

\$15 million is a lot of money



Logo for the Fund created by Ruby Pipeline and Western Watersheds Project

That much money could do good things, it could fund projects improving sagebrush habitat. It could help Sage Grouse and perhaps keep the bird from being listed as an endangered species. Elko County has several such projects either planned or being implemented. Several land owners, non-profit groups and agencies are working toward such goals but are too often stymied by the lack of funding. But will this money be available for such projects?

The Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund was created by a settlement between the Ruby Pipeline LLC, a subsidiary of El Paso Corporation and the Western Watersheds Project (WWP). The settlement said the WWP would not oppose or delay the 680-mile Ruby Pipeline and Ruby Pipeline would donate \$15 million over ten years to create an independent, non-profit fund to be used for voluntary conservation projects in sagebrush habitat to benefit both Sage Grouse and pygmy rabbits. I recently spoke to Debra Ellers, president of the Fund and Idaho resident, who was happy to explain how the Fund would work.

The Fund's mission statement states "protect and restore sagebrush habitat in the American West for native wildlife through voluntary conservation." Their web site then explains how the Fund seeks to work flexibly and responsively with individual landowners and permit holders interested in voluntary conservation projects. Notice the emphasis in both statements on voluntary. Litigation has always been WWP's primary tactic in producing change around the West and I assume this is the Fund's declaration that it is indeed independent and offering a different approach.

The Fund's web site lists five methods to be used to achieve the mission statement. Much can be learned by the verbs beginning such statements. The first three bullet items begin with "buying", "acquiring", and "leasing".

The first bullet item has gotten all the publicity, that of buying and retiring federal grazing permits. Debra told me this first item has unfortunately overshadows the rest but is not considered to be any more important than the others.

Items two and three concern acquiring property interests from willing sellers, including conservation easements. It includes leasing state and private lands. Debra said these do not necessarily include the removal of cattle. Each property would be examined to see what needs to be done to improve it for wildlife conservation. The land would then be managed based on an agreement with the landowner.

The fourth bullet item speaks of "working with non-profit organizations, government agencies and others to fund comprehensive land protections for native wildlife". This concerns larger areas, perhaps ecosystem in size, and working with others on projects of that scale.

The fifth bullet states "restoring native plants and water sources to benefit native wildlife." This would involve funding projects proposed by groups or agencies to improve wildlife habitat. Debra used the examples of perhaps returning native vegetation or removing noxious weeds to improve the landscape.

Debra told me the Fund uses a different approach to address wildlife habitat needs, involving a market based approach and including policy and management changes on the land. She sees these five approaches as equally important and the idea is to see which ones work best.

She agrees with me that \$15 million is a lot of money, although spread over ten years. She adds it may not be enough considering what the Fund wants to accomplish. She sees it more as seed money and hopes to attract other funding. The Fund's web site sagebrushfund.org invites proposals for projects.

Debra and the Fund's board will need to explain this Fund and just how the \$15 million will be spent. Hopefully some of it becomes available for wildlife habitat projects here in Elko County.

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