

Testimony of Kenneth Johns, Clover Valley, Wells Nevada, December 4, 2010

I was born and raised in Spanish Fort Utah. My wife Debby and I moved to Nevada in the fall of 1951. My cousin Blair Johns had purchased the KC ranch in Clover Valley and ask that I come and manage it for him. The country was still open then. Each Fall everyone rode together when gathering cattle. It wasn't long until I got to know a lot of the country and the people that lived throughout our part of Elko County. There were a lot of sage chickens in the country at that time. But not as many as there were later on. Predator control practices were still improving. It wasn't until about 1955 when the birds peaked.

That first winter we were in Clover Valley was a tough one. People still talk about the winter of 1951 and 52. People ran out of hay. Hay lifts were organized and hay was flown in from Lovelock and Fallon. Sheep were snowed in on their winter ranges all across the state.

It took a terrible toll on wildlife. The next spring it seemed there were dead deer being reported all over Elko County. Sage hens were hurt as well. The following year, very few sage hens were seen. But it didn't take long for them to come back. Trappers and sheepmen started using 1080 in 1947. Bert Taylor and Tom Mease had poison stations everywhere sheep were being run.

Every year it seemed, we were seeing more sage hens. It got to where, as soon as the hay was up, starting in August, there were flocks of sage hen on every meadow in the valley. There was one old hen that brought her brood right in on our lawn.

They were like that right up until the early 1980's - not as many as there were in 1954 or 55, but still there were a lot of sage hens. I can remember, we put in an alfalfa field across the valley, next to highway 93 in 1974. In the evenings, sage hens would fly from the slopes east of the highway to our alfalfa field, one flock after another.

There were a lot of sheep outfits in the county up until that time - sheepmen were seeing to it that their sheep were protected from predators. Coyotes, badgers, crows, eagles, skunks and so forth were held in check. It wasn't like it had been when the country was first settled, when predators kept wildlife to an absolute minimum. Ray Goodwin told me, it was a rare thing to see a deer when he was a boy. He remembered following a deer track all one day and never did catch up with it.

In 1972 the government banned the use of toxins for controlling predators. Predator control budgets were cut. Sheep men began going out of business. Finally it got down to where the Sorensens' were the only people left running sheep in our part of the country - but then, they even had to give it up. It got to where there were coyotes and crows everywhere. We began seeing more and more skunks. Raccoons and fox began moving in. And correspondingly, year by year, we began seeing fewer and fewer deer, fewer and fewer sage hens and even antelope.

I can remember, in the years before the agencies began curtailing predator control, my son Kent and I would ride up one of the creek bottoms during hunting season - there were deer moving out

ahead of us almost constantly - most of the bucks - even four pointers - we would just let them go. Gosh, there were a lot of deer at that time. Later it got to where we could ride through the same area and we wouldn't see a tenth of the deer we had seen in prior years.

Kent and his two boys came out one time - I told them - today, let's just keep tally of the deer each of us see. Everyone count the does, the bucks and fawns to see what we come up with. So we rode up through the allotment - then south until we reached the Weeks access. It turned out that we only counted one fawn for every seven does that were seen that day. Which equates to no more than 14 fawns for every 100 does. Which indicated of the effects of predation at that time.

Antelope were being hurt as well. There for quite a few years, one or two members of our family would draw an Antelope tag each year. We would hunt Independence Valley, Tobar Flat, on down past the Warm Creek Ranch and south west of Spruce Mountain. Then we would hunt Dolly Varden Valley, Shafter and on up to Silver Zone. Very seldom did we see many antelope kids - maybe one or two kids for each bunch of antelope we were seeing.

Coyotes and whatever other predators were raising heck with everything. I remember, here a few years ago, Bill Taylor showed me pictures he had taken of coyote dung that was full of sage hen feathers. You could see the feathers all through the dung.

For 40 years now, the agency people have been blaming the loss of sage hens on overgrazing. Now it seems they are blaming the loss of sage hens on fence post and barbwire - and maybe even roads. Never have they recognized that it's been their own policy that is causing problems.

They talk about having to protect this strutting ground or that strutting ground. Why, there used to be strutting grounds almost everywhere. In the 1950's there were strutting grounds all along the foothills above the ranches here in Clover Valley. I remember riding above the ranch in early spring checking fence - sage hens were strutting like crazy - all over.

I got to thinking recently - with all the wildfires we've had during the last twenty or more years - if we did have all the sage grouse that we had forty years ago, where would they live - where would they go? Just in our area alone, wildfires have been horrendous these last few years. In 1981, we had a huge fire on the W mountain, north of Wells that took out one large strutting area near Oxley Spring and another in Peltier Canyon.

In 1998, another big fire on the south end of the Pequop range took out another sage grouse strutting area when the BLM refused to allow firefighters to use crawlers to put out the fire because of a so called protected area.

In 2000, The Cricket Fire burned all the way from Ten Mile Hill all the way around the mountain to the north, almost to the Wine Cup Ranch, and over the top, burning thousands of acres, and four major strutting areas. One near Cricket Spring, one near Homestead Spring on the east side of the mountain and two areas near Holburn Field to the south.

In 2002, another fire, on the south eastern side of the Wood Hills took out another major strutting

area just above the Frog Ponds.

In 2003, the Hepworth Fire took out two more known strutting areas north of Metropolis.

That same year, another fire in Rock Wall Canyon in south Clover Valley wiped out another major strutting area.

If livestock were allowed to graze our rangelands as they should be grazed, these fires would never have occurred.

Back in the 1950's and 60's before the Forest Service and BLM began cutting grazing, we didn't have fires burning thousands and thousands of acres of land like there are now. If lightning started a fire, and a puff of smoke was seen, the ranchers would get right on it and put it out. The range wasn't overgrazed, but it was utilized in a way it should be utilized. The range was not overgrazed as we are all being told it was back at that time. We ranchers had to take care of the range. If we didn't, and it quit producing, it would put us out of business. We treated it just as we treat our own lands - we took care of it.

Since I came to Nevada in 1951, I've witnessed an almost complete destruction of our state's range livestock industry.

In the 1950's there were, 3,635 head of permitted cattle and horses being run in Clover Valley - 2,290 in the O'Neil Basin - 825 in Metropolis - 2,200 in Starr Valley - and 4,200 at Big Springs, Independence Valley, Gamble Ranch, Wine Cup, Goose Creek and the San Jacinto.

Back in the 1940's there were 125,000 sheep being run in Elko County. I have no idea how many sheep are being run in Elko County today - but it can't be many. If we put livestock back on the range, we would put a stop to the destruction of wildlife habitat.

That and we need to reinstate effective predator control practices. For a while it looked like they were going to do just that. In 2005 the Department of Wildlife began an experimental predator control project in our area, targeting mountain lions and coyotes. Over the next four years, they took out nearly 2,000 coyotes. The program was working. Each year we were seeing more sage hens, more deer, and more fawns. But then - here a year or so ago, they shut the program down. They said it wasn't working. They're wrong. They should not have stopped the program. What we need is more predator control, not less. We need to control, skunks, raccoons, fox, ravens, badgers as well as mountain lions and coyotes.