

Project Narrative

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Central Idaho Conservation Area consists of three core priority landscapes: the Vanishing Rivers, Upper Salmon, and Pioneer Mountains (See Map 1). Together, these landscapes encompass over 5 million acres. This extensive geography is dominated by large undeveloped areas of sagebrush steppe interspersed with riparian habitat along hundreds of miles of rivers and creeks. Elevations range from 4,000 feet in the Snake River Plain in the south to over 12,000 feet in the Pioneer, Lost River and Lemhi mountains. Much of this region consists of large swaths of wilderness and roadless areas.



Pronghorn – Craters of the Moon

Conservation goals in this region are: to protect and restore river and riparian habitats for fish and wildlife and to protect and restore the private/public land matrix that supports wide ranging mammals and plant communities. These vast expanses provide migration corridors for wide ranging species, critical sage grouse habitat, free flowing rivers and streams for native fish, and habitat for a myriad of other species that rely on this landscape for their survival. While public land

dominates the land ownership, critical habitat and migration corridors occur on private lands – compelling TNC to focus on an 'all lands' conservation strategy that encompasses both public and private land throughout this region.

As it is throughout much of the western United States, livestock grazing is the dominant land-use throughout the central Idaho landscape. Consequently, inappropriate livestock management is one of the predominant negative impacts on terrestrial and aquatic species and communities. The complex public-private land ownership pattern that is prevalent in most western landscapes serves to complicate efforts to achieve good stewardship at ecologically-meaningful scales. Private ranching operators are constrained by economics, limited time, and the insular nature of rural communities. These patterns, as well as a long history of conflict over rangeland management and the dominant role of litigation in public lands decision-making, have created an atmosphere where there is often little trust between all parties. Further, there are few, if any tools, for managing across administrative and landownership boundaries, precluding the effective application of science to stewardship and decision-making challenges. Precious few resources are dedicated to adaptive management on the ground – a goal commonly claimed by all stakeholders. Current conditions will continue to preclude any real adaptive management taking root across the proposed project area and throughout the western United States unless a new, collaborative, science-based and practical framework is developed. Through the partnership with the Central Idaho Rangelands Network (CIRN) we can provide such a framework.

Beginning in September of 2010 TNC initiated an effort to strategically affect conservation on public and private lands by bringing together a number of partner organizations and interested ranchers to develop a partnership to address challenges faced by individual public land grazing permittees, public agencies, and. This led to the formation of the CIRN. Currently, CIRN includes a group of 10 ranchers and Lemhi Regional Land Trust; the Nature Conservancy is a partner in the group and serves as a primary leader of the effort. CIRN also actively collaborates with government agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Idaho

Department of Fish and Game (IDFG), and local soil and water conservation districts as well as other non-governmental organizations such as Salmon Valley Stewardship and Sustainable Northwest. The first formal meeting for CIRN was held in Salmon, Idaho on November 30, 2010. Members of CIRN operate on 80,000 acres of private lands and over 1.5 million acres of leased lands managed by BLM, USFS, and State of Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) in the heart of central Idaho (map 2). Since its inception CIRN has met as a group to align priorities, coordinate activities, share experiences, and learn from others on a regular basis. CIRN formally meets at least 6 times per year with 1 to 2 allotment tours with agency partners and public lands managers.

CIRN and its public agency partners are committed to working together to develop conservation and grazing management plans which will strive for an 'all lands' management strategy leading to measurable improvements in the status of species and habitats. We envision this strategy leading to improved grazing management, restoration, stewardship and monitoring.



Management plans will be used to help improve federal land-use decision-making regarding grazing permits. CIRN will create management and scientific information-sharing systems for operators, regulators and scientists as we seek to create a model for conservation planning, cooperative conservation, and on-the-ground success that can be exported throughout central Idaho.

TNC's goals for the central Idaho landscape encompass 4 broad categories: 1. Connectivity - free movement of wildlife i.e. summer range to winter range, 2. Healthy sagebrush steppe - resilient to disturbance and resistant to noxious weed invasion, 3. Riparian and aquatic systems - connected to allow for fish movement and natural flows, and 4. Diversification of the landscape – a mosaic of natural communities in a diversity of ecological states and size classes.

Throughout central Idaho sagebrush steppe dominates the landscape. Historically, it accounted for approximately 44 million ha of the Intermountain West (Crawford et al., 2004), with a large percentage of this habitat type occurring on public land managed by state and federal agencies. Over time, sagebrush steppe has undergone dramatic alteration (Crawford et al., 2004) including large scale conversion to agricultural uses. Much of the remaining sagebrush steppe has been degraded by excessive livestock grazing, altered fire regimes, and invasive species introductions (Holechek, 1986). It is widely recognized today that sagebrush steppe is among the most threatened ecosystems in the Intermountain West (Noss et al. 2001).

The sagebrush steppe of central Idaho supports remarkable and sometimes surprising levels of biological productivity and diversity. In the Upper Pahsimeroi and Lemhi River Valleys, for example, critical spawning habitat for fish species, including Chinook salmon, sockeye salmon, and bull trout, occurs in rivers flowing through an arid landscape 900 miles from the mouth of the Columbia River. In the Pioneer Mountains and the Vanishing Rivers (including Birch Creek and Crooked Creek), large populations of pronghorn, elk, mule deer and sage grouse continue to migrate hundreds of miles across

these largely unfragmented landscapes. The riparian and aquatic systems in these landscapes, along with the intactness of the landscape, are crucial to supporting these patterns of biodiversity. And, importantly, these patterns occur across a complex mix of private, state and federal land ownership.

Public land management agencies (i.e., BLM, USFS and IDL) have statutory responsibilities to conduct forage surveys and prescribe forage allocation decisions. Each agency has a different set of guidelines for this process and limits its efforts strictly to the lands under its own management. For many grazing allotments, surveys and forage allocations were conducted years ago. In some cases more than a decade has passed since an allotment has been assessed by agency range professionals. Moreover, agency land managers are faced with dwindling funding, limited resources, and lack of personnel to implement their mission. Meanwhile, typical ranch operations include permits for BLM, USFS and IDL lands, as well as their private lands. Creating comprehensive adaptive management plans based on consistently applied assessment standards for an entire ranch operation is difficult under current systems. This leads to inefficient management and unintended resource impacts.

Further complicating management of public lands is the pressure from frequent lawsuits from a few environmental organizations forcing agency staff to focus resources on dealing with litigation and sacrificing their ability to effectively work with permittees. The result of this intentionally disruptive litigation has been that decision-making and land management on federal lands, as conducted under the



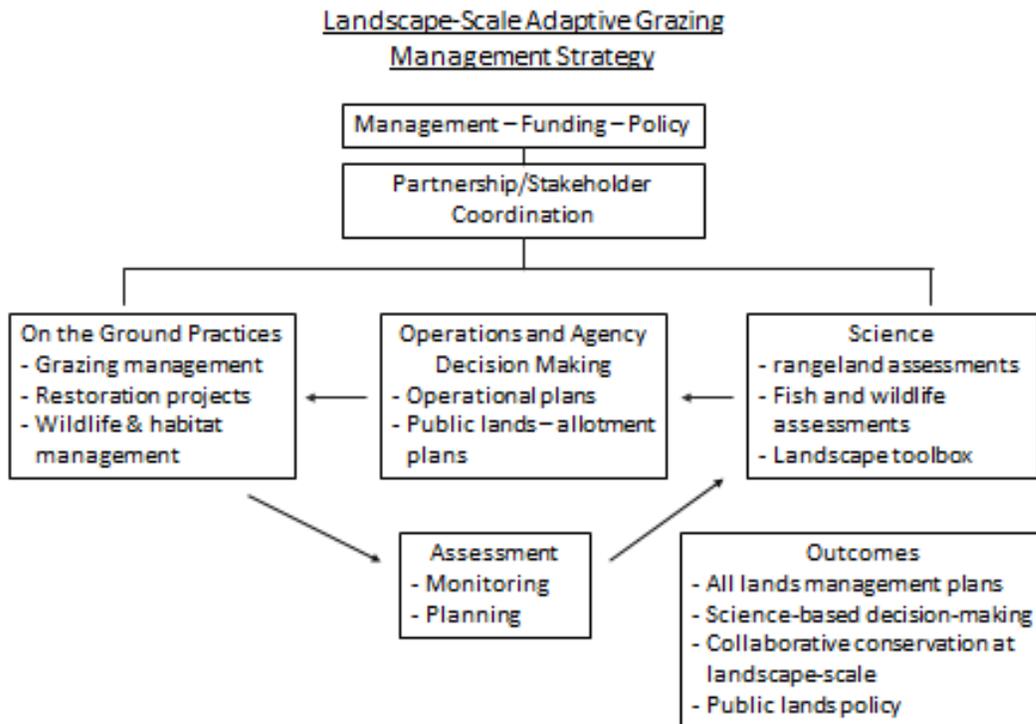
Central Idaho – Hat Creek Allotment

National Environmental Policy Act, often fails to deliver timely, professionally developed, adaptive management that improves conditions on the ground. Instead, this has led to a disturbingly large proportion of grazing management decisions being made via a court-mediated process, which frequently fails to set the stage for improved management into the future. As a

result, land managers too often base forage utilization decisions on the forage consumption axiom “take half and leave half.” While many permittees recognize this, they have no access to help or consultation to design better, more effective, grazing practices. Typically, ad hoc efforts have been hobbled by the lack of data and poor coordination between federal land managers, ranching permittees, scientists and conservationists leading to frustration and retrenchment.

TNC has a long-standing commitment to conservation of the sagebrush steppe, river, riparian and montane ecosystems of central Idaho. TNC’s landscape conservation efforts in central Idaho are targeted at preserving habitat for species such as Chinook salmon, sockeye salmon, bull trout, sage grouse, pronghorn, and migratory songbirds. Conservation of these species and systems requires an integrated approach to public (largely federal) and private lands. With cattle and sheep ranching being predominant land uses in the region, TNC’s work has necessarily focused on working with ranchers and public lands managers to protect private lands, improve livestock management, develop the required scientific knowledge and conduct habitat restoration. TNC and its partners are uniquely positioned to help bridge the gap in this largely dysfunctional process of managing public land grazing allotments. Using the experience gained over many years and building on longstanding and extensive relationships with ranching permittees and the managing agencies, TNC believes a paradigm shift in public and private lands management is required to successfully achieve landscape health, moreover, we strongly believe

that TNC can catalyze landscape scale conservation through its work and partnership with CIRN we have a chance to affect change on a local and regional context. In order to accomplish this change the CIRN and partners are proposing to implement a landscape-scale adaptive grazing management strategy as outlined in the adaptive management diagram.



Adaptive Management Diagram

TNC is working in Idaho and throughout the world to conserve the lands and water on which all life depends. In order to achieve our mission on a local as well as global scale TNC's strategic direction is set by the Global Challenges/Global Solutions Conservation Framework. Through this framework, over the next ten years, TNC is committed to demonstrate that conservation is integral to improving the lives of people. Our approach is aimed at increasing the pace of conservation efforts that restore and protect large ecological systems.

The goals of TNC's participation in CIRN are to sustain the natural and social values of the region by i) improving the economic and operational stability of ranching operations and ii) achieving increased wildlife abundance and habitat condition through the conservation and restoration of land throughout the region. Our work is based on the belief that effective conservation and grazing management in this landscape must cut across the boundaries of individual ranches and must integrate public and private lands. We are committed to working in tangible, on-the-ground, and cooperative ways to forge new approaches to achieving improved land, economic and community health.

References

Holechek, JE. 1986. Range Management: Principles and Practices. Prentice Hall, 501pp.

Noss, RE, ET LaRoe III, and J.M Scott. 2001. Endangered ecosystem of the United States: A preliminary assessment of loss and degradation.

Project Outcomes and Evaluation

TNC, along with CIRN, is working to implement conservation outcomes throughout central Idaho. Project outcomes will achieve significantly improved landscape health as measured by increased sage grouse populations, improved sagebrush community condition, improved riparian community conditions, and an increased amount of anadromous fish spawning and rearing habitat in the Salmon, Pahsimeroi, and Lemhi River basins. Additional outcomes are focused on CIRN itself. We are working to continue a self-sustaining network of public land operators, conservation organizations, federal land managers, and supporting scientists that will foster adaptive, landscape-scale ecosystem management across this region of Idaho. Lastly we are focused on building, sharing the stories of the participants in CIRN and creating a transparent model for implementing conservation. TNC seeks to advance its conservation objectives throughout central Idaho through the following CIRN partnership outcomes.

- Improve the process of public lands grazing management which incorporates inputs from conservation partners, permittees, and all public lands management agencies for the development of preferred alternatives in the permit renewal process which include the following:
 - a. Establish cost-efficient field monitoring systems that are sustainable in terms of cost and time and that provide data that are relevant to management decision-making and to permit renewal processes
 - b. Assist ranchers in working with agencies (USFS, BLM, USF&WS, NRCS, IDFG, IDL) to prepare and review NEPA documents
 - c. Identify and implement opportunities to improve grazing management, especially in terms of collaborations between permittees and across allotment boundaries
- Implement grazing management plans that promote and assist in the recovery of healthy native plant communities as well as conserve wildlife habitat and migration routes through stewardship activities that cut across private and public lands boundaries by accomplishing the following:
 - a. Implement and support grazing management systems that promote and assist in the recovery of healthy native plant communities (winter grazing and grass-banking, for example) and address sage grouse habitat requirements.
 - b. Conserve wildlife habitat and migration routes through stewardship activities that cut across private and public lands boundaries.
 - c. Develop mechanisms to improve water flows in key salmon streams through innovative approaches to forage production and farming (for example, examine grass-banking or exchanges of water/hay land for access to forage).
 - d. Assist willing ranchers in conserving and restoring private lands
- Operation of a functional network and resource allocation across the partnerships through the following activities:
 - a. Examine forage and other resources available among participating ranchers – find opportunities for increased operational efficiency, management improvements, grass-banking, and water-banking.
 - b. Provide educational opportunities for CIRN members and partners to better understand NEPA and other regulatory processes that affect land management and the allotment renewal process.
 - c. Develop and implement a marketing strategy that will be used to increase awareness of sound land management strategies being implemented by ranches associated with

CIRN, highlight the personal stories behind each family ranch operation and the conservation vision of CIRN through web based tools and printed material

- Develop and implement a demonstration project on a minimum of one ranch operation focused on alternative approaches to the public land grazing allotment renewal process that integrates an all lands approach, provides operational flexibility, and creates security for public land use while protecting habitat and resource values. Components of a demonstration project include:
 - a. A diverse and powerful set of partners with staying power and commitment
 - b. Rancher commitment to outstanding stewardship
 - c. Clear goals and strategy
 - d. Political and agency support at the local, state, regional and federal level
 - e. Transparency and engagement – to an uncomfortable degree
 - f. Excellent legal guidance and an understanding of the NEPA process.
 - g. Changes in how the federal agencies do business
 - Landscape scale approach to evaluating management issues and gathering monitoring and baseline information
 - Transparent engagement with ranchers and conservationists starting with the design phase of the process all the way to implementation
 - Building sufficient information bases to make decisions
 - Attention to process – getting NEPA right

Future of Project – Sustainability

One of the objectives of the CIRN is to ensure that cooperative grazing management networks such as this can be sustained after the three year period outlined in this proposal. To achieve a long-term sustainable Network each individual and organization needs to be actively engaged in the management and development of CIRN over time. Support for CIRN will need to come from a blend of funding sources which include active members, partner organizations, and public agencies.

Members in CIRN, in particular the ranchers and landowners, can contribute to the success of CIRN in two ways. First data collected related to grazing use will provide members with information that directly supports their use of public lands allotments. As a result members are willing to financially support those activities that have a direct benefit to their ranching operation on either public or private land. Second each of the ranchers in our network support conservation activities through in-kind donations of time and equipment to improve land management from livestock grazing to improving irrigation efficiencies on private land.