on Action Plan implementation in order to illustrate significant developments that may be addressing some of the concerns raised by interviewees. We examine these developments and findings related to post-SageCon events to further illuminate lessons learned.

4.1. Reconvening after the SageCon Process

The full SageCon Partnership reconvened on September 30, 2016—their first full meeting since before submittal of the Action Plan and the USFWS decision not to list sage-grouse a year earlier. Participants celebrated their successful collaboration and received extensive information about Action Plan implementation efforts and sage-grouse conservation in Oregon. They also discussed future roles and structure for SageCon.

Participants reported seeing implementation of the Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan as an opportunity to further integrate broader economic and social considerations affecting the communities and landscapes covered by the plan. They shared concerns about maintaining momentum, and expressed concern that losing key leaders could threaten long-standing relationships and commitments to provide resources for plan implementation.



4.2. Maintaining Momentum

Because the interviews with participants reflected in this report took place before the reconvening of the SageCon partners in September 2016, some interviewees commented that they felt that SageCon (as one interviewee put it) “fell off the face of the earth” after the USFWS decision not to list the bird.³² Given the importance of robust implementation of the plan to the long term success of the process, the lack of communication during the year after the decision caused some concern. It would have been helpful to have had a plan in place for continued communication about implementation efforts before SageCon adjourned. Interviewees suggested that having a roadmap for future SageCon meetings and some clarity about roles for implementation could help maintain momentum for the plan. The September 2016 SageCon partnership meeting may have alleviated some of this concern.

4.3. Re-setting the Table and Embracing Broader Context

Some interviewees felt that the decision not to list the bird offered an opportunity to bring new voices into the discussion, to create a clearer process structure, and to remedy the perception of some rural participants that they were forced to participate in the process or choose the lesser of two evils. Some interviewees suggested that, by articulating a broad set of goals that include goals meaningful to Eastern Oregon communities (such as rural economic health) as well as to sage-grouse conservation, the implementation process could accomplish outcomes that would be even more significant and productive for affected communities.

Similarly, some participants noted that it will be important to be aware of other environmental conservation issues that overlap with sage-grouse efforts (e.g., wolf population management), as working on issues in parallel silos can strain the resources of participants, and can lead to fatigue in communities. Several interviewees noted that implementation efforts also need to incorporate climate change, water resources, noxious weeds or other invasive species.

Overall, there was acknowledgement that developing a more integrated approach or collaborative system to address the complex social, economic and environmental issues facing Eastern Oregon would be a worthwhile effort.

Participants also recognized this shift from Action Plan development to implementation as a natural point to adjust the structure and procedures of the SageCon team itself. Participants offered suggestions regarding the structure of SageCon leadership, the frequency and location of meetings, and other process details.

Participants recognized this shift from Action Plan development to implementation as a natural point to adjust the structure and procedures of the SageCon team itself.

The SageCon meeting that took place after our interviews attempted to address some participant concerns. Among other adjustments, the conveners and process team proposed a restructuring of SageCon leadership to create the SageCon Coordinating Council. The process would remain focused on implementation of the Action Plan and coordination with federal implementation efforts. And, while the Oregon Governor's Natural Resource Office would formally convene the process, a new Coordinating Council, including federal, state, and county government leaders along with leaders from the conservation and agricultural sectors, would provide overall direction and oversight of the effort. This council would replace the SageCon conveners and core team with a more explicitly inclusive leadership group. A decision on the structure for SageCon moving forward is pending.

In the interviews, participants raised additional issues that they hoped will be addressed in the implementation phase, including making sure there would be adequate state and federal resources invested in implementation efforts to ensure that the decision not to list sage-grouse as endangered will be upheld during the USFWS five-year review in 2020.

4.4. Turnover

Interviewees noted that turnover in personnel at key agencies—departures at ODFW and BLM in particular—pose a significant challenge for Action Plan implementation because implementation responsibilities are passing to individuals who were not involved in planning and who may not receive sufficient guidance. The

ongoing engagement of the GNRO was identified as important for keeping state agencies on task with implementation. One participant suggested that the implementation plan adopt an adaptive management strategy that accommodates the changing cast of characters and shifting policy context.

4.5. Institutionalizing Trust

Questions about how to institutionalize collaborative approaches to conservation were raised by a number of interview participants. While personal and professional relationships are clearly important elements

of the collaborative process, there was interest in figuring out how to establish a framework that fostered ongoing problem solving and proactive engagement on challenging issues rather than “jumping from fire to fire.” One state agency participant noted that one challenge with institutionalizing collaboration is that the best learning occurs “at the table.” The participant noted that, although there are programs like PSU’s Executive Seminar Program³³ that are effective because they let participants experience collaboration in action, the cost and time demands of such programs may make providing this kind of experience more broadly a challenge. ■



5. SUGGESTIONS

Distillation of our analysis of SageCon renders the following list of possible considerations and approaches for collaborative groups wishing to apply what we've learned from SageCon's success:

5.1. Context

- Recognize situations where the legal or regulatory context creates a real but time-limited opportunity for stakeholders to create an alternative outcome better suited to their interests. Such a context—in which the issues are both important and urgent—supports collaboration.
- When identifying necessary participants (decision makers, affected parties), look for individuals who understand the potential benefits (and costs) of a collaborative approach and who can think creatively about solutions, and look for individuals with previous collaborative experiences or working relationships across areas of interest.
- Remind people that a collaborative solution may reduce the likelihood of an outcome being imposed from outside the stakeholder group.

5.2. Process Design

- Use a neutral facilitator to balance power, broaden input, ease tension around controversial topics, and foster trust within the group.
- Use a neutral project manager to do the following:
 - Monitor the progress and products of the group and any subgroups.



- Conduct shuttle diplomacy (with transparency).
 - Lead meeting planning.
 - Monitor relevant outside events.
 - Provide a primary point of contact for the project.
 - Maintain a balanced focus on process and outputs.
- Consider choosing a project manager who has:
 - knowledge of the subject matter and politics surrounding the issue;
 - existing relationships with key actors;
 - experience with related efforts; and
 - understanding of the interests and positions of current stakeholders.
 - For large or geographically dispersed efforts that may rely on subcommittees, use a core planning team to collaborate on meeting design in coordination with the project manager. Make sure the core team is representative of the interests at the table.
 - Seek the involvement of high-level committed project conveners,

participants, sponsors or advocates who can do the following:

- Give the project gravitas.
 - Signify high-level commitment to project goals.
 - Enhance visibility and transparency.
 - Make decision-makers more accessible.
 - Connect project members and project issues to broader constituencies, wider issues, or extended geographic regions.
 - Enhance the group's access to funding and other resources.
- Seek to include some participants with subject matter expertise as well as some participants with special sensitivity to the dynamics of the group. Consider using subcommittees (or funded or in-kind staff) who can do a deep dive on technical policy issues or science and report back to the full group.
 - Balance the level of structure and flexibility in the collaborative process. Ensure that group purpose, roles and expectations are clear at the outset, but also help group members recognize the value of remaining flexible about the process. Discuss how any need for process adjustments would be determined, and how adjustments would be devised, communicated, agreed upon, and implemented. Take care not to foster the misperception that an outcome is preordained.

5.3. Process Implementation

- Encourage participants to seek novel solutions by thinking outside of the constraints of precedent or their organization's limitations.
- When available, utilize a well-articulated, widely-accepted technical or scientific assessment of outcomes or objectives needed to be attained in order to achieve the desired policy outcome of the

collaborative effort—that is, an independent reference for technical progress or success.

- Seek ways to help small organizations defray costs of participation to ensure balanced representation. While exploring opportunities for remote participation may be one avenue, finding ways to allow small organizations to fully participate in face-to-face meetings is also important.
- Carefully consider meeting location to improve participation and access and to acknowledge local concerns and impacts.
- Encourage participating leaders to ease their control of the process and outcomes and allow their participating staff to take risks and consider adaptive solutions.
- Encourage participants to bring well-vetted science to the process; ideally, in addition to being vetted by experts, science should also be vetted in the field with impacted communities.
- Ensure that participants have the freedom to scrutinize and challenge the science and to offer additional scientific data they may be aware of. Help participants identify commonalities in science contributed by different interests.
- Strive to maintain continuity in who attends meetings, minimizing use of substitute attendees when practical so that the group can build trust and construct a shared understanding of where they have been and where they are going. Give attention to thorough on-boarding of participants who join the group in progress.
- Fully acknowledge the concerns of communities who will be most impacted by the outcome of the process and ensure they feel their voices are heard and given due consideration.

- Have a clear communication strategy that does the following:
 - Clarifies purpose, roles and expectations of the effort at the start.
 - Promptly conveys any changes in purpose, roles, and expectations.
 - Keeps all participants informed of subcommittee developments.
 - Keeps all participants informed about related efforts or relevant political or substantive developments.
 - Ensures effective onboarding of new team members.
 - Keeps the group informed about subsequent phases of a project that follow close on the heels of the project.
- Creates project visibility that:
 - encourages confidence and investment of resources from leaders and decision makers;
 - keeps affected communities connected to the effort;
 - gives the project an identity or brand that is easy to communicate about; and
 - fosters confidence that the groups' work product will have visibility after the project ends.
- Have participants evaluate the process while it is fresh. Use evaluation results to inform discussion of how any subsequent phases of the project could be supported or improved. ■



6. FINAL REFLECTIONS

While every natural resource management challenge and related collaborative effort has its own characteristics, reflecting on the SageCon process offers potential to inform other such initiatives to address complex issues across the landscape. This report has sought to distill some of the lessons learned that may have broader applicability.

Positive outcomes of the planning process are worth reiterating. Overall, participants shared a sense of accomplishment in their ability to come together and achieve some level of agreement on a set of sage-grouse conservation actions based on the best available science and sufficient to avoid an endangered species listing. Stakeholders were also able to build that plan while considering the interests of rural Eastern Oregon communities concerned about maintaining robust traditional western economies and lifestyles as well as a healthy sagebrush ecosystem. In a sense, SageCon participants developed a shared vision for the future in Eastern Oregon.

The agreements reached in Oregon have shown initial strength and signs of durability: although litigation challenging state and federal sage-brush conservation planning, as well as the decision not to list the bird, is



prevalent across the eleven-state range of the bird, there has been only one legal challenge filed in Oregon—a challenge to the BLM RMPA.³⁴ So, while there are still issues to be resolved, for the most part a cautious optimism appears to have prevailed—or at least a willingness to see if collaborative implementation efforts can address these issues. This is a significant testament to the goodwill generated by the SageCon process, even though choices about how to balance diverse stakeholder needs and sage-grouse habitat needs will continue to test the implementation process. Time will reveal whether the SageCon process will adapt to meet future challenges and maintain the collaborative commitments that have been so important to the success of the process to date. ■

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

The National Policy Consensus Center, in partnership with other researchers from Portland State University, interviewed seventeen SageCon participants throughout summer 2016. Interviews took place after the SageCon process was completed and USFWS had decided not to list sage-grouse as endangered but before implementation of the Action Plan began.

Interviewees volunteered in response to an open invitation to participate in the study. The pool of interviewees reflected a balanced representation of the interests at the SageCon table. Interviewees included the following:

- County officials
- Other local government staff
- Federal agency staff
- State agency staff
- Tribal representatives
- Soil and Water Conservation District staff
- Representatives of conservation NGOs
- Representatives of the livestock industry
- SageCon project management staff

We conducted roughly half of the interviews by phone and half in person.

Interviews were semi-structured with prompts to maintain a set sequence of topics. However, interviewees were encouraged to build their own story and elaborate as they wished. The interviews explored participants' perceptions about the following:

- Their own motivation to engage (and stay engaged) in the collaborative process.
- Factors or events that were especially significant in moving SageCon forward.
- Lessons learned about the structure and implementation of the collaborative process itself, including what was helpful and what could be improved.
- Ways in which scientific and technical information entered the process.
- Any other SageCon experiences they wished to discuss.

Interview results were compiled and organized thematically without attribution.

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The following is a summary of interview responses organized thematically without attribution. While not all interview responses are reported here, this summary broadly illustrates the full range of themes raised by interviewees. Note that responses reflect not only events during the SageCon process, but also events after the SageCon process but before implementation of the Action Plan.

Sources of Motivation to Stay Engaged

Various interviewees reported the following sources of *motivation for staying engaged in the SageCon process*:

Urgency to avoid negative outcomes

- There was urgency to find solutions before the court-ordered decision deadline in order to preserve the ability to shape the outcome.
- SageCon might prevent perceived negative outcomes like those experienced by rural communities when the Northern Spotted Owl was listed as endangered.
- SageCon might avoid perceived negative dynamics like those that emerged around the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds.³⁵

High-level leadership involvement

- Strong involvement from top-level state leaders from the Governor's Natural Resources Office (GNRO) sent a clear signal to state agencies and stakeholders from other sectors about the priority of the SageCon effort.
- The active engagement of high-level federal agency leaders in Oregon (including BLM and USFWS) and their efforts to maintain an open dialogue about policy developments regionally and nationally, and their willingness to bring SageCon concerns to their superiors helped create a sense that input was being taken seriously at the federal level.

Importance of balanced representation

- Unless representatives from rural communities were engaged, people who derive their livelihood from the rangelands might not be adequately represented in the ESA listing decision or BLM's Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) process.

Potential for an effective solution

- Collaboration could produce a realistic compromise that accommodated the full range of interests—from wildlife conservation to sustainable local economies—if SageCon could get out in front of the issue and avoid a listing.
- SageCon appeared to represent the best possible channel for achieving a positive outcome for the sage-grouse.

Desire to integrate science

- Engagement could help ensure that the Action Plan was consistent with the best available science about sage-grouse so that the mitigation approach would be rigorous, scientifically-sound, and outcome-based.

- Government agencies could share data and protect the integrity of previous sage-grouse scientific research and planning.

Opportunity to do something comprehensive and impactful

- SageCon was an opportunity to address topics across multiple jurisdictions in a coordinated way, and to implement conservation on a landscape scale—as opposed to parcel by parcel.
- SageCon was an opportunity to engage in an effort that was meaningful.

Opportunities to build relationships

- SageCon was an opportunity to build working relationships with leaders and constituencies.

The Role of Science

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions regarding *the role of science in the SageCon process*:

Many participants had positive feedback on the use of science in the SageCon process, including:

- The way that scientific information was brought into the discussion contributed to the success of the effort.
- ODFW and others came to the table with good science and data, and while there was some debate over particular topics, most of the information had been well vetted by credible experts.
- ODFW’s use of Local Implementation Teams to ground-truth core-area maps with local landowners helped gain buy-in, build support and ensure information reflected the real-world situation.

On the other hand, some participants had concerns over how science was incorporated in the process, including comments such as:

- There was sometimes resistance to questioning of data.
- There was some lack of transparency about sources as data was developed.
- Science was, at times, disregarded when policy decisions were made. In particular, social sciences and the quantification of social impacts received less attention than some thought they deserved.

Neutral Forum

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions regarding *the neutrality of the discussion forum*:

- Process facilitation and management were done well in general.
- Having neutral staff that did not represent a particular interest or position was valuable.
- The process was not overly directed by any particular agency agenda. Oregon Consensus and Oregon Solutions were viewed as the “holders of the process,” with a facilitative role that provided transparency.
- The facilitators and project manager together helped create an environment of mutual respect that made it possible for diverse parties to feel heard, participate constructively, and raise contentious issues early in the process for discussion later.

- Most views were heard, but some concerns were not always fully addressed.
- Issues were at times “summarily removed” from consideration even though not all participants were on board with dismissing the issues.

Working Relationships

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions regarding *SageCon working relationships*:

- Relationships that were built among process participants during previous sage-grouse conservation efforts (dating as far back as the 2010–2012 REECon process) contributed to the success of the SageCon process by providing for more open and constructive interactions during the negotiations.
- Due to pre-existing long-term relationships there were few surprises along the way because everyone was sharing information as it became available.
- Pre-existing relationships helped the group stay on course, even when the conveners or project manager offered ideas that were not particularly in line with the group’s direction.
- It was impressive how pleasant and amenable group participants were—even when participants were upset, or had strong views.
- Maintaining SageCon relationships with people who have different interests could have positive implications for future work.

The Nature of Collaboration

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions regarding the *collaborative nature of SageCon participants*:

- The collaborative nature and experience of local, state and federal leaders as well as other participants were important for SageCon’s success.
- The ability of individual agency leaders to think and act “outside of the box” of perceived agency cultures, and the ability of advocates on all sides to move beyond positional thinking, to listen to other interests, and to work toward creative solutions were critical to SageCon’s success.
- If individuals with different personalities and experiences had been involved, the process might not have been as successful.
- The process might not be replicable with a different cast of characters.

Roles and Expectations

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions regarding *roles and expectations for SageCon*:

- The inherent flexibility of the process was perceived by some participants as useful in allowing the process to respond to changing issues and political dynamics.
- Others felt that it would have been helpful at the outset to have a deliberate process of defining roles, setting the agenda, and developing explicit operating principles.
- Particularly early in the process, SageCon’s role in decision making about sage-grouse conservation issues and strategies was not well-defined.

- Greater clarity of roles and expectations might have reduced the amount of shuttle diplomacy that was needed to keep the process on track.
- Perhaps the relatively under-structured process would not have gone as smoothly if key participants were not already committed to constructive collaboration.
- The ad hoc nature of the process was at times confusing and frustrating.

Transparency and Communication

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions about *transparency and communication during the SageCon process*:

Transparency

- The process was not as transparent and participatory as it was purported to be—there were behind-the-scenes negotiations and decision making that were not always apparent.
- The need to get work done outside of full-group meetings was legitimate, but better communication about what was going on between meetings would have been helpful.
- Transparency may have been reduced somewhat due to the tension between having a structure that delegated work and decision making to smaller groups (for the sake of efficiency) versus maintaining broad real-time transparency about issues and process.
- As the listing decision deadline got close, the final push to complete the Action Plan disappeared into a “black box.” (Some respondents reported that this final push to complete the final written product began when the content of the plan was 80 percent complete.)

Communication to Participants

- A more robust and deliberate communication effort could have helped convey information more efficiently and effectively to participants and thereby have reduced concerns about transparency.
- A more formal communication structure for the process might have helped newcomers to the process get up to speed more quickly.
- Short notice of some full SageCon meetings, and occasions when meeting materials were not distributed in advance of the meeting, were somewhat frustrating.
- Communication about the progress and content of the two rulemaking processes that ODFW and DLCD were undertaking jointly via two SageCon committees could have been improved.

External Communications

- An external communication plan may have fostered a common lexicon and a “brand” for the effort that could have been sustained during staff onboarding, throughout the process, and into the implementation phase.
- Greater investment in communication outreach could have demonstrated the long-term benefits of successful collaboration to communities in sagebrush country and could have secured broader support for SageCon outcomes.
- Having a communication plan for broadly informing the public and affected communities about the process would have been more effective.

Time and Resource Commitments

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions about *time and resource commitments during the SageCon process*:

- The process required substantial time and personnel.
- Finding time and adequate funding to participate was a particular challenge for smaller agencies and organizations.
- While the engagement of the GNRO staff was an important contribution to the success of the effort, this staff was spread thin; consequently, at times accessibility and effectiveness were somewhat limited.
- Sometimes one or more entities (usually federal or state agencies) were over-represented at meetings, creating the appearance that they had a more dominant presence.
- Engagement of high-level players from key decision-making agencies triggered a perceived need for other participating groups to have their highest-level leaders present in order to have equal impact. Resulting time demands were a strain.
- Distance from meeting locations exacerbated time and resource concerns for some participants, particularly some who lived in the heart of sage-grouse country. (No meetings of the full SageCon Partnership, but some meetings of smaller working groups, were held in that area of the state.)
- Long travel to meetings was frustrating for some participants from the communities most affected by the ultimate outcome; as one participant noted, “Prineville is not Eastern Oregon.”

Trust Issues

Various interviewees reported the following perceptions about *trust among SageCon participants*:

- Overall, most participants felt that the process was helpful in building working relationships and trust among diverse interests, although a few voiced concern that some participants might not be actively participating or candidly sharing their views, but rather just “waiting to sue.”
- The process might be a waste of time if participants were working on a deal that other participating organizations were simply going to challenge in court. Some felt—particularly those from potentially affected rural communities—that the urgency created by the deadline for a listing determination forced them “over a barrel,” faced with choosing the lesser among evils.³⁶
- Ongoing collaboration around implementation of the Action Plan may provide opportunities to address lingering or unaddressed concerns, such as consideration of the impacts from predators on sage-grouse.

NOTES

¹ Spelling of the common name of the species *Centrocercus urophasianus* varies. In this report we use “Western Greater Sage-Grouse,” “greater sage-grouse,” or “sage-grouse.”

² The stipulated settlement agreement from the U.S. District Court case *Center for Biological Diversity v. Salazar* may be downloaded at this link: https://www.fws.gov/endangered/improving_ESA/WILDLIFE-218963-v1-hhy_071211_exh_1_re_CBD.PDF

³ The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan may be downloaded from the Oregon Explorer website at this link: <http://oregonexplorer.info/content/oregon-sage-grouse-action-plan?topic=203&ptopic=179>

⁴ Oregon Executive Order 15-18 adopting the Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan and directing state agencies to implement the plan may be downloaded at this link: <http://www.oregon.gov/admin/Pages/executive-orders.aspx>

⁵ Elizabeth Chuck and Jim Urquhart, “The \$5.6 Billion Bird: How Will the Sage Grouse Fight End?” (*NBC News*, September 22, 2015), para. 4. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/5-6-billion-bird-why-u-s-needs-greater-sage-n424311>

⁶ Reid Wilson, “Western States Worry Decision on Bird’s Fate Could Cost Billions in Development” (*The Washington Post*, May 11, 2015), para. 3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/05/11/western-states-worry-decision-on-birds-fate-could-cost-billions-in-development/>

⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Press Release, “Historic Conservation Campaign Protects Greater Sage-Grouse” (September 22, 2015), para. 1. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/historic-conservation-campaign-protects-greater-sage-grouse>

⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Press Release, “Historic Conservation Campaign Protects Greater Sage-Grouse” (September 22, 2015), para. 4. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/historic-conservation-campaign-protects-greater-sage-grouse>

⁹ Encyclopedia of Life, “*Centrocercus urophasianus* Greater Sage-grouse” (n.d.) <http://eol.org/pages/1049185/details>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Press Release, “Historic Conservation Campaign Protects Greater Sage-Grouse” (September 22, 2015), para. 1. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/historic-conservation-campaign-protects-greater-sage-grouse>

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- ¹¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Notes from the Lek, Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Primer Series, Primer 1: Beginners’ Guide to Greater Sage-Grouse” (c. 2010). <http://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/factsheets/Primer1-SGBeginnersGuide.pdf>
- ¹² U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Press Release, “Historic Conservation Campaign Protects Greater Sage-Grouse” (September 22, 2015), para. 3. <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/historic-conservation-campaign-protects-greater-sage-grouse>
- ¹³ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Greater Sage-Grouse—Species Information,” (n.d.) <http://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/speciesinfo.php>
- ¹⁴ Oregon Governor’s Natural Resources Office, “The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan” (2015), p. 10. <http://oregonexplorer.info/content/oregon-sage-grouse-action-plan?topic=203&ptopic=179>
- ¹⁵ Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, “Greater Sage-Grouse Backgrounder” (2015), p. 2. http://www.dfw.state.or.us/wildlife/sagegrouse/docs/Greater_Sage_Grouse_Candidate_species_Backgrounder.pdf
- ¹⁶ Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Greater Sage-Grouse” (n.d.), para. 4–7. <https://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/articles.cfm?id=149489436>
- ¹⁷ Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, “Greater Sage-Grouse Backgrounder” (2015), p. 1. http://www.dfw.state.or.us/wildlife/sagegrouse/docs/Greater_Sage_Grouse_Candidate_species_Backgrounder.pdf
- ¹⁸ Oregon Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership, “Oregon’s Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon)” (2013), p. 1. http://orsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SageCon_OverviewFactSheet_2013.pdf
- ¹⁹ A full list of SageCon partners is included in the appendix to the Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan. “Appendix 1: SageCon Partners” may be downloaded from the Oregon Explorer website at this link: http://oe.oregonexplorer.info/ExternalContent/SageCon/Appendices_Combined.pdf
- ²⁰ The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan may be downloaded from the Oregon Explorer website at this link: <http://oregonexplorer.info/content/oregon-sage-grouse-action-plan?topic=203&ptopic=179>
- ²¹ Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, “Oregon Conservation Strategy” (Salem, Oregon, 2016).
- ²² Learn more about the Renewable Energy and Eastern Oregon Landscape Conservation Partnership at the Oregon Solutions website at this link: <http://orsolutions.org/osproject/renewable-energy-and-eastern-oregon-landscape-conservation-partnership>

²³ [The National Policy Consensus Center](#) (NPCC) was established in 2000 to lead, research, and develop the field of collaborative governance and consensus-building around public policy issues. [Oregon Solutions](#) and [Oregon Consensus](#) are statewide programs under the NPCC umbrella that serve to build more durable, sustainable and collaborative relationships through stakeholder engagement, mediation processes, and implementation on the ground.

²⁴ Oregon Solutions has found that the clarity around roles and commitments embodied in Declarations of Cooperation—which are central to the Oregon Solutions approach—can help facilitate successful partnership efforts. Visit the Oregon Solutions website to view the REECon Declaration of Cooperation at http://orsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/FINAL_DoC.pdf

²⁵ To learn more about the Sage-Grouse Task Force, see the website of the Western Governors Association at this link: <https://www.westgov.org/about/411-sage-grouse>

²⁶ Download the report of the Conservation Objectives Team, “Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Objective: Final Report” at this link: <https://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/documents/COT-Report-with-Dear-Interested-Reader-Letter.pdf>

²⁷ Download BLM’s Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management and Restoration at this link <https://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/documents/SecretarialOrder3336.pdf>

²⁸ To learn more about Candidate Conservations Agreements (CCAs) see the Harney County website at this link: <http://www.co.harney.or.us/sagegrouse-links.html> and download a CCA fact sheet by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at this link: <https://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/CCAs.pdf>

²⁹ To learn more about the Oregon Model to Protect Sage-Grouse see the website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service Oregon at this link: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/or/home/?cid=nrcseprd346415>

³⁰ Interviews took place after the SageCon process was completed and after USFWS had decided not to list sage-grouse as endangered but before implementation of the Action Plan had begun. Consequently, interviewee responses reflected not only events during the SageCon process, but also events after the SageCon process and before implementation of the Action Plan.

³¹ The Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center (a joint effort among Oregon State University and the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service) and The Nature Conservancy both had field staff working on invasive plant issues, and they had good credibility with the ranching community. ODFW staff were well regarded for their role in researching and converting the sage-grouse field work into workable principles and for conducting many “road shows” and field studies around the state to get local buy-in and to ground-truth the science.

³² Near the end of the SageCon process, but before work was to begin on implementation of the Action Plan, there was a significant lapse in communication to the larger group. Some SageCon participants were uncomfortable with uncertainty about SageCon's likely role during implementation. Discomfort was addressed by a meeting that provided information about ongoing implementation efforts and reemphasized the importance of developing a consistent and structured communication approach as implementation moved forward.

³³ More information on PSU's Executive Seminar Program is available at <https://www.pdx.edu/cps/executive-seminar-program-for-natural-resources-0>

³⁴ The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan has not been challenged to date. Concerns about BLM's Oregon RMPA resulted in a lawsuit filed by the Harney County Soil and Water Conservation District in December 2016.

³⁵ The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds was developed with the intent to avoid the listing of Coho salmon, but the listing did in fact occur. Many of the actions in the salmon plan were difficult to implement because they were voluntary and under-resourced.

³⁶ This response echoes an overarching sense sometimes expressed by rural communities in Eastern Oregon that they are repeatedly on the defensive with respect to natural resource issues despite their sincere belief that they have generally been good stewards of the land.