

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

August 1, 2017

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Ron & Thad:

On behalf of the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) Management Board and staff, I extend our sincere appreciation to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for partnering with the IWJV on the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT).

Please find attached the SGI SWAT NRCS Quarterly Report for April-June 2017. The report also contains the following appendix: Objectives and Evolution of the SGI SWAT.

Please give me a call at (406) 549-0287 if you have any questions. We look forward to reporting on future SGI SWAT successes!

Sincerely,

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator



Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: April 1 – June 30, 2017

Intermountain West Joint Venture
August 1, 2017



The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its three focus areas: people and partnerships, science and technology, and communications and outreach. The following reports on these accomplishments from April – June 2017.

PEOPLE & PARTNERSHIPS

SGI would like to thank U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, partners, and ranchers for all of their great work and dedication to conserving sage grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem in 2016. The positive momentum for SGI's proactive, voluntary working lands conservation model has continued to grow following the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service's (FWS) 2015 decision not to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. Thanks to the many partners, SGI is proving that this new paradigm of cooperative conservation on working lands is making a difference for ranchers, wildlife and rural economies.

SWAT Field Staff

The SWAT field staff continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state NRCS staff, funding partners, Pheasants Forever (PF) and the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). The team's dedicated and enthusiastic range conservationists, wildlife biologists, and natural resource specialists not only help get conservation on the ground but also spread the shared vision of achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching throughout the West. Below are some of the incredible highlights from the SWAT field staff and PF's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

Conservation Implementation

PF and the IWJV maintain a detailed tracking system to document SWAT field staff progress on a quarterly basis. These contributions are rolled up with other NRCS actions and reported to the FWS, during the annual sage grouse status review process, to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act listing decision reviews.

Partner Positions Accelerate Conservation—Additional field capacity support provided by SWAT partner positions across the West has essentially enabled NRCS to double the amount of SGI conservation. Partner staff have helped plan or implement:

- **2,527,786 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase overall rangeland health and resiliency through sustainable ranching to benefit sage grouse and other wildlife.
- **323,915 acres** of conifer removal in key nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats. Removing encroaching conifers from sagebrush rangelands to increase water availability and eliminate tall structures in otherwise suitable habitat. As birds re-colonize former habitats, increased bird abundance is anticipated.
- **222 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

SWAT Position Update

SWAT field staff talent does not go unrecognized by other employers that work with us. As position vacancies arise, PF works with NRCS, hiring entities and funding partners to re-assess position locations to ensure technical assistance is focused where it's needed most; positions are quickly refilled to minimize disruption to conservation delivery. Here are changes that occurred this quarter:

- Martin Townsend was selected for the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana position in Malta (vacated by Kelsey Molloy, who is now a Rangeland Ecologist with The Nature Conservancy in Malta). Martin graduated from Montana State University in 2015 with a degree in Agricultural Education. He also graduated from Northwest College's Agriculture Program in Powell, Wyoming. Martin spent two summers working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducting range inventory in the area. He was raised in Manhattan, Montana, but has a connection to the Malta area through a family ranch that he helps work on.



Martin Townsend

- Hayden Nelson was selected for the new Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana position in Roundup (previously located in Glasgow and vacated by Luke McCarty, who is now a Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Assistant Project Manager). Hayden graduated from Montana State University in May of 2017 with a bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Management and Rangeland Ecology. She has worked with the USDA Agricultural Research Service's Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research Laboratory in Miles City as a range technician, as well as with FWS' Fish Technology Center in Bozeman.



Hayden Nelson

- Due to partner priorities and adjustments in funding, Oregon does not have full-time SWAT positions. With these changes, PF has worked innovatively with Oregon NRCS leadership and field offices to develop a two-year, summer seasonal (2017 and 2018) field technician program. PF and Oregon NRCS hired the four new 2017 seasonal positions, filling a newly established position in each of the four NRCS Field Offices—located in Baker City, Hines, Lakeview, and Ontario. These new SWAT members will conduct field work for conservation planners and enhance the ability of field staff to complete current SGI projects and work with new landowners. For 2017, the four technicians – Bob Floyd, Don Slone, Cody Hamilton, and Kate Walker – began in June and attended a three-day orientation in Hines.

SWAT Field Staff Calls & Webinars

PF and the IWJV continue to host monthly conference calls in which SWAT members receive SGI updates, share accomplishments and experiences, ask questions, and receive continuous technology transfer and training.

[7th Annual SGI SWAT Workshop & Field Tour](#)

SGI is comprised of hundreds of partners and dozens of field staff, all of whom are scattered across the vast sagebrush range. When everyone gets together at the annual workshops, it offers a chance to swap stories, share experiences, and learn about cutting-edge research on range management and wildlife biology. Over 170 federal, state, and non-governmental organization participants from around the West attended the 2017 Workshop, held June 13-15 in Gunnison, Colorado. Attendees learned firsthand about SGI's new mesic focus and tools, the mesic work that Bill Zeedyk has completed in the Gunnison Basin, and the Gunnison landscape collaboration taking place via conservation easements and the local community. During the three-day workshop, participants heard from local ranchers, a county commissioner, local non-profits, public land managers, and state leadership.





SGI workshop participants listen to local conservation leaders on the Allen Ranch near Gunnison. Many local ranchers are dedicated to stewarding these high-elevation Colorado rangelands to benefit sage grouse and their agricultural operations. Photo by Brianna Randall

The theme of this year's workshop was water and habitat conservation centered on [SGI's Mesic Habitat Conservation Strategy](#), while highlighting the work of the [Gunnison Basin Riparian and Wet Meadow Restoration and Resilience Project](#). These efforts are focused on building drought resilience and boosting forage production, not only for wildlife but for agriculture as well. Noreen Walsh, FWS Mountain-Prairie Regional Director, shared the following sentiment: "We're finding common ground for a common goal: Healthy working lands and wildlife in the West."

Beyond mesic habitats, participants learned how conservation in the Gunnison Basin has been fostered over the past two decades. It is now a regular part of the local culture of incorporating community education and conservation efforts together. For example, kids remind their parents not to disturb sage grouse during their spring mating displays. As Gunnison County Commissioner Jonathan Houck eloquently stated, "Sage grouse isn't an ag or game issue...it's a community issue."

This year's workshop also included a hands-on training day led by Bill Zeedyk. Over 60 field staff from across the West spent a morning building Zeedyk structures that will not only enhance the local Gunnison landscape but provide firsthand knowledge so people can implement these highly effective practices in their area.

SCIENCE & TECHNICAL TRANSFER

On the SGI science front, the second quarter of 2017 included the release of SGI's Mesic Habitat Conservation Strategy, which was detailed in a new brochure, *On the Range, Water is Life*. In addition, a new layer – Mesic Resources – was added to the SGI Interactive Web App, and a three-part video series on conserving water in sage country became available.

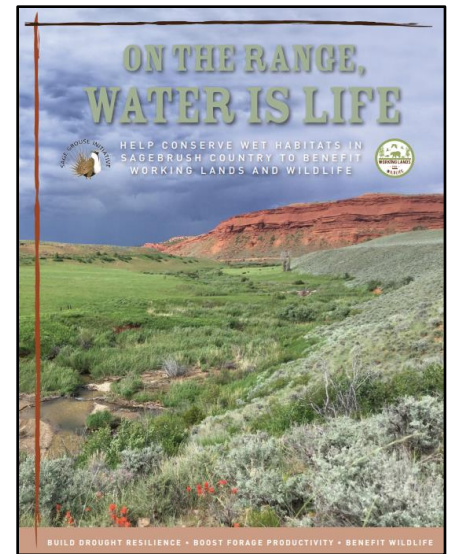
[Water is Life: Introducing SGI's Mesic Habitat Conservation Strategy](#)

Mesic habitat refers to land with a well-balanced supply of moisture throughout the growing season, such as streamsides, wet meadows, springs and seeps, irrigated fields and high-elevation habitats. These are the places that provide drought insurance as uplands heat up, and the places where birds and livestock flock during the hot summer months. Healthy mesic habitats act like sponges, helping to capture, store, and slowly release water. This service is essential for supporting the wildlife, people, and livestock living in the West. Today, the majority of these vital [water resources are on private lands](#). By conserving these areas, ranchers can build drought resilience and boost forage productivity. Through SGI, NRCS is supporting ranchers who are working to protect and restore mesic areas, benefiting agricultural operations, sage grouse, and 350+ sagebrush-dependent species.

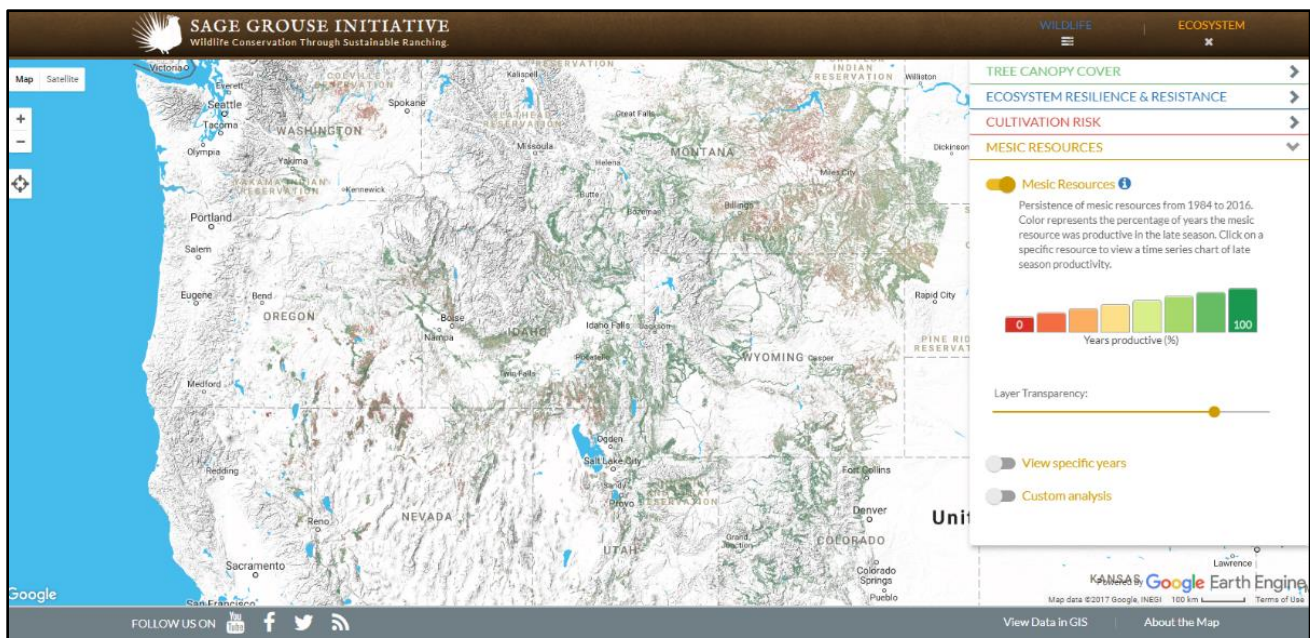


Through SGI, NRCS and partners are helping ranchers restore and protect mesic areas across the 11-state range of sage grouse. They're scaling up the following key conservation actions through practices detailed in SGI's new brochure, [*On the Range, Water is Life*](#).

- Grazing Management
- Spring Protection and Enhancement
- Low-Tech Restoration
- Conifer Removal
- Mechanical Restoration
- Easements



The SGI science team developed a new addition to the [SGI Interactive Web App](#) – a free, open-access, online tool that informs local conservation efforts – to help visualize mesic resources across the entire range of sage grouse. The SGI Mesic Resources layer draws upon over 30 years of satellite imagery to map the location of late-summer wet habitats. The data quantifies photosynthetic activity and net primary productivity from 1984 to 2016, providing users with a measure of ‘greenness’ in sagebrush country.

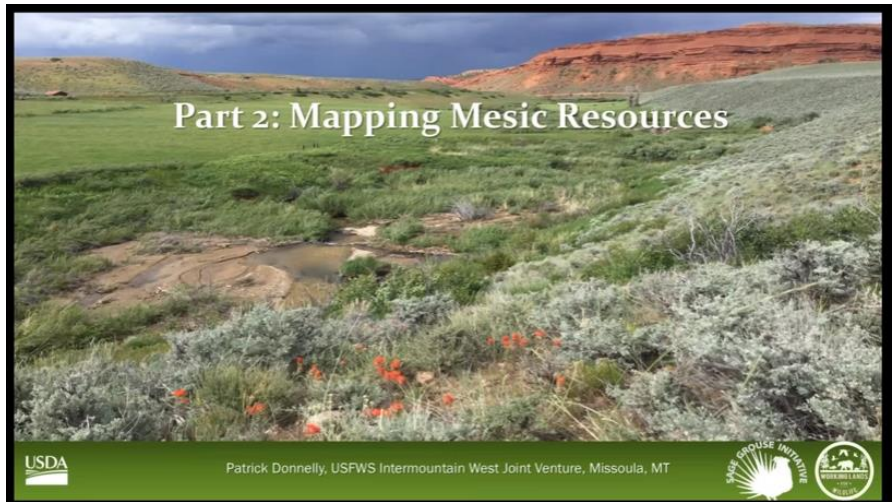


Wet ‘mesic habitats’ rooted within arid sagebrush rangelands are vital to people, livestock, and wildlife. Envision riparian areas, wet meadows, springs and seeps, irrigated fields, or high-elevation areas that remain cooler and wetter long into the summer. These places provide essential green groceries for critters on the range, as well as water. New tools are now available to help land managers and partners [conserve these emerald islands](#) in the sagebrush sea. A recent [three-part video series by SGI](#) provides details on how people can help:

- [Part 1: Conserving Mesic Habitats in Sagebrush Country](#)
In the first video, Jeremy Maestas, NRCS West National Technology Support Center Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist, presents SGI’s approach to conserving mesic habitats in sagebrush country. Maestas explains why SGI is working with landowners and partners to accelerate mesic area conservation and highlights six types of beneficial conservation actions that can be implemented to protect, restore, or enhance these rare wet areas.

- [Part 2: Mapping Mesic Resources](#)

In part two, Patrick Donnelly, IWJV's Landscape Ecologist, explains the nuts-and-bolts of how SGI mapped mesic resources across the entire sage grouse range for the first time. The new SGI mesic mapping layer online draws upon over 30 years of satellite imagery to depict the extent of mesic areas and provide insights about how mesic productivity fluctuates through time.



- [Part 3: SGI Interactive Web App & Mesic Resources Layer](#)

In the third and final segment, Brady Allred, Rangeland Ecologist at the University of Montana, walks a viewer through SGI's interactive web application and new layer for mesic resources. This free tool helps land managers visualize mesic resources in their watersheds and identify potential areas to implement appropriate conservation actions. The unique Google Earth Engine platform also allows users to run custom analyses for local project areas. Maestas wraps up the discussion with some tips on bringing these layers into your desktop ArcGIS software for map making and other conservation planning.

Other News

[New Science: Sage Grouse Population Increases When Western Juniper Pushed Back](#)

This study focused on the encroachment of western juniper in southeast Oregon and just over the border in California and Nevada. Wildlife biologists in Oregon, Idaho and Montana estimated a 25 percent increase in the sage grouse population growth rate in an area where western juniper was being removed, either by cutting or burning, where juniper continued to spread slowly and the sage grouse population did not increase.

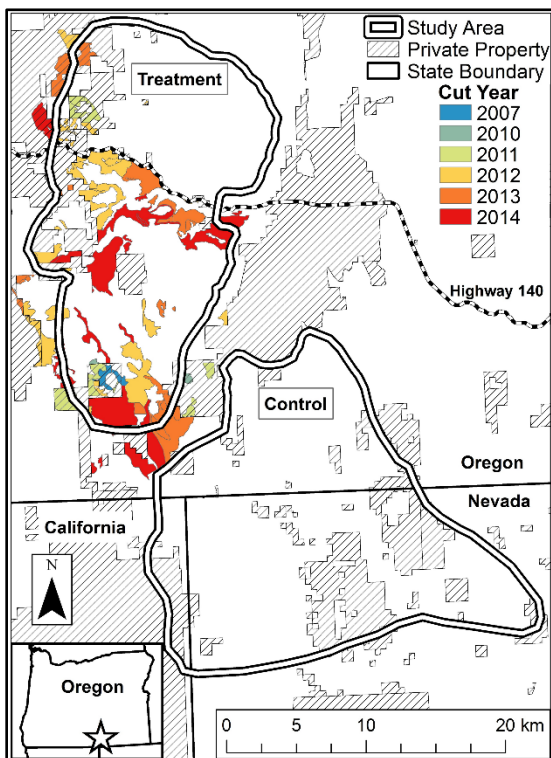


Figure 1. Treatment and control study areas used to assess greater sage-grouse demographic response to conifer management.

The study – [Better living through conifer removal: A demographic analysis of sage-grouse vital rates](#) – was published in PLOS ONE and was led by John Severson, who conducted the research for his dissertation at the University of Idaho. The research was funded by BLM and NRCS, through its Conservation Effects Assessment Project and SGI.

[Restoration of Sagebrush Ecosystems Class](#)

Several topics were covered in this five-day course, which Jeremy Maestas, NRCS West National Technology Support Center Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist, helped teach in Reno, Nevada. The course was a collaborative effort of the BLM National Training Center and the Great Basin Fire Science Exchange and was taught by specialists from BLM, U.S. Geological Survey, USDA Agricultural Research Service, and NRCS. Topics covered included: landscape characterization and prioritization; case study exercises using site characterizations and web soil surveys; mechanical, fire, and fuel break treatments; seeding equipment and techniques; and implementation, evaluation, the Land Treatment Digital Library, and weather applications. Participant reflections as to the relevance of this training to their work and amount of skill or knowledge the training provided are available in this [event report](#).

COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

SGL communications during the spring quarter focused on introducing and promoting the new **Mesic Habitat Conservation Strategy**. On April 5, SGI released several resources in partnership with NRCS Headquarters designed to help landowners and partners enhance, protect, and restore the wet, green places that support all life on the sagebrush range. New communications products released around mesic conservation include:

- [SGI Interactive Web App's Mesic Resources layer](#)
- [On the Range, Water is Life: Help Conserve Wet Habitats in Sagebrush Country to Benefit Working Lands and Wildlife brochure](#)
- [Mesic Habitat Conservation Planning Guide](#)
- [Multimedia mesic story](#)
- [NRCS' Mesic Area Conservation for Sage Grouse webpage](#)
- [SGI Mesic Conservation Webinar Series](#)
- [Ask An Expert post with Patrick Donnelly, IWJV Landscape Ecologist: How Do We Find \(And Protect\) Wet Places In The West?](#)
- Dozens of tweets, Facebook posts, E-News mentions, and web stories on mesic conservation



SGL also published several feature stories between April and June that hold up the important **collaborative work of the partners**, much of which is cost-shared by SGI. These partnership posts highlighted sagebrush conservation led by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation ([Wildhorse Ranch Project: A Win-Win Partnership To Protect Sagebrush Range](#)), Western Landowners Alliance ([Stewardship With Vision | David Spicer Conserves Habitat in Nevada](#)), The Nature Conservancy (["Ranching Gone Right," Thanks To Partners Like The Nature Conservancy](#)), FWS ([New USFWS Collaboration Expands Science Tools To Sage-Steppe](#)), and the Gunnison Climate Working Group ([Keeping Water In Colorado's Gunnison Basin](#)).

Other SGI feature stories published in the third quarter include the popular [Ask An Expert post with Lisa McCauley, Montana NRCS Easement Specialist: How Do Conservation Easements Work?](#) (April 20) and a rancher success story on Greg Peterson, who also spoke at the SGI Workshop in Gunnison, Colorado, [Meet Greg: A Sagebrush Habitat Hero](#) (June 27). This was **SGI's first multimedia story** focused on a rancher (created in partnership with NRCS' #HabitatHero series). [The multimedia story uses an attractive, easy-to-use layout with beautiful photos, text, video, and resource links.](#)



Also new this quarter in SGI communications was the “[Sage Whiz Quiz](#)”, a simple and informative way to engage audiences on social media and drive traffic to the website. The [inaugural quiz](#) featured “Cool Facts About The Pygmy Rabbit” and a question (How much does an adult pygmy rabbit weigh?). The post generated 69 entries and 202 page views.

Posts like these helped us gain **2,076 new followers on [SGI’s Facebook page](#)**, a 37% increase in total followers. This increase is due in part to a one-month ad promoting SGI’s page, which highlighted photos of “wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching.”

From January to June, SGI added **845 new subscribers to our E-News**, a 22% increase since 2016. Each of the monthly emails sent out last quarter averaged 30% open rates—an impressive return!

However, traffic to both the [SGI website](#) and the [SGI Interactive Web App](#) decreased by ~20% from last quarter, which is typical of the change in seasons. Our highest traffic for visitors over the past seven years falls between October through March, with page views declining during the spring and summer.

MOST DOWNLOADED RESOURCES:

- [Science to Solutions: Sage Grouse Need Intact Landscapes For Long-Distance Movement](#) (97)
- [Conserve Our Western Roots high-resolution 6x9 postcard](#) (58)
- [On the Range, Water is Life brochure](#) (36)
- [Conserve Our Western Roots low-resolution 18x24 poster](#) (34)



TOP WEBSITE PAGES & POSTS:

1. [On the Range, Water Is Life](#) – SGI’s Mesic Habitat Conservation (multimedia story housed with NRCS) (3,095)
2. [#HabitatHero: Greg Peterson](#) (multimedia story housed with NRCS) (486)
3. [2014 Sage Grouse Lek Viewing Tours & Places to See the Wondrous Dance](#) (481)
4. [Animal Tales: A Great White Sage Grouse](#) (391)
5. [Lessons from the Heath Hen](#) (reprinted from the [Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative website](#)) (379)
6. [Ask An Expert post with Lisa McCauley, Montana NRCS Easement Specialist: How Do Conservation Easements Work?](#) (363)

TOP FACEBOOK POSTS:

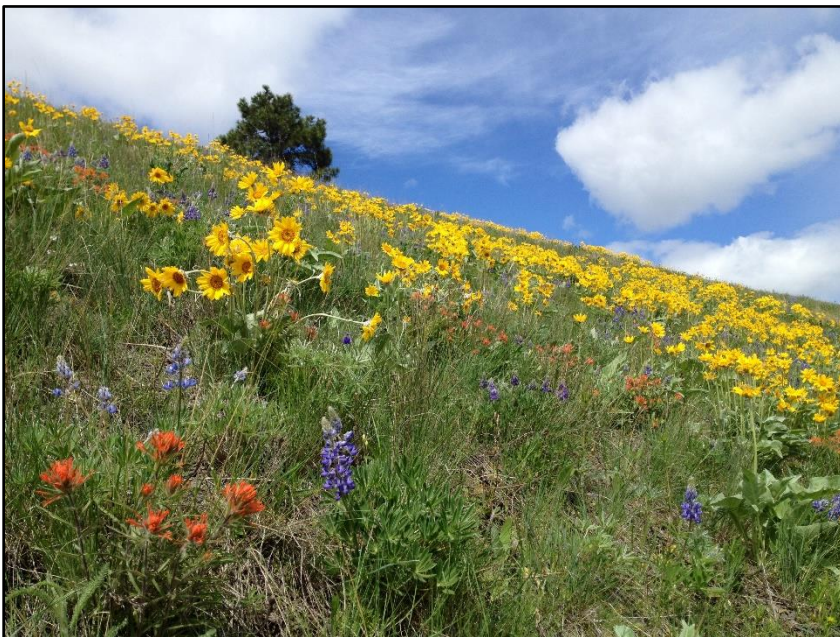
1. April 9 (760 reactions and 12,241 people reached): [A Yeti? No! It's a rare white sage grouse, caught on camera by Tracie Fernandez of Meeteetse Cowboy Corner Photography in Wyoming.](#) Learn more about this spring mating ritual: <http://buff.ly/2ns5hVE>.
2. June 29 (257 reactions and 10,043 people reached): [Meet Greg](#), our sagebrush [#HabitatHero](#), who's conserving rangeland in Colorado: <http://buff.ly/2uiSbt1>.
3. April 15 (364 reactions and 7,565 people reached): [Can transplanted sage grouse survive on a lek in North Dakota? We sure hope so!](#) <http://bit.ly/2tcCkMn>.



Photo by Tracie Fernandez, Meeteetse Cowboy Corner Photography, Wyoming

TOP TWITTER TWEETS:

1. April 12 (30 likes and 31 retweets): [NEW MULTIMEDIA STORY](#): On the Range, [#Water](#) Is Life bit.ly/2pdYM5i @USDA_NRCS.
2. June 13 (23 likes and 13 retweets): [Full house](#) at the [@SageGrouselnit](#) workshop, now listening to Noreen Walsh [@USFWS](#) talk about "finding common ground for our common goal".
3. May 4 (19 likes and 11 retweets): [Cherish the soils and roots that support life on the range](#): bit.ly/2p7K13E [#WildflowerWeek](#).



The roots of wildflowers on the range – like the balsamroot, lupine, and paintbrush pictured here – support a hidden world of living organisms that produce healthy soils. Photo by Brianna Randall

SUMMARY

The SGI SWAT is a model for science-based, landscape-scale habitat conservation—and a model for the future. It represents a landmark step forward in helping NRCS – through partnerships with FWS, state fish and wildlife agencies, and others – address many of the bottlenecks that have long prevented Farm Bill conservation programs from realizing their true potential for wildlife habitat conservation in the West.

NRCS SGI SWAT AGREEMENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

- a) *Efforts for outreach to, and participation of, beginning farmers or ranchers, and Native American Tribes within the project area.* The SWAT field capacity staff worked directly with one Indian Tribe, Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producer this quarter.
- b) *Assistance provided to program participants to help meet local, state, and/or federal regulatory requirements.* The intent of SGI is to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat to negate the need for additional regulations. Participating producers are highly committed to sage grouse conservation, and the SGI provides an excellent vehicle for addressing threats to sage grouse populations at very large scales.
- c) *Numbers of NRCS program participants assisted and/or cooperating in the project effort.* The SWAT partner positions made 1,409 contacts (field visits, etc.) with 641 different agricultural producers as of December 31, 2012. The reporting system was revised in 2013, and we now track Technical Assistance days. Since January 1, 2013, the SWAT provided 9,066.25 Technical Assistance days. This level of technical assistance provision is indicative of how the SWAT will ratchet up SGI implementation over the next few years.
- d) *Number of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) being employed through the SWAT agreement.* Twenty-six and three-quarters (26.75) FTEs (20.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity Coordinator FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Coordinator FTE, 0.75 IWJV FTEs, and 4.0 Science Support FTEs) were employed during the reporting period.
- e) *Acres of project area addressed in NRCS program contracts and/or extents of conservation activities implemented in the project area.* The SGI SWAT, to date, resulted in the following accomplishments: conservation planning for 2,527,786 acres of grazing systems; 323,915 acres of conifer removal; 1,171,249 feet (222 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 27,996 acres of rangeland seeding; and 34,908 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$148,733 in Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds were obligated during the reporting period. ***This brings the total amount contracted by the SWAT, to date, to an impressive \$65,023,834!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured or leveraged a total of \$7.4 million in partner contributions to date.

Appendix A

Objectives & Evolution of the Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Launched in 2010, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a highly targeted and science-based working landscape approach to delivering the right conservation practices in the right places, in order to elicit a positive sage grouse population response to management. SGI uses dedicated Farm Bill conservation program funds, at appropriately large scales, to alleviate threats that otherwise fragment habitats—the primary reason for the species “candidate” designation under the federal Endangered Species Act. SGI targets Farm Bill resources to high sage grouse abundance centers, or “core areas,” to maintain large and intact habitats, rather than providing palliative care to small and declining populations.

The SGI Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) was established to strengthen NRCS' capacity to implement SGI. Six years later, SGI SWAT has continued building field capacity and strengthening the science guiding SGI, as well as bolstering communications capacity through partnerships. SGI SWAT objectives include:

- Increase field-level capacity by placing specialized human skill sets at critical geographic “pinch points” to increase SGI benefits.*
- Increase science capacity to better focus SGI implementation, assess biological outcomes, and continually improve program delivery.*
- Improve and enhance outreach and communication strategies to increase partner buy-in and SGI participation from landowners.*
- Expand SGI partnership to further leverage NRCS contributions resulting in increased outcomes and participation.*

This work has been facilitated through agreements with two major partners. In 2011, NRCS entered into an Interagency Agreement (IA) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) was charged with implementation of the IA on behalf of FWS. NRCS obligated \$9.3 million to the IA, which the IWJV leveraged to raise an additional \$7 million from an array of conservation partners including FWS, state wildlife and agricultural agencies, conservation districts, non-governmental conservation organizations, and energy companies. Between 2011 and 2016 – the term of the IA – the combined \$16.3 million resulted in:

- 2,443,193 acres of rangeland improvements; 308,144 acres of conifer removal; and 218 miles of high-risk fence marked or removed.*
- Completion of 14 major research projects that evaluated outcomes of conservation practice implementation or identified future conservation investments.*
- Establishment of a robust communications program with a top-notch website, strong social media presence, and innovative written series including Rancher Success Stories and Science to Solutions.*
- A network of conservation partners focused on sagebrush habitat conservation, as well as a new partnership between the IWJV and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that seeks to expand the SGI SWAT model to public lands, specifically those managed by BLM.*

In June 2016, NRCS executed a Cooperative Agreement with Pheasants Forever (PF), obligating an additional \$5 million to continue the SGI SWAT effort through September 2018. PF is committed to working with partners in providing over \$2.68 million in match to the agreement.