

**Question 1 Grant Request
Round 4**

Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group

Proposed Project

**Complete an Assessment of the Tuscarora Watershed / Sage
Grouse Population Management Unit (PMU)**

The Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group (NNSG) worked from 1999 to 2004 to complete the *Elko County Sagebrush Ecosystem Conservation Strategy* (Strategy). This document was designed to be implemented by the agencies and other partners at the watershed level. Those developing the Strategy recognized the need and ultimate benefit of using a third-party coordinator and contractors to complete and deliver a watershed assessment product that would reflect the existing habitat conditions for the Tuscarora Watershed/Tuscarora PMU and recommend landscape-scale actions that would improve habitat for sage-grouse. The proposed Coordinator (Coordinator) and associated contractors would have the responsibility to evaluate baseline conditions and threats, then identify management opportunities that would improve overall watershed functionality and sage-grouse habitat. The assessment resulting from this effort would serve as a template to be used by NNSG and agencies across other watersheds in Elko County as the Strategy is implemented. Because of this need, NNSG is requesting funding for a third-party Coordinator and related contract consultant work. Work of the Coordinator would commence in the 2nd quarter of 2006 and continue through the working field season of 2006 (approximate six months). The NNSG Sage Grouse Pod (participant list attached) identified the Tuscarora Watershed, which is coincidental to the PMU recognized by the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), as the priority management area for the Strategy implementation.

With the passage of Assembly Bill No. 9 in July of 2000, Nevada citizens provided support of the Proposal to Issue Bonds for Conservation Resource Protection. Under AB 9, commonly known as "Question 1", part of the funding generated was to provide for the development of habitat conservation plans. These plans were to protect and/or enhance wildlife habitat for endangered species, other species that warrant special attention, and biodiversity.

Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group's ongoing planning for species conservation would result in actions or activities designed to fulfill the expectations associated with wildlife habitats; specifically: landscape ecosystems that provide resources upon which the life cycle of diverse species can thrive. This NNSG funding request under Q-1 will fulfill the public benefit expectations for habitat conservation planning.

This Proposal fits well with the Elko County General Open Space Plan (Plan) that was formally approved September 4, 2003 by the Elko County Board of Commissioners. Emphasis of the Plan is on the value of open space as it relates to Elko County's livestock/agriculture industry; citizen interest in scenic open space; passive, active, and dispersed recreation; preservation of flood plains; defensible open space; area parks; and conservation values. The Strategy, and its implementation within Elko County watersheds, provides a planning vehicle to coordinate the

interests expressed in the Open Space Plan and to enhance opportunities to further properly-functioning ecosystems and enhance essential habitat for biodiversity.

One key component of the proposed project is to utilize a Coordinator. Skills necessary for the Coordinator would include experience in facilitating a diverse group to achieve common goals or purposes, understanding of spatial analysis principles, basic understanding of natural resources, experience with a watershed assessment, and document production skills. The specific scope of work assigned to the Coordinator would be:

- A. Coordinator and contractors under his/her direction will utilize the collaborative process, including members of NNSG and other interested parties, to form the Watershed Working Group (working group). Members of this working group will participate within their appropriate abilities to complete the watershed assessment and associated planning, which will result in identified habitat improvement projects.
- B. Coordinator will use the Strategy, with focus on Section 3.5: The Watershed Planning Process. The watershed assessment would combine the methodology included in *Interpreting Indicators of Rangeland Health (USDI and USDA Technical Reference 1734-6)* and *Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale (Federal Guide for Watershed Analysis)*.
- C. Coordinator has the responsibility to coordinate the identification and prioritization of impacts to sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligates that the Watershed Team identifies for emphasis within the Tuscarora Watershed/PMU planning process.
- D. Coordinator will include Strategy components for use in the watershed assessment to identify the stressors on the system and management opportunities within the watershed, specifically:
 1. Evaluate the restoration potential of approximately 126,560 acres identified as R-2 habitat (poor condition as described by NDOW's Nevada Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan Draft and prioritize for action planning.
 2. Develop a monitoring protocol based on the evaluation of the effectiveness of past restoration projects.
 3. Summarize existing vegetation data to identify ecological range sites and soil mapping units.
 4. Rate condition of existing plant communities (proper functioning condition assessment of uplands and riparian communities as well as refinement of the restoration (r-values).
 5. Provide other information related to grazing, wildlife habitats, special status species, cultural and historic values, etc.

- E. Coordinator will include the Draft Tuscarora PMU document for guidance in developing the watershed assessment product.
1. Completed NNSG project work within the Rock Creek watershed, a sub-unit of the Tuscarora Watershed/PMU, identified in the watershed prioritization matrix as the starting point for implementation of the Strategy. The completed project consists of the Very Large Scale Aerial (VLSA) Data Collection on a Sagebrush Steppe Watershed project of June 2005. This pilot project was jointly completed by the Agricultural Research Services, High Plains Grasslands Research Station (ARS), Cloud-Street Airsports, and Bitterroot Restoration, Inc.(BRI). ARS provided leadership for the project, with Cloud-Street Airsports and BRI as contractors paid directly by NNSG. The project budget totaled \$22,555. NNSG solicited and gained support for the project from: Placer Dome/Cortez Mines, Bureau of Land Management Elko Field Office, and N-1 Grazing Board. (revised Scope of Work attached). NNSG will work to include this data collection regime as an integral component to the watershed planning process.
 2. Regarding the concern that has been expressed about legal challenges that the Bureau of Land Management is facing in the Tuscarora watershed. The NNSG actions within the Q-1 watershed proposal will not result in immediate management actions. Therefore no conflict exists. To the contrary, data assembly and analysis of existing conditions and actions within the watershed will most likely enhance the overall understanding and prescribe positive actions for next steps in the region.
- F. Coordinator will identify data gaps and information needed to fill those gaps. He/she will also determine any negative impacts to the analysis process in the event that the data is not collected. If critical data is missing, efforts will be made to collect necessary data during the 2006 season.
- G. Coordinator will present preliminary findings to the NNSG Sage Grouse Pod and other stakeholders for discussion of current habitat conditions, reference conditions, desired conditions, and synthesis of information.
- H. Coordinator will, based upon results of the preceding steps, develop recommendations for project level discussions.
1. NNSG has demonstrated the ability to leverage not only “funding from other sources,” but to exhibit synergistic planning environments where diverse participants are engaged in accomplishing mutually identified ecosystem and societal goals.
 2. NNSG will engage with their partners on the private land sector to access funding sources specific to their ownership needs. NRCS, NDF, NDOW – Private Landowners Incentive Program (LIP), and others, have land restoration opportunities available. The management agencies will also have suggestions for funding sources. The Elko County Conservation Districts have supported NNSG in the scoping of the Strategy, with financial support of educational opportunities, weed suppression training, and will be an important part of the watershed assessment process, and with the

implementation phase of the Strategy. Nevada Division of Forestry has programs and skills that will compliment the watershed assessment process, and the implementation of restoration projects. NNSG being a 501 C (3) can apply for grants from private funding sources supporting restoration efforts.

- I. Coordinator will develop a draft watershed assessment and submit two reports to NNSG, agencies and other partners.

This assessment will identify steps that, when implemented, will improve habitat for sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligates. These habitat improvements will also restore functionality to the hydrologic, nutrient, and energy cycles through the establishment of healthy vegetation communities. The highest priorities for habitat treatment will be driven by the risk of crossing an undesired ecological threshold (e.g., conversion to monocultures of cheatgrass or other invasive weeds) and maintaining the opportunity to apply an effective management treatment. "State and transition models" for evaluating vegetation relationships offer the best tool for analyzing management hazards and opportunities and determining management options and priorities.

In preparing the final watershed assessment, the Coordinator and Watershed Working Group will:

1. Identify existing impacted areas (from vegetation maps) and develop appropriate management actions required for restoration of significant life cycle needs of the sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligates.
2. Recommend changes to grazing strategies that will provide sustainable livestock production and accomplish the recovery of impacted areas.
3. Develop management actions for prioritization based on feasibility, availability of diverse funding sources appropriate to land status, appropriate timeframes for treatment implementation, and the schedule of professional and private members of the team.
4. Finalize the habitat improvement monitoring protocol and initiate the implementation of the protocol at the point of project development. The adaptive management principles will guide the construct of the protocol.

J. NNSG will use the U.S. Wildlife Services Policy for Evaluation of Conservation _____ Efforts (PECE) as a component when implementing conservation planning.

K. Coordinator will recommend appropriate implementation milestones and _____ benchmarks to gauge success.