



SAGEBRUSH KEYSTONE INITIATIVE



Spanning over 175 million acres in the Western United States, sagebrush country contains biological, cultural and economic resources of national significance. America's sagebrush ecosystem is the largest contiguous ecosystem in the continental United States, comprising one-third of the land mass of the lower 48 states. Sagebrush landscapes have long been a home to Tribal and rural communities, a driver of agricultural economies, and a host for a diversity of wildlife, including the greater sage-grouse, migrating herds of big game, and more than 350 species – many of which live nowhere else in the world.

This iconic landscape of the American West, however, is disappearing.

Biome-level threats are dramatically degrading and converting sagebrush landscapes. Prolonged drought, pinyon-juniper encroachment, and the catastrophic cycle of invasive grasses and wildfire, among other disturbances, pose significant threats to the resilience of the biome. A 2022 U.S Geological Survey report found an average of 1.3 million acres of sagebrush have been lost or degraded each year over the last 20 years.

To conserve the sagebrush biome and promote community and economic sustainability, the Department of the Interior's bureaus and offices are working together with Tribal, state and private partners to implement a "Defend the Core, Grow the Core" approach, utilizing the Sagebrush Conservation Design. As part of the Department's Restoration and Resilience Framework, funded by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, this approach focuses first on defending intact cores of sagebrush that provide essential ecosystem services to people and wildlife, including desirable forage for domestic livestock, the availability of critical water supplies in otherwise dry environments, and habitat for migrating and wintering big game. The approach also focuses on growing those core areas outward by restoring more degraded areas – a two-pronged effort that will help maintain healthy Western landscapes and identify additional opportunities for landscape-scale restoration investments.

To implement the approach, the Sagebrush Keystone Initiative will make strategic restoration investments from across the Department's bureaus and offices in identified "Sagebrush Collaborative Restoration Landscapes." These non-regulatory landscapes are places of existing partnership and investment, allowing the Department to accelerate partnerships with ranchers, state and local governments, Tribes, conservation and sportsmen organizations, the outdoor recreation community, and other stakeholders to strategically deliver restoration in sagebrush country for the people, wildlife, and economies that depend on it.

THE SAGEBRUSH KEYSTONE INITIATIVE INVESTS IN:



Targeting Invasive Annual Grasses

Invasive annual grasses are the primary threat to sagebrush plant communities. The increased presence of invasive grasses are increasing wildfire threats, resulting in the conversion of complex native shrub-based landscapes that support wildlife and livestock to single species grasslands. Herbicides, seeding, planting, and targeted and dormant season grazing are all tools for reducing invasive annual grasses, supporting native perennial species and building resistance to protect these landscapes.



Reducing Wildfire Risk

Reducing the intensity and frequency of wildfires is integral to protecting sagebrush plant communities and wildlife. Fuel breaks and other fuels management activities such as conifer removal, prescribed fire, and invasive annual grass treatments improve landscape resilience by reducing the vegetation that fuel wildfires. Treated areas that intersect with wildfires have been shown to aid in fire suppression, reduce the size of fires, and lessen the intensity of burns – limiting their impact to sagebrush communities, wildlife, and the people that live, work and recreate in this landscape.



Restoring Native Plants

As landscapes across the country face the increasing impacts of climate change, restoring native plant species on sagebrush landscapes will help bolster sagebrush recovery and protect the habitats they support. Seeding and planting of native grasses, forbs, and sagebrush can support restoration of invaluable native plant communities where degradation has occurred, control invasive species, reduce wildfire risk, and strengthen the landscape's recovery.



Restoring and Protecting Riparian and Wet Meadows

Water resources are essential to maintaining connectivity and resilience in the arid sagebrush biome. Impacts such as erosion, channel incision, and vegetation loss disconnect floodplains from streams and rivers, reducing water availability for wildlife and livestock. Wet, green bands of habitat in this arid landscape are critical for wildlife, like the greater sage grouse, and serve as natural breaks against the spread of fire.

