



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

February 1, 2015

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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 October – December 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: October 1 – December 31, 2015

Intermountain West Joint Venture
February 1, 2016

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 October – December 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 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:

- **2,271,146 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.
- **287,167 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.
- **193 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 Updates

SWAT field staff 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:

- Marcella Fremgen filled the relocated Bird Conservancy of the Rockies Range Ecologist position in Montrose, Colorado. (The position was formerly located in Gunnison, Colorado.) Marcella has several years of experience working on Gunnison sage grouse with private landowners as a Wildlife Technician with Colorado Parks and Wildlife; she most recently completed a MS in Biology at Boise State University looking at foraging behavior in sage grouse.



Marcella Fremgen. Photo courtesy Boise State University

- Both the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife position in Lakeview, Oregon and the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) position in Glasgow, Montana are currently open and are expected to be filled within the next quarter.

SWAT Field Staff Calls & Events

Several events occurred during the quarter to further SGI and SWAT coordination. Montana & South Dakota SGI Partner Coordination Meetings (October 7-9; 13-16) – SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator traveled throughout Montana (Ekalaka, Forsyth, Glasgow, Malta, Miles City), as well as to Belle Fourche and Rapid City in South Dakota, to meet with partners implementing SGI at the state and local level.



Justin Hughes (SWAT employee in Ekalaka, Montana with MACD) demonstrates how to attach fence markers to field tour attendees in Carter County, Montana.

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.

SWAT Field Staff Feature – Eduardo Contreras in Mountain Home, Idaho

To highlight some of the great work happening on the ground, we will feature specific SWAT field staff and their conservation efforts, as part of SGI.

This quarter’s featured SWAT member is Eduardo Contreras, SGI Range and Wildlife Conservationist with Pheasants Forever, located in Mountain Home, Idaho.

Eduardo services Elmore and Owyhee Counties in southwest Idaho. The majority of landowner interest in SGI in the area has been in juniper removal. However, after landowners see the success they’ve had with juniper treatments, they have become increasingly receptive to other projects. Similarly, as some individuals witness SGI’s benefit to their neighbors, they too become involved, opening the door for projects that improve habitat at a landscape-scale. Much of the area is in the private/federal “checkerboard,” with mixed land ownership often complicating project implementation. Currently, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is wrapping up an Environmental Assessment of the Bruneau-Owyhee Sage-Grouse Habitat Project; once complete, it will open numerous opportunities for larger scale projects to benefit sage-steppe habitat.



Left: Pre-treatment photo taken in October. Right: Post-treatment photo taken in December. This treatment will remove 2000+ acres of juniper in designated, important sage grouse habitat in Owyhee County, Idaho.



Above: Sage grouse feeding near riparian area post-cattle grazing. Photo taken in August; same property as photos on previous page in Owyhee County, Idaho.



Left: This livestock water system will provide off-site water for livestock and protect the spring source. The system will allow the majority of the water from the spring to continue down the riparian area. Right: Some overflow water from the system will daylight into a meadow, thereby extending the wetted period and available brood-rearing habitat in Elmore County, Idaho.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

Conifer Science Summit

Conifer encroachment and conifer removal – and their respective impacts to sage grouse and sagebrush obligate species – have been a focus of SGI since its inception. In October 2015, researchers representing 11 different entities and working on conifer-related studies gathered at Jay and Diane Tanner’s Box C Ranch in northwest



Utah. The gathering, which also became known as the “Conifer Science Summit,” was convened to assess the status of conifer-associated research; improve knowledge transfer to practitioners; and develop a strategic path for next generation conifer science. The Summit included a tour, led by Dave Dahlgren (Utah State University Wildlife Extension Associate), of large-scale conifer removal projects that illustrated a variety of removal methods, in addition to providing an opportunity to learn about bird and vegetation response following treatments.

Summit participants toured conifer-removal projects like the one above.

Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI Science Advisor, said of the Summit, “Our team was impressed by what’s possible through the power of partnerships and voluntary conservation of local landowner leaders like Jay Tanner.” “We gained a better understanding of how science can help evaluate outcomes of ongoing conifer work and inform future treatments.”



Summit participants: (back row, left to right) Jason Reinhardt (University of Minnesota); Michael Falkowski (Colorado State University); Aaron Holmes (Northwest Wildlife Science); Brady Allred (University of Montana); Dave Naugle (University of Montana); Andrew Olsen (Oregon State University); Jeremy Maestas (NRCS); (front row, left to right) Patrick Donnelly (IWJV); Christian Hagen (Oregon State University); Jason Tack (University of Montana); Holly Copeland (The Nature Conservancy of Wyoming). Not pictured: Sandra Brewer (Nevada BLM)

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

[USDA Announces \\$40 Million to Help Ranchers Restore Sage Grouse Habitat](#)

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced on December 10 that USDA will invest \$40M in FY 2016 to help ranchers and other partners restore and protect sagebrush habitat for Greater Sage-grouse in 11 western states. This investment in conserving privately-owned habitat is part of USDA's four-year, \$211M *SGI 2.0 Investment Strategy* (announced in August) through the Working Lands for Wildlife partnership.

Success Stories

October 2

[Safer-Grouse Flights Over Washington State Made Possible With New Partnership](#)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pacific Region's Blog post by Michael Brown, SGI SWAT Range and Wildlife Conservationist in Wenatchee, Washington

October 22

[Across the West, Landowners Create Legacy of Open Land](#)

American Bird Conservancy's (ABC) [Bird Calls](#) Blog post by Steve Holmer, ABC's Senior Policy Advisor/Bird Conservation Alliance Director



Participants of the Ranch Conservation Tour, co-hosted by Point Blue Conservation Science and the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition

[High Desert Museum](#) in Bend, Oregon. The exhibit explores the birds' role in the sagebrush ecosystem, as well as its important cultural value to Native Americans, hunters, and birdwatchers.

December 1

[Human Connections Drive Habitat Conservation](#)

Point Blue Conservation Science's [Science for a Blue Planet](#) Blog post by Tiffany Russell, SGI SWAT Partner Biologist in Susanville, California

SGI Partner News

October 13

Produced in partnership with The Nature Conservancy; made possible by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and BLM; and with support from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Teton Waters Ranch and SGI, a new exhibit – [Sage Grouse: Icon of the Sagebrush Sea](#) – opened in October at the



Photo Steve Chindgren

November 9-10

[Sustaining Big Game Migrations in the West: Science, Policy & People](#) – An Emerging Issues Forum hosted by the University of Wyoming William D. Ruckelshaus Institute and the Wyoming Migration Initiative

November 14

[Seeding Big Sagebrush Successfully on Intermountain Rangelands](#) by Susan E. Meyer and Thomas W. Warren from the *Great Basin Factsheet Series* – Information and tools to conserve and restore Great Basin ecosystems

November 18

[Assessing Impacts of Fire & Post-fire Mitigation on Runoff & Erosion from Rangelands](#) by Frederick B. Pierson, C. Jason Williams and Peter R. Robichaud from the *Great Basin Factsheet Series* – Information and tools to conserve and restore Great Basin ecosystems

Sustaining Big Game Migrations in the West: Science, Policy, and People
An Emerging Issues Forum

Mule deer, pronghorn, elk, and other big game species that help define western landscapes and culture travel long distances between seasonal ranges. Come explore the science of big game migration and discuss what it means for policy and people.

Be part of the conversation.

Hosted by the University of Wyoming William D. Ruckelshaus Institute and the Wyoming Migration Initiative Photo Credit: Joe Riss

November 9 and 10, 2015
University of Wyoming Rochelle Gateway Center
For more information and to register, visit uwyo.edu/haub

Ruckelshaus INSTITUTE

WYOMING MIGRATION INITIATIVE
Understanding & Conserving Greater Wyoming



November 20

[Woody Fuels Reduction in Wyoming Big Sagebrush Communities](#) by Eugene W. Schupp, Chad S. Boyd and Shane Green from the *Great Basin Factsheet Series* – Information and tools to conserve and restore Great Basin ecosystems

SGI E-News

The SGI E-News continues to delivery several stories within a professional template into the e-mail inboxes of subscribers. E-News from the quarter include:

[November 5 – Onward & Upward to Benefit People & Wildlife Across the West](#)

[December 17 – Happy Holidays From Your Favorite Bird](#)

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 86 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 \$7,510,182.79 in SWAT funds. Our focus this quarter was on communications, as we initiated a new contract for the development of additional Rancher Success Stories and released a Request for Proposals for a SGI Communications Coordinator. The Coordinator will manage the SGI website, social media accounts, and e-news; further, the person will work closely with the interdisciplinary team of SGI and Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) staff members and partners to ensure the latest and most relevant information is included in materials and that all messages are consistent with the WLFW program.

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 West WLFW Coordinator, NRCS National SGI Coordinator, NRCS SGI National Science Advisor, NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist, 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 fourteenth time on December 7-8, 2015 in Missoula, Montana. They discussed the closeout of SGI SWAT 1.0 and subsequent transition to SGI SWAT 2.0. The Team is hopeful that planning ahead will minimize issues and allow SGI to continue smoothly. The Team will next meet via conference call on February 16, 2016.

As mentioned in the previous quarterly report, we have discussed with BLM the potential of applying the SWAT model to public lands. In this quarter, discussions continued with Steve Small, BLM Fish and Wildlife Conservation Division Chief. Steve notified the IWJV Coordinator that the FY 2016 Omnibus Appropriations included \$60 million for sage grouse habitat implementation, an increase of \$45 million from the FY 2015 level. The IWJV Assistant Coordinator devoted substantial staff time to defining needs and opportunities with Mr. Small. The IWJV is hopeful that a new partnership with BLM could positively impact the sagebrush ecosystem and sagebrush obligate species.

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 staff 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 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 7,399.25 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.* Thirty-five (35) FTEs (25.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator FTE, 0.5 SGI Communications Specialist FTE, 0.5 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 2,271,146 acres of grazing systems; 287,167 acres of conifer removal; 1,018,763 feet (193 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 16,837 acres of rangeland seeding; and 30,185 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$257,655 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 \$56,451,440!***
- 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 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 eight of the SWAT 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.