



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

May 1, 2015

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Ron & Tim:

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 January – March 2015. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave Smith".

Dave Smith  
IWJV Coordinator

**Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team**  
**Quarterly Report: January 1 – March 31, 2015**  
Intermountain West Joint Venture  
*May 1, 2015*

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its four focus areas: field delivery, science, communications, and partner development. The following reports on these accomplishments from January – March 2015.

## **FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY**

The SWAT field staff continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, funding partners, 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 the IWJV's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

### **Conservation Implementation**

The IWJV maintains 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 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), during the annual sage grouse status review process, to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act (ESA) 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:

- **1,976,421 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase sage grouse hiding cover during nesting season. Additional grass cover is expected to increase sage grouse populations by eight to ten percent.
- **236,731 acres** of conifer removal in key nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats. Removing encroaching conifers from sagebrush rangelands eliminates tall structures in otherwise suitable habitat. As birds re-colonize former habitats, increased bird abundance is anticipated.
- **189.3 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

### **SGI SWAT Expands**

In February, the SGI SWAT Coordination Team met in Missoula, Montana. Funding available from past field delivery capacity cost savings was available for re-allocation; thus, the Coordination Team fully analyzed and evaluated options for strengthening SGI field delivery capacity. The team decided the best utilization of those funds was to create two new SWAT positions and support one existing position; all three positions address SGI technical assistance needs and are supported by NRCS leadership at the state level in Washington, Montana, and Colorado, as follows:

- *Waterville, Washington:* The first new position was created to support SGI efforts in the state of Washington. Capacity for writing and implementing range management plans was surfacing as a roadblock to SGI implementation; as a result, Washington NRCS and Pheasants Forever, Inc. (PF) worked in partnership to develop a new position in Waterville, Washington. The position was filled in February (see SWAT Position Updates below for further details).

- *Ekalaka, Montana:* An additional position was created at the request of partners in Montana. Montana NRCS and the Montana Association of Conservation Districts, based on landowner interest, felt an additional SWAT position in the southeast portion of the state will generate meaningful sage grouse conservation efforts in a largely intact landscape. The position will be based in Ekalaka (Carter County), Montana.
- *Montrose, Colorado:* Partial SGI support will also assist Colorado NRCS and the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) with a position that focuses on the conservation of Gunnison Sage-grouse. The position was formerly located in Gunnison but will now be based out the NRCS Field Office in Montrose.

This brings the total SGI SWAT capacity investment to 27 positions across 11 western states.

### SWAT Position Updates

SWAT field team talent does not go unrecognized by other employers. As position vacancies arise, the IWJV 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:

- Mary Beth Albrechtsen filled the PF position in February in Belle Fourche, South Dakota. Mary Beth brings years of field experience to the position and earned a degree in Wildlife Sciences from Colorado State University.
- Logan Ross filled the Baker Valley Soil and Water Conservation District position in Baker City, Oregon, in February. Logan earned a degree in Range Science with a minor in soils from Oregon State University. He has spent the last couple seasons in the field with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), conducting vegetation monitoring.
- Donn Slusher filled the RMBO position in Kremmling, Colorado, in February. Donn is currently finishing his degree in Rangeland Ecology and Restoration at Colorado State University. His previous experiences include working as a ranch hand and fish and wildlife technician for the USFS and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks.
- Scott Scroggie (formerly in the PF position in Burley, Idaho) will fill the newly created PF position in Waterville, Washington.

### IWJV Sponsors & Helps Organize Bi-State Pinyon-Juniper Expansion Forum

The Bi-State Pinyon-Juniper Expansion Forum (Forum), *Managing Pinyon-Juniper Expansion in Sagebrush Ecosystems: Next Steppe for the Bi-State*, was organized by the IWJV and representatives of the [Bi-State Local Area Working Group](#) (BSLAWG), NRCS, USFS and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Speakers and



Forum attendees listened to various presentations on sage-steppe restoration at the CVIC Hall in Minden, Nevada. (Photo by Seth Gallagher)

participants from the aforementioned organizations and agencies, as well as from the U.S. Geological Survey, Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and several area Native American Tribes came together to engage multiple stakeholders in planning efforts, current ecological knowledge and implementation of pinyon-juniper (PJ) removal, and sage steppe restoration.

Day one included a welcome from NDOW Director, Tony Wasley, and USFS Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Supervisor, Bill Dunkelberger, as well as an introduction to the collaborative effort. Collectively, the group – consisting of an Executive Oversight Committee, a Technical Advisory Committee and a Local Area

Working Group – laid out a strategic vision for implementation, which includes on-going monitoring and adaptive management. Together, partners have committed an impressive \$46 million in funding to treat a targeted 110,000 acres of Phase I and II PJ encroachment; to date, 20,000 acres of removal has occurred. While this is only roughly four percent of the PJ in the region, its removal is thought to have widespread benefits to the Greater Sage-grouse and other sage-steppe wildlife species. Additional sessions focused on the current state of knowledge regarding PJ and sage-steppe communities and defining restoration targets and linking them to actions. An evening reception/conversation was open to local ranchers, tribal members and the general public; it included a panel of BSLAWG members, leading a discussion on the role of private landowners, local governments (including Native American tribes), non-profits and other non-agency stakeholders.

The second day was focused on looking toward the future, and sessions incorporated a review of the [Bi-State Action Plan](#), including timelines and location selected for treatment. Other morning talks focused on monitoring treatments for desired outcomes and adaptive management, as well as a [five-year summary of the Sage Grouse Initiative](#). The morning ended with the meeting facilitators breaking the attendees into eight small groups. Each group was tasked with developing potential modifications to the Bi-State Action Plan, based on information and discussions incubated during the Forum, as well as identifying other stakeholder groups who could add value to the collaboration.



*Forum attendees tour a PJ mastication site on the Buckskin BLM area near Wellington, Nevada. (Photo by Seth Gallagher)*

The Forum concluded with an afternoon field tour of several spots in the Wellington, Nevada, area to view the effects of PJ treatments and wildfire on the sage-steppe understory vegetation. Additional discussion was had on ecological sites and how to determine the “phase” of a PJ site (i.e., if it is truly encroachment and therefore an appropriate stand for removal efforts).

The Bi-State sage-steppe restoration is an unprecedented effort, only possible through collaboration. The Forum was a celebration of this but also included a number of take-home messages, should others formulate similar efforts: the importance of building trust among partners, which can only be built over time and if you have team members who are dedicated to working together on a common goal; communication – among the team but also with the many stakeholders – is critical to the success of the effort; learn from your mistakes – resist the temptation to quit the effort after bumps in the road occur (in the event that mistakes occur, taking the time to learn from them vs. avoiding them will help to strengthen future efforts).

For more information about the Forum, including speaker presentations and posters, see the [Mono County, California website](#). Sponsors of the event included the [IWJV](#), [Praxis Associates, Inc.](#), [Society for Range Management](#), [USFS](#) and the [Great Basin Fire Science Exchange](#).

### **SWAT Field Staff Calls & Events**

Several events occurred during the quarter to further SWAT coordination:

- Idaho SGI Partner Coordination Meetings (January 5-9) – SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator traveled throughout Idaho to meet with partners implementing SGI at the state and local level.
- IWJV State Conservation Partnership (SCP) Chair Annual Meeting (March 10) – SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator presented on “SGI & the IWJV” to the IWJV’s SCP Chairs/Co-Chairs in Alturas, California.

- IWJV Agreements and Grants Specialist and SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator contacted SGI SWAT hiring entities related to contract modifications for extension of SWAT positions through June 2016.

An Orientation will be held for new SWAT hires, June 16-17, in Bozeman, Montana. The meeting will provide new members of the SWAT team an opportunity to learn about SGI, as well as develop additional technical and programmatic proficiencies regarding sage grouse habitat conservation.

The IWJV continues 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.

## SCIENCE CAPACITY

In February, NRCS released a five-year report summarizing SGI efforts and accomplishments from 2010-2014, *Outcomes in Conservation, Sage Grouse Initiative*. The report described exciting results produced through SGI investments in science, including outcome-based assessments and decision support tools; a report excerpt is below:

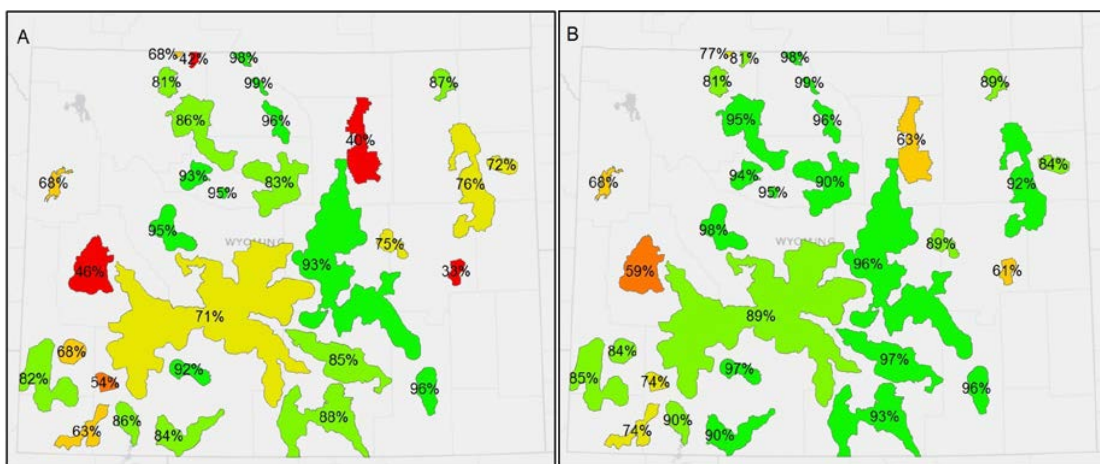
### NRCS Accelerated Conservation Easements in Sage-Grouse Range

*Case Study: Wyoming*

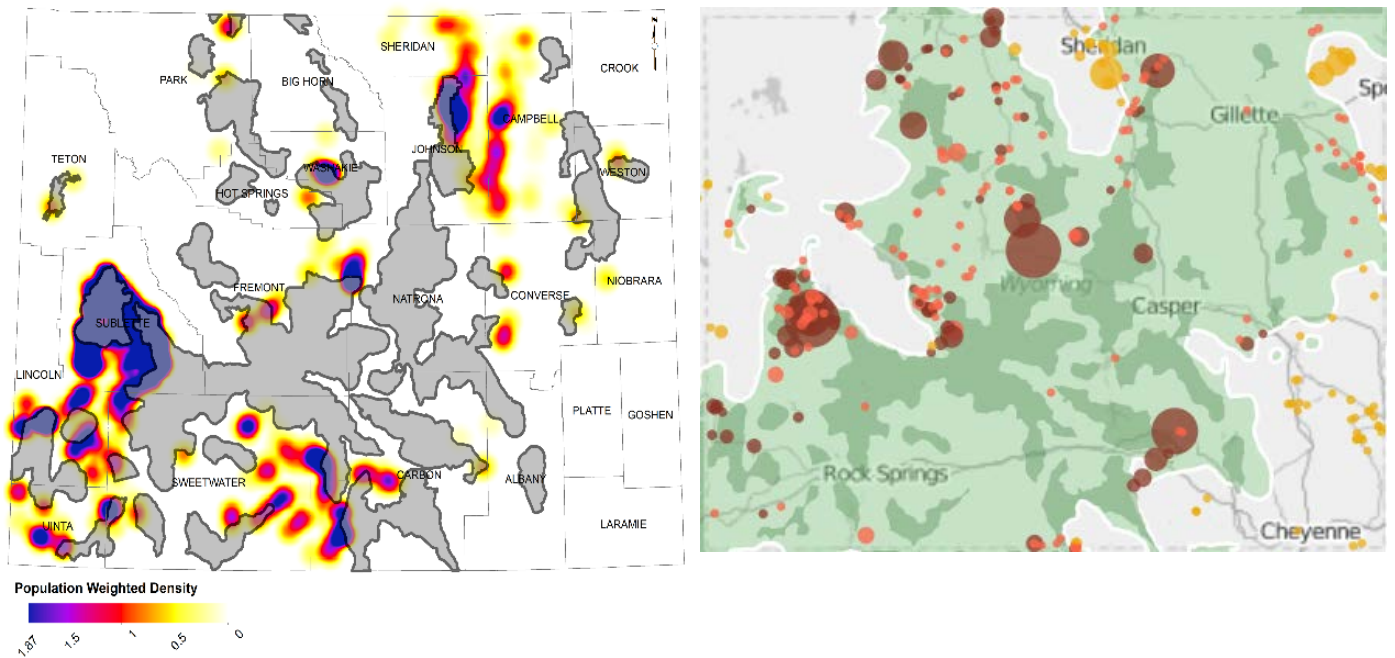
Wyoming's approach is a marriage between policy and voluntary conservation, with each partner doing its share to reduce the mix of threats facing populations. The Wyoming Governor's Executive Order (EO) is reducing energy threats inside Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) to 1 well/mi<sup>2</sup> and ≤5 percent surface disturbance to maintain populations (Wyoming EO 2011-5). BLM policy manages drilling of the federal mineral estate in accordance with objectives set forth in the EO (BLM Instructional Memorandum Wyoming (2012-2019)). With these policies in place to reduce habitat fragmentation from energy development, NRCS and partners have placed conservation easements to remove the residual fragmenting threat of urbanization.

An outcome-based assessment by scientists from The Nature Conservancy has quantified the biological benefits of resulting policy and easement investments (Copeland et al. 2013). A conservation strategy with policy and \$250 million in targeted easements is predicted to halt declines to 9-15 percent, cutting anticipated losses by roughly half statewide and nearly two-thirds within PACs (Figure 1). Easement acquisitions during SGI have prevented urbanization in some of the most bird abundant and at-risk landscapes in Wyoming (Figure 2). SGI's \$250 million easement campaign in Wyoming is 59% complete, and NRCS and partners remain committed to continuing this partnership.

**Figure 1. Percent of Wyoming sage-grouse populations remaining with and without conservation. Panel A is population remaining within PACs without policy and easements. Panel B shows percent remaining from current population with policy in place (as modified from Copeland et al. 2013).**

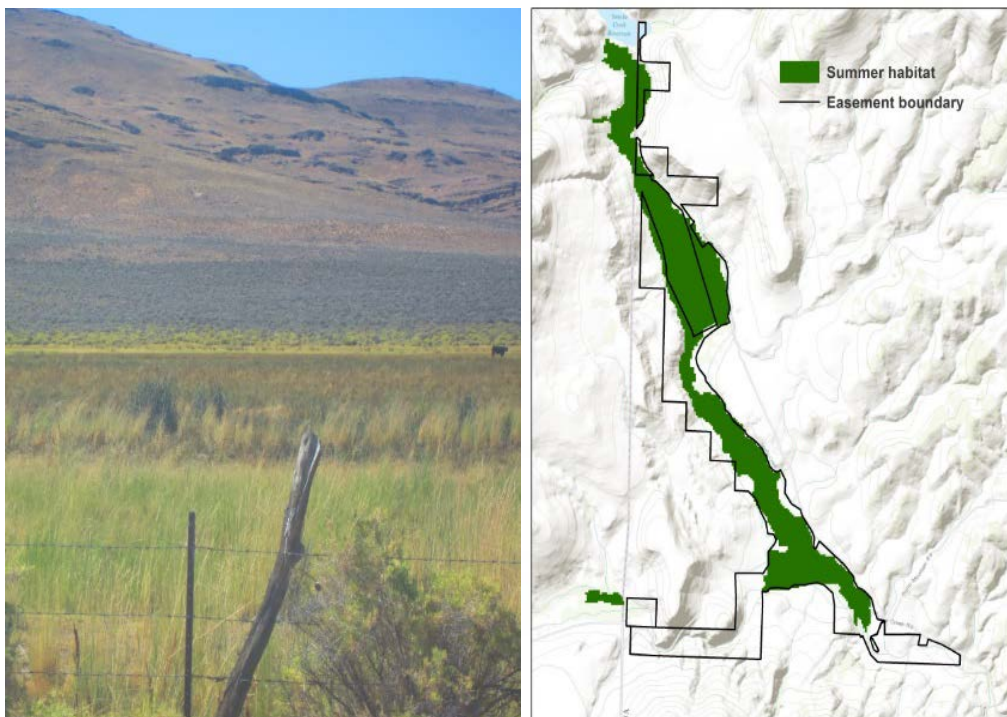


**Figure 2.** Left shows priority areas in need of conservation easements to reduce ex-urban development (blue is highest need; modified from Copeland et al. 2013). Right shows NRCS-sponsored easement acquisitions in Wyoming during SGI (brown) and before SGI began (pink).



*Case Study: Science-Based Tools for Targeting Easements in the Great Basin*

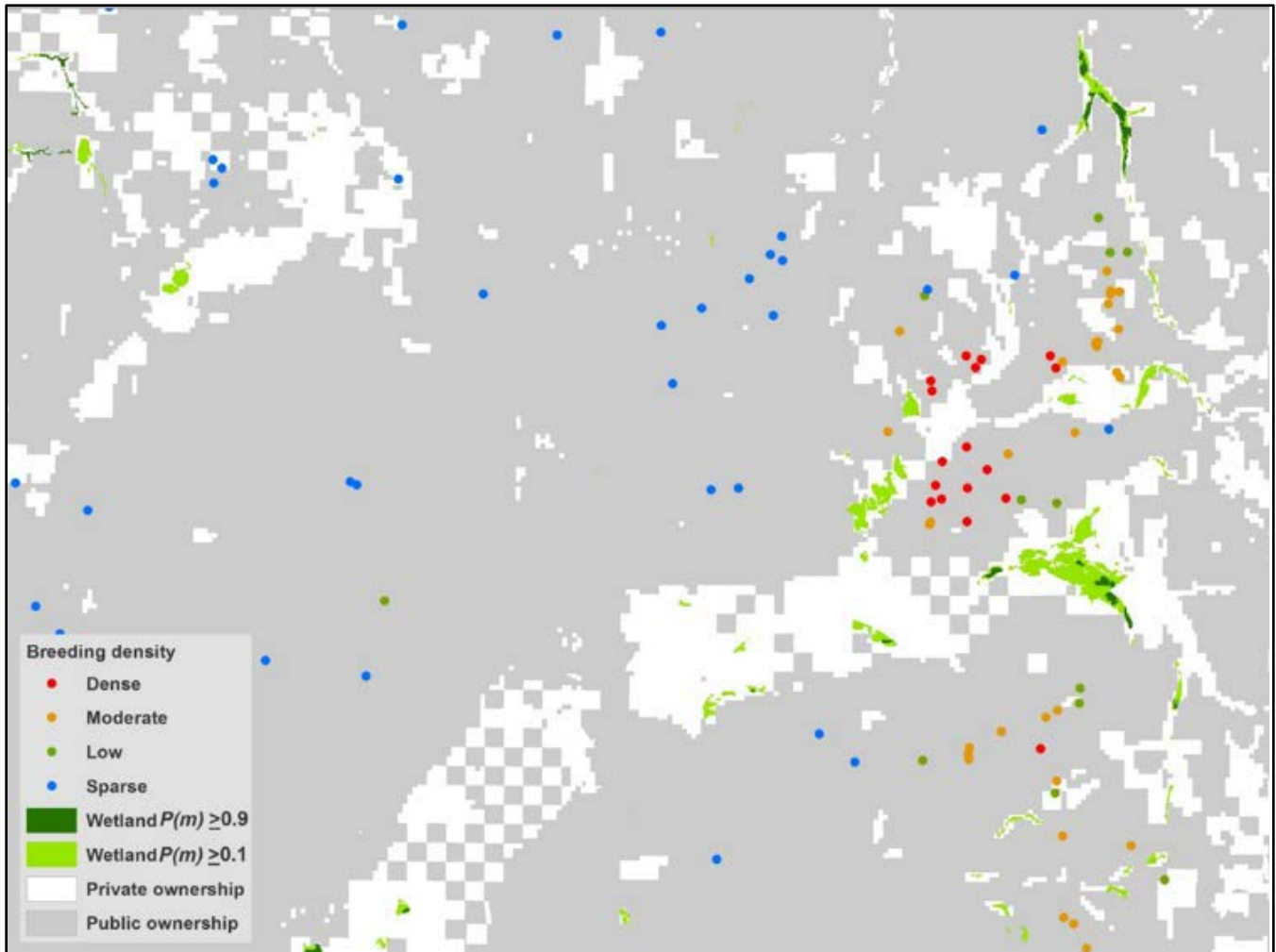
Life follows water in the arid West, and easements are an effective tool for maintaining the scarce summer resources that moist (i.e., mesic) habitats provide in the Great Basin. The newest SGI acquisition in Nevada is Smoke Creek, located inside the Western Great Basin PAC. Each year, successful nesting females from surrounding public uplands make the short trek to Smoke Creek to raise their young on this private working ranch (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Smoke Creek easement (left) in Nevada’s central Washoe County conserves in perpetuity the scarce summer habitats birds need to raise their young. The new SGI tool that maps mesic habitats (Figures 4 and 5) identified Smoke Creek as a high priority for conservation (green polygons; right).

This same story plays out each summer in much of the Great Basin, where new SGI science shows >80 percent of brood habitats are privately owned (Figure 4; SGI 2014). SGI has incorporated this information into a map-based decision support tool to assist in targeting of future actions that conserve, restore, and enhance mesic habitats (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Colored dots represent sage-grouse leks with breeding densities that vary from dense (red) to sparse (blue). Leks are clustered near summer habitats (green). Although more than 80 percent of upland breeding habitat is on public lands (gray), 81 percent of summer habitats are privately owned (white; as modified from SGI 2014).**



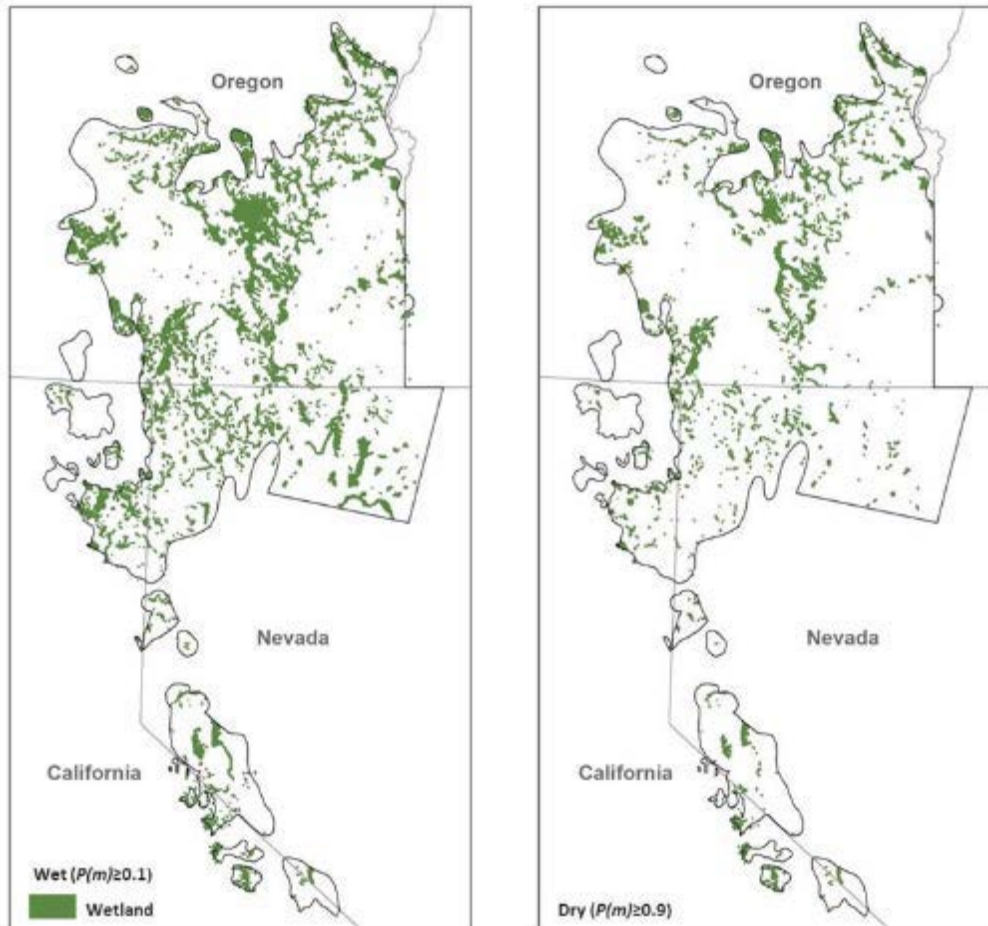
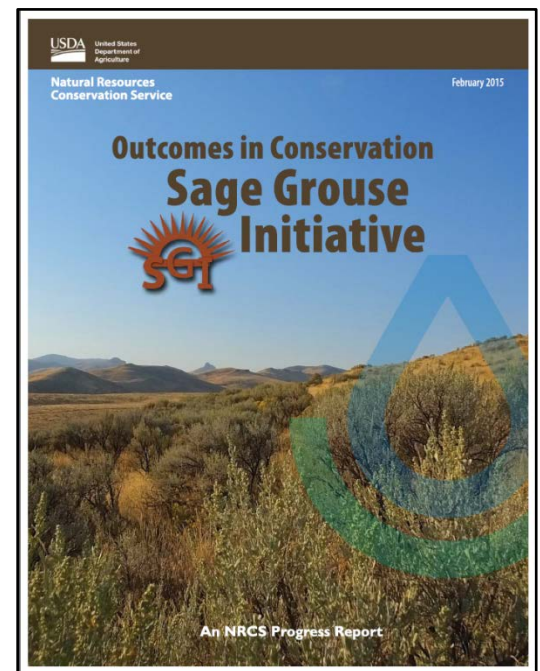


Figure 5. Mesic habitats, as mapped for sage-grouse broods in Oregon, Nevada, and California. Extent of brood habitat nearly doubles in wet (left) compared to dry (right) years.

## COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

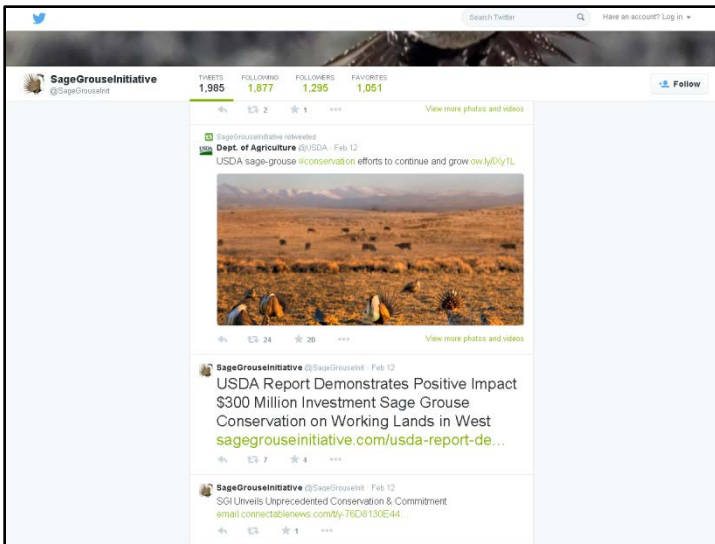
### ***Outcomes in Conservation, Sage Grouse Initiative***

The release of NRCS' five-year report in February, [Outcomes in Conservation, Sage Grouse Initiative](#), was accompanied by several communication pieces to deliver the exciting news: [the U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) produced a press release](#), including comments by USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Robert Bonnie; NRCS Chief, Jason Weller, provided a [webinar](#) for the press, NRCS staff and partners, highlighting the conservation achievements from the beginning of SGI in 2010 through 2014; [Chief Weller sent a formal letter to FWS Director, Dan Ashe](#), noting the report's intent of answering FWS' two fundamental questions, prior to their upcoming ESA listing decision (What has changed since 2010 when FWS designated Greater Sage-grouse as a Candidate for listing? With what certainty will conservation efforts continue into the future?); and, NRCS also created a three-page factsheet to accompany the report, [SGI: The Untold Story of Sage-Grouse Conservation on Working Lands](#). The news of the outcomes came with a pledge by NRCS for an additional \$200 million in SGI funding through 2018.



***With 1,129 participating ranchers, the NRCS-led SGI and its partners have already invested \$424.5 million and conserved 4.4 million acres, an area that is twice the size of Yellowstone National Park.***





SGI used social media to effectively share the news on its Facebook page and Twitter account, including retweets of partner posts. The story’s message of on-the-ground, proactive conservation and pledge for the future caught the attention of national press and partners. For example:

Environment & Energy (E&E) Publishing’s *Greenwire*: [Ranchers crucial to saving sage grouse -- USDA](#)

Western Governors’ Association: [NRCS reports significant progress in sage-grouse conservation since 2010, commitment to future work](#)

Pheasants Forever, Inc.: [Sage Grouse Initiative](#)

[Partners Conserve 4.4 Million Acres in 5 Years](#)

Audubon: [USDA Announces \\$200 Million to Conserve Sage-Grouse on Private Lands](#)

Beef Producer: [USDA partnership improving sage-grouse habitat, grazing lands](#)

**Science to Solutions Series – Two New Additions & More Prominence on SGI Website**

This series has proved instrumental for media, along with our partners, landowners, and managers. Putting forward easy-to-comprehend, yet thorough, science that’s central to sage grouse conservation, the series has become one of SGI’s most powerful tools.

With two new articles this quarter, there are now seven *Science to Solution* articles, with an eighth in a fact sheet format; [the Series now has its own section on the SGI website](#) and can also be found under [the Resources page](#).

[Science to Solutions: Sage Grouse Conservation Benefits Migratory Mule Deer](#) – This report shows how habitat conservation for sage grouse, considered an umbrella species, can also protect critical habitat for mule deer. Scientists found that sage grouse conservation efforts *doubled* the protection of deer migration habitat and winter range.

[Science to Solutions: High-Res Maps Sharpen Focus on Sage Grouse Habitat](#) – A new technique called Earth Sense Technology is a more efficient and cost-effective way to assess range conditions throughout the West. This report explains how the technology allows managers to better see, quantify, and understand the big picture of how grouse choose seasonal habitats.

**Rancher Success Stories**

This continuing series now has a dedicated page on the SGI website to easily connect readers to featured SGI ranchers. More than 950 ranchers are enrolled in SGI programs, yet facts and statistics can’t deliver the real stories of those individuals and what they do to make a difference. SGI is tying the facts to real life stories in a series featuring a rancher from each of the 11 western states in the sage grouse range. All are involved with SGI, many with the SGI SWAT staff. The final stories were completed in 2014; however, two of the stories were released this quarter:

[Five Dot Ranch Sustains Sage Grouse & Produces Natural Beef](#) (California) – SGI released the Five Dot Ranch story in January, working closely with California NRCS Public Affairs staff. This marks the first story that effectively connects the concept of “pasture to plate” or “fork to farm” – linking conservation practices



for sage grouse with sustainable beef products in urban markets (in this case, the Bay Area). The story ran on the SGI website, was featured in Five Dot Ranch E-Newsletters and promoted as a handout at the 68<sup>th</sup> Annual Society for Range Management Meeting in Sacramento.

[South Dakota rancher adds value to his operation and improves wildlife habitat](#) – Rancher Ron Steineke makes water delivery and grazing improvements that benefit his cattle along with sage grouse and other wildlife. A January article showcased Ron’s fine work putting SGI conservation practices on the ground, including rest-rotation grazing and water developments – smart steps to take in a drought-prone area. The [SGI Facebook post on the Steineke ranch](#) has more than 3,000 views and 17 shares.

### **Sand County Foundation Partnership Adds Additional Rancher Success Stories**



The Sand County Foundation (SCF) is working closely with SGI to create a booklet of rancher stories, featuring producers who are enrolled in SGI. SCF has a strong media team and is very successful at cultivating media interest in the process of assembling the stories – with the goal of creating a final product that also inspires related media stories along the way. SGI has helped SCF via numerous calls and connections to the area NRCS public affairs staff with shared media contacts and more.

March – [Livestock Producers Step Up For Sage Grouse](#) (*Western Livestock Journal*)

March – [Nevada Ranchers Take Proactive Measures in Bi-State as Listing Date Approaches](#) (*Reno Gazette-Journal*)

### **Other News**

SGI also played a large role in the following stories, via writing, posts on the SGI website, Facebook page and Twitter:

January – [Intermountain West Joint Venture Announces ConocoPhillips Project Funding for Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation](#) (IWJV)

January – [Major Working Ranch Conservation Easement Protects Vital Sage Grouse Habitat in NW Colorado](#) (Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust)

January – [BLM embarks on major juniper removal in Idaho to save sage grouse](#) (E&E’s *Greenwire*)

February – [Bi-State Sage Grouse Forum Attracts Full House in Nevada](#) (SGI)

### **Featured Friend**

The *Featured Friend* series is dedicated to holding up SGI, featuring the partner on the home page of the website and development of a one-page handout. In addition to the home page feature, all *Featured Friend* stories to date can be viewed in [a single category](#) or on [the Resources page](#) of the SGI website.

January – [Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust](#)

January – [Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust](#)

February – [COR Enterprises, Montana](#)

February – [FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program](#)



*Rancher Steven Fulstone and his daughter Emily on their property in the Smith Valley in Nevada. (Photo by Jason Bean/Reno-Gazette Journal)*



## New SGI Communications Specialist

[Brianna Randall](#) joined the team during this quarter as the SGI Communications Specialist. Brianna works closely with Deborah Richie, SGI Communications Director, and brings many social media skills to the table.



Brianna Randall

## SWAT Field Staff Communications

February – [Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Efforts in the U.S. and the Sage Grouse Initiative](#) – Kelsey Molloy (Malta, Montana) (Webinar)

March – [SGI Range & Wildlife Conservationist Lara Fondow Enjoys Working With Birds & People](#) – Lara Fondow (Rexburg, Idaho) (Standard Journal)

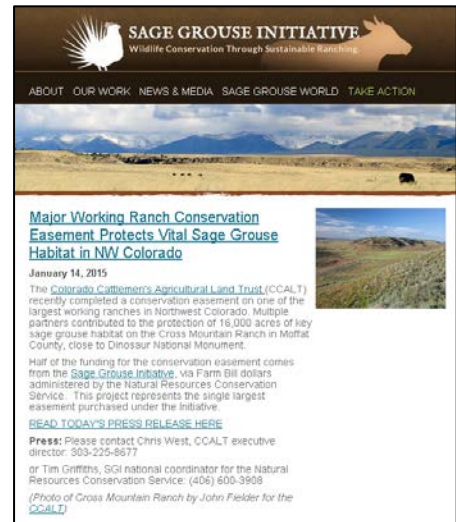


Lara Fondow, SGI SWAT Range & Wildlife Conservationist in Rexburg, Idaho

## SGI E-News

The bi-monthly SGI E-News continues to deliver several stories within a professional template into the e-mail inboxes of subscribers. The subscriber list is now more than 3,180. E-News from the quarter include:

- [January 8, 2015](#)
- [January 14, 2015](#)
- [January 29, 2015](#)
- [February 20, 2015](#)
- [March 17, 2015](#)



## PARTNER DEVELOPMENT

The IWJV continues to strengthen the partnership for SGI implementation through extensive coordination and collaboration among state and federal agencies, non-profit conservation organizations, and corporations – all facilitated by the leadership of its Management Board. The Partner Development element of SGI has played a critical role in maintaining strong support for SGI across a diverse group of conservation partners.

In cooperation with PF, a key partner of the SGI, the IWJV has now executed 74 field capacity, science, communications, and management agreements. Together, the IWJV and PF closely manage these agreements to ensure successful implementation and achievement of SGI objectives. These projects encumber a total of \$6,781,022.65 in SWAT funds. This quarter, a new agreement with Oregon State University was executed to continue the assessment of conifer removal in Oregon. We also began the process of modifying field capacity agreements, which will extend the positions through June 2016.

The IWJV devotes significant staff time and resources to maintaining existing partnerships, as well as to the development of new partnerships. Frequent communications with the NRCS SGI Coordinator, NRCS SGI Science Advisor, and SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator ensures that the implementation of SGI is precisely aligned with NRCS objectives – and has built a solid foundation for regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. The SGI SWAT Coordination Team met for the twelfth time on February 4-5, 2015, in Missoula, Montana. As part of this meeting, the team previewed SGI's five-year assessment report. The group also reviewed budgets, discussed the status of current projects, prioritized actions for the next six months, and continued to formulate the long-term vision for SGI SWAT.

On the heels of major funding announcements from NRCS and ConocoPhillips Company, partners are once again stepping up to support SGI SWAT now and into the future. Rocky Mountain Power pledged another \$20,000 to SGI SWAT in 2015, bringing their total contributions to date to \$40,000. These funds provide critical capacity for SGI's partner development and communications efforts. FWS has supported several field capacity positions since SGI began in 2011. FWS Region 6 Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program recently provided \$200,000 to support SGI SWAT field capacity in 2016 and beyond. It is inspiring to see the continued commitment of partners to SGI, and it goes without saying that this massive partnership is a primary reason why we see the remarkable outcomes of this landmark initiative!

## **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 the 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 workforce worked directly with four Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers 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 25 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 5,944.5 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.* Thirty-eight (38) FTEs (27.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity Coordinator FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Director FTE, 1.0 Communications Support FTE, 3.0 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 1,976,421 acres of grazing systems; 236,731 acres of conifer removal; 999,533 feet (189.3 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 11,846 acres of rangeland seeding; and, 24,685 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$727,463 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 \$49,380,061!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$4.96 million in partner funding toward all aspects of the SWAT through the first three years, have secured or project an additional \$2.23 million in partner funding leveraged in Years 4 and 5, and have secured an additional \$800,000 from COP through 2019. We are in the process of securing commitments from partners for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

## **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 landscape approach to delivering enough of 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. The SWAT builds field capacity and strengthens the science guiding SGI, as well as bolsters communications capacity – all through partnerships that leverage the NRCS SGI funding with significant contributions from other sources. The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV), in close collaboration with NRCS at multiple levels, continued to make significant progress toward the following objectives in launching the SGI SWAT during the reporting period:*

- 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 is facilitated by execution of an Interagency Agreement (IA) between NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and subsequent modifications to the IA. The \$4 million in SWAT funds were obligated in an NRCS-FWS IA, signed June 24, 2011. NRCS provided an additional \$3 million to the SGI SWAT NRCS-FWS IA late in FY 2011, from another funding source, to bring the total NRCS commitment to \$7 million. The "Phase 2" \$3 million was obligated in a modification to the IA, executed on September 13, 2011. NRCS provided an additional \$2.3 million to extend the agreement through December 1, 2016, through a "Phase 3" modification to the IA on September 28, 2012. As with all SWAT projects, the IWJV leveraged NRCS' investment by raising 25% of the funds needed to implement the SGI SWAT from an array of conservation partners, including the FWS, state wildlife and agricultural agencies, conservation districts, non-governmental conservation organizations, and corporations.*

*The IWJV, through the FWS, subsequently entered into a Cooperative Agreement with Pheasants Forever (PF) to facilitate fiscal administration and partnership-based implementation of SGI SWAT, effective August 9, 2011. PF works closely with the IWJV staff on SWAT implementation and is also playing a key role in building field capacity for SGI, specifically by supervising seven of the 24 positions through agreements they have negotiated with state fish and wildlife agencies and other partners. For the purpose of this and future reports, we consider the overall \$14.7 million effort as the SGI SWAT, even though only \$4 million arose from NRCS' FY 2011 SWAT appropriation.*