One of the things that most attracted me to The Nature Conservancy is the breadth of our mission: to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. When you think about it, it’s audacious in its simplicity. And, to my mind, it gets to the heart of the matter—that our fate is inextricably tied to the natural world, that all things are connected, the problems we face, and therefore the solutions, all interconnected.

This concept of interconnection is core to our vision at the Idaho Chapter. It’s also the way TNC approaches the complex challenges we face. Our collaborative and science-based solutions strive to both maintain the wholeness of our natural systems and to restore those parts of our systems that have been degraded.

In this annual report, you’ll read about how this concept touches down at ground level, beginning with our feature on employing innovative restoration to reverse the rapid loss of sagebrush across the West.

In another story, we introduce you to our Healthy Soils, Clean Water program, which brings together conservation and farming to restore soil health and clean water, both as a way to maintain the health of the land and to build back the land’s potential to store carbon.

Our last feature highlights an exciting study that aims to measure the economic impacts of climate change. We hope to leverage the results to inspire individual and collective change.

We are doing all these things and more as an interconnected approach to achieving our mission. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

Yours in conservation,

Mark Menlove, Idaho State Director
You’re Restoring the West’s Sagebrush Sea

TNC scientists search for ways to save the West’s sagebrush grasslands

By Christine Peterson

Stand in the middle of the West’s expanses of rolling shades of green, beige and brown and you’ll understand why it’s called the sagebrush sea. It stretches from California to the Rocky Mountains and southern Canada to New Mexico, feeding, sheltering and housing hundreds of species from sage grouse and pygmy rabbits to mule deer and pronghorn. It’s critical to healthy ranching and agricultural economies in the West. And it’s under near-constant threat.

“The major problems facing the sagebrush sea are problems for everyone—for nature, people, conservation and energy,” says Matt Cahill, TNC’s Sagebrush Sea Program director. Those problems are largely due to invasive annual grasses likely carried here through contaminated grass seed or hay brought from Europe and Asia. Once established, they grow early, grow fast and dry out, filling in the gaps between native vegetation like sagebrush, bluebunch grass and balsamroot. When lightning strikes, fire rips through the dried grasses, torching everything in its wake. But instead of hundred- or thousand-acre blazes, 100,000-acre sagebrush sea fires now rage. After they burn out, invasive grasses are the first to grow from seeds that survived the fire. They then dry out and welcome more fire. The cycle repeats and compounds.

But there’s hope. TNC chapters in six western states, including Idaho, are working together to run a pilot project at five sites called Innovative Restoration. TNC scientists will publish the results so they can be applied to larger projects in the future.

Currently, reseeding native grasses and shrubs involves spreading seed and crossing fingers. Some estimates of restoration seeding success are as low as 10 percent. Success depends on many factors, including limited options, tight timetables and few resources. For example, researchers have to wait a year after spraying herbicide before they spread native seeds, but that length of time gives invasive plants an edge. The first Innovative Restoration project packages seeds in nutrient pods that include charcoal to protect them, so that herbicides can be sprayed simultaneously, giving the advantage to native plants.

Data from this project will help inform targeted planting in the future, essentially increasing the odds from coin toss to consistent chance of success.

“It will take an economy of scale and the entire federal land management prospective shifting, but if those things happen we can start restoring rangelands chunk after chunk instead of losing it,” Cahill says. “It gives us a way forward when right now we don’t have one.”

The major problems facing the sagebrush sea are problems for everyone—for nature, people, conservation and energy.

% OF HISTORICAL SAGEBRUSH RANGE LOST IN NORTH AMERICA

50
The Cost of a Changing Climate

Idaho’s changing climate is ushering in longer wildfire seasons, poor air quality and shorter winters. While these physical effects are coming into focus, the economic impacts resulting from them are much less clear.

A first-of-its-kind statewide study aims to change that. The hope is that the study’s findings empower communities and elected officials with the facts they need to find solutions.

The study will translate data on climate, water, wildfire and smoke into economic costs and opportunities. An example would be to look at the data on shorter winter seasons and determine how the changes affect profitability of local ski resorts.

The two-year study concludes in the summer of 2021. But preliminary reports are anticipated sooner, and an important dialogue has begun. An advisory group of 29 individuals, representing small businesses, corporations and communities in every corner of Idaho, met for the first time in May at the J.R. Simplot Company in Boise.

The University of Idaho’s McClure Center for Public Policy Research is leading the study. The Nature Conservancy is contributing funds and helping direct the effort.

To follow results, learn who’s involved and find out more: https://www.uidaho.edu/news/climate-change/economics

You’re Transforming How We Grow Food

Todd Ballard’s family has farmed in the Kimberly area for 100 years. Six years ago, he started to experiment with using cover crops to improve soil health. That marked the beginning of his farm’s shift from traditional to regenerative farming. Now he hopes to expand his toolbox with support from The Nature Conservancy.

Ballard is one of the early participants in TNC’s Healthy Soils, Clean Water program, which launched in 2018. The program brings together the ingenuity of the state’s farmers and TNC’s rich conservation experience to transform the way we use soil and water to grow food. Idaho native and long-time agriculture specialist Brad Johnson joined the Idaho Chapter this year as its first-ever agriculture strategy manager.

Through the program, TNC has committed to removing the financial risk for farmers as they transition to regenerative agriculture practices. These practices, which include cover cropping and no-till, have the potential to enrich soil, reduce water consumption, increase carbon sequestration and boost farms’ profitability.

Partnerships were formed in 2019 with farmers in Bellevue, Shoshone, Buhl, Driggs and Kimberly. If they can successfully demonstrate the benefits of soil health practices, their approach can catalyze change across the state.

25,000 # OF FARMS & RANCHES OPERATING ACROSS IDAHO
Protecting Salmon and Steelhead Spawning Grounds

A land deal will soon protect a Pahsimeroi Valley creek that is critical to the survival of Idaho’s imperiled salmon and steelhead. TNC, with funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, will protect about 500 acres of Patterson/Big Springs Creek on a ranch in Central Idaho. The property contains several headwater springs that provide clean water downstream, as well as quality habitat for juvenile and spawning fish.

Charting a Future for Silver Creek

A five-year master plan is being developed for Silver Creek Preserve. It provides a cohesive vision and strategy to restore the wild trout fishery and maintain the integrity of the spring-creek system across the Wood River watershed, enhance the visitor experience, and promote education and outreach. Watershed manager Erika Phillips, who joined TNC in 2019, will oversee the completion of the plan.

Conserving Forests on the Kootenai River

Nearly 700 acres of productive forestlands along the Kootenai River in Boundary County were conserved by Stimson Lumber Company under the Forest Legacy Program administered by the U.S. Forest Service. These “working forests” provide timber for regional mills and support a variety of wildlife. The Kootenai River is home to native and threatened fish such as burbot and white sturgeon.

Transforming How We Share Water

Westerners have long struggled to resolve water conflicts. The Nature Conservancy took steps this past summer to introduce new solutions to this challenge. In 2019, TNC leased water from Cove Ranch. Instead of being used to water crops, the leased water was allowed to seep into the ground to support the Wood River Valley’s local aquifer. Improved aquifer levels support flow in Silver Creek by increasing the quantity of groundwater emerging at Silver Creek’s springsheads. The Cove Ranch agreement is a type of “water transaction” tool that could transform the way in which water supply shortages are addressed in the future.

Saving Migration Pathways

More than 6,900 acres in Idaho’s Pioneer Mountains–Craters of the Moon, home to one of the longest pronghorn migration routes in the West—were conserved by TNC and its partners. Among those lands is a ranch owned by Dan Brown. He says, “The property has been in my family for four generations and part of it was homesteaded by my great-grandmother. Growing up, I spent a lot of time there and have a strong attachment to the land. I thought about the decision to protect it for some time, in the hopes that we can preserve its resources and beauty far into the future.”
The anonymous donors behind the Climate Change Is Real Fund have always enjoyed nature. In their explorations, they’ve observed how human behavior has impacted nearly every aspect of the natural world. Our donors explained that by creating a fund for conservation in Idaho, they hope to be a catalyst for others to reflect on their relationship with nature. They want their actions to engage people in conversation about our changing climate. They believe everyone can contribute to a sea change by being mindful about their individual choices—whether it’s starting a worm farm for composting food scraps, picking up trash on a hike, or stopping the use of plastic straws.

Volunteer opportunities, film festivals, and other events brought hundreds of people together this year through The Nature Conservancy’s new Community Engagement Program. With generous support from the Murdock Charitable Trust, TNC led and participated in more than 20 events over the summer, including two “work days” at Silver Creek Preserve. Volunteers donated more than 80 hours to clean up the preserve’s trails and facilities. The community outreach events, which covered topics ranging from urban forestry to climate change, reached audiences of all ages—from preschoolers to corporate employees.

“The Murdock Trust is eager to support programs and projects that find innovative ways to educate and inspire community members across the Pacific Northwest. We are very excited to have helped enable one such initiative come to life in The Nature Conservancy of Idaho’s new Community Engagement Program,” says Steve Moore, executive director, Murdock Trust. “It is an important investment in both the natural beauty and community values of Idaho, one which will help bring more hearts and hands to the Conservancy’s ambitious conservation work and help to ensure a bright future for nature and people.”

To find upcoming events and volunteer opportunities, please visit: nature.org/IdahoEvents

In a nod to environmental stewardship, Boise Cascade donated to support The Nature Conservancy’s mission in Idaho. The company’s gifts supported TNC’s programs to protect and restore North Idaho’s forests, which provide food, water, shelter and safe passage for wildlife. The Boise-based company, which makes and distributes building materials, has supported the communities in which it operates for more than 60 years. “Boise Cascade relies on natural resources to make and distribute the wood products people use every day,” says Wayne Rancourt, executive vice president and chief financial officer. “It only makes sense that we operate in ways that sustain those natural resources and protect the environment today and for generations to come. We believe good business and good environmental practices go hand-in-hand.”
The Nature Conservancy's accomplishments are made possible by the many individuals, organizations, businesses and foundations that made gifts to our vital conservation programs during fiscal year 2019 (July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019). Every gift, regardless of size, plays an important role in our work. We thank you for your commitment to our mission.

GIFTS OVER $500

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The Stephen G. & Susan E. Denkers Foundation
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Crowe & Janice Foster
Brady & Joy Foster
Amy & John Frost

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Carol & Kelly Fucum
Gretchen G. Geib & John Arendt
The Libra Fund
The Martine and Dan Drackett Family Foundation
The Stephen G. & Susan E. Denkers Foundation
The Perkins Charitable Foundation

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Diane Smolenski
Craig & Susan Fossum
Sharon & Richard Fox
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David & Anna Franklyn
Bradford F. Franklin
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Lindy Cogan & Laura Hubbard
Crowe & Janice Foster
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Gretchen G. Geib & John Arendt
The Libra Fund
The Martine and Dan Drackett Family Foundation
The Stephen G. & Susan E. Denkers Foundation
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