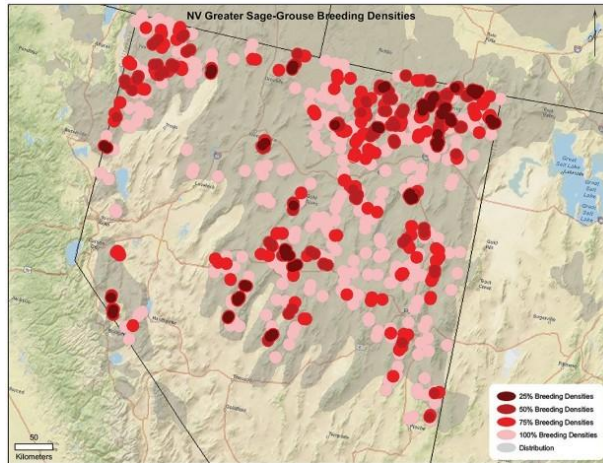


## Stewardship group hosts sage grouse talk

ADELLA HARDING Free Press Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, January 17, 2011 8:39 am



ELKO — Gary Back of Great Basin Ecology will give a presentation Thursday on a draft study on the greater sage grouse in the North Fork area of Elko County — a study he did for the North-eastern Nevada Stewardship Group.

A reception will begin at 6:30 p.m., followed by the presentation at 7 p.m. in Room 108 of the Health Sciences Building at Great Basin College.

The Summary of the North Fork Population Management Unit Conservation Assessment is the second such study funded through the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group under a conservation grant from the Nevada State Lands Division, said Leta Collord of the stewardship group.

“The first study was done on Tuscarora, and this North Fork area is to the east,” she said.

The assessments look at “the life-cycle needs of the greater sage grouse,” including breeding, nesting, brooding, hatching and wintering habitat, Collord said.

“What we focused on is trying to identify the critical life pathway for the greater sage grouse,” she said.

The Division of Lands provided a \$210,000 grant to the stewardship group for this second study, according to Gerald Miller, coordinator of the studies for the stewardship group.

Miller is past president of the group and he is the resource conservation and development coordinator for northeastern Nevada for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He said the group had \$223,000 for the study, including the Question 1 grant from the state and a \$13,000 contribution in money and volunteer labor from the group.

Collord said the assessment will be available to the public when published to provide information for livestock operators, public agencies, land planning organizations, consultants and recreationists.

“Operators will be able to use it as a tool,” Collord said.

Miller said the presentation will provide an opportunity “to see how natural eco-systems work, from grasslands to a sagebrush ocean.”

He said the two studies show how because of range fires in Elko County a few years ago, the land is a combination of “old, decadent sagebrush and new, even-age grasslands. It’s missing the varieties of ages in the plant community due to fires or lack of disturbance.”

Miller said three more studies are planned, and the stewardship group has applied to the state for the funding. These areas will be the O’Neil Basin, Snake Mountains and Gollaher Mountain.

“The interesting study will be the O’Neil population management unit as that region has not been affected as much by fires,” Miller said.

He said the studies so far have revealed that the sage grouse is more affected by West Nile virus than expected, that predators affect the sage groups population more than thought and that the sage grouse migrates farther than expected.

“We’re finding out they really move,” Miller said. “The sage grouse is the only warm-blooded critter that actually gains weight in the wintertime,” he also said.

They chow down on sagebrush.

“When we get these done, 75 percent of Elko County will be done with almost no cost to Elko County. The grant funding makes a difference,” Miller said.

“Elko County is providing all of the grant administration. Otherwise securing these funds would be next to impossible for a small not-for-profit organization run by volunteers,” he said.

Miller explained that these studies are part of Nevada’s efforts and Elko County’s efforts to study and improve greater sage grouse habitat.

The state and county hope that should the sage grouse be named to the endangered species list, they will qualify for an exemption because of their advance work.

“I firmly believe the population can rebound,” Miller said.

He said fish and wildlife agencies in the West suggested steps to take on the sage grouse to help restore populations.

These included a state plan, a county plan, a population management unit plan and implementation of the population management unit plan.

Humboldt County also has done a plan, and federal agencies have completed their versions for additional counties, Miller said.