

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

February 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 October-December 2016. 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, 2016

Intermountain West Joint Venture  
February 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 October – December 2016.

### 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 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 is making a difference for wildlife and working lands.

#### 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 the 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:

- **2,505,702 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.
- **319,475 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.
- **219 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:

- Julie Unfried was selected for the PF position in Waterville, Washington (vacated in October by Michael Brown, who is now the SGI Field Capacity Coordinator). Julie formerly worked as a Farm Bill Biologist with PF in Chinook, Montana. She has a background in the shrub-steppe landscape and is excited to be back working with sage grouse and sagebrush. She received a BS in Fisheries and Wildlife Science from Oregon State University, with a specialization in Avian Conservation and Management.
- Zack Foster was selected for the PF position in Marsing, Idaho (vacated by Lara Fondow, who accepted a position with Idaho NRCS). This position was moved from the Rexburg (Idaho)



*Julie Unfried*

Field Office after a re-assessment by partners concluded that technical assistance was of greater need in Marsing. Zack received a BS in Wildlife Resources from the University of Idaho. He has work seasonally for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), both as a wildland firefighter and as a rangeland technician.



*Zack Foster*

#### **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. Several webinar trainings occurred this quarter, including the one highlighted below:

#### **[Roundtable: Rangeland Challenges in Western States, Wildfire and Habitat Conservation:](#)**

The Western Governors' Association (WGA) hosted a webinar with moderator Don Kemner (Idaho Department of Fish and Game Wildlife Habitat Program Manager) and panelists

Jeremy Maestas (NRCS West National Technology Support Center Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist); Mike Courtney (BLM Twin Falls District Manager); Brenda Richards (Owyhee County Rancher); and Allen Rowley (USFS Rangeland Management Director) on October 20 entitled, *Rangeland Challenges in Western States, Wildfire and Habitat Conservation*. The roundtable was part of [WGA's National Forest and Rangeland Management Initiative](#), the central policy initiative of Montana Governor Steve Bullock, in his capacity as WGA Chair. The webinar was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).

#### **SGI SWAT Realignment**

The original SGI SWAT agreement came to a close in December 2016, and during the third quarter of 2016, the next round of funding was launched through SGI 2.0. With this new funding, NRCS continues to maintain its commitment to using science to target sage grouse conservation projects and practices. In addition, we are building field capacity, expanding the science team, and strengthening partnerships across the western sagebrush landscape.

Over the last two years, NRCS greatly expanded its internal core capacity for SGI implementation. Based on this successful effort, in April 2016, the IWJV Management Board took action to support an SGI SWAT realignment, based on the SGI/IWJV core team's recommendation. PF subsequently entered into a direct agreement with NRCS to lead implementation of the SGI partnership's next phase (aka SGI SWAT 2.0) which will run 2016–2018. The realignment means PF will handle all fiscal administration and agreements, while IWJV staff will continue to support SGI SWAT through partnership coordination functions, provision of non-federal funding, and operational support for the whole SGI SWAT effort. NRCS will provide funding to support IWJV staff work through their new agreement with PF.



This arrangement enabled the IWJV to accept a new agreement with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to scale up SGI's approach to sagebrush conservation on public and mixed ownership lands. Highly supported by NRCS, this agreement essentially melds several key aspects of BLM's sagebrush work—particularly science capacity—with SGI SWAT. The IWJV will continue to strengthen and champion SGI by building this robust new complimentary partnership with BLM. In addition, the IWJV will embark upon new sagebrush conservation partnerships with FWS and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

### IWJV-BLM Agreement

The BLM and IWJV are investing in new partnership-based efforts to accelerate, coordinate, and/or streamline conservation treatments and put projects on the ground. Proven approaches and techniques that have worked on private lands (e.g., shared positions or contracts) are being transferred to further work across landscapes with mixed ownership to remove invading conifers, reduce the risk of wildfire and invasive weeds, and restore and enhance wet meadows and riparian areas. The key objective here is to scale up proactive, voluntary sagebrush

conservation through leveraging and sharing resources to achieve whole-watershed conservation.



*Photo by Tom Koerner, FWS*

In October 2016, Duane Coombs was hired by the IWJV as the Sagebrush Collaborative Conservation Specialist. This position, based in Battle Mountain, Nevada, is critical to broadening and strengthening the public-private partnerships necessary for this project to succeed. Duane's initial charge is to work with partners to build field delivery capacity for sagebrush conservation. This includes: 1) collaborating with BLM and SGI staff to identify priority landscapes for field delivery capacity investments; 2) fostering engagement in this effort with outreach to public land ranchers, state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agencies, non-governmental conservation organizations, and

local coalitions; 3) launching these capacity-building projects through investment of BLM and partner funds in partnership agreements; and 4) assisting with the implementation of demonstration projects. Duane's long history of ranching and conservation in the West provide him with a unique perspective and set of skills that are needed for this position.

In six months of operation, this sagebrush conservation partnership has achieved six important outcomes that will help accelerate and implement actions identified in the agreement. We have:

- Supported SGI's "actionable" science;
- Transferred science and decision support tools to practitioners;
- Facilitated efforts to develop a Landscape Project Area Map to strategically target and coordinate conservation practices across agencies (BLM, NRCS, USFS);
- Increased field-level capacity to restore and conserve sagebrush habitat;
- Amplified communications to tell the story and share sagebrush conservation success; and,
- Diversified and expanded partnership resources.

Our efforts are focused on implementing a shared vision of conserving the sagebrush ecosystem and working lands with state leads and partners in local communities helping implement BLM's Five-Year Integrated Program of Work and NRCS SGI 2.0 Investment Strategy, FY 2015-2018. This science-based, landscape-scale habitat conservation represents a landmark step forward in helping BLM – through partnerships with NRCS, USFS, FWS, state fish and wildlife agencies, public land ranchers, and others – address many of the bottlenecks that have long prevented conservation programs from realizing their true potential for wildlife habitat conservation in the West.

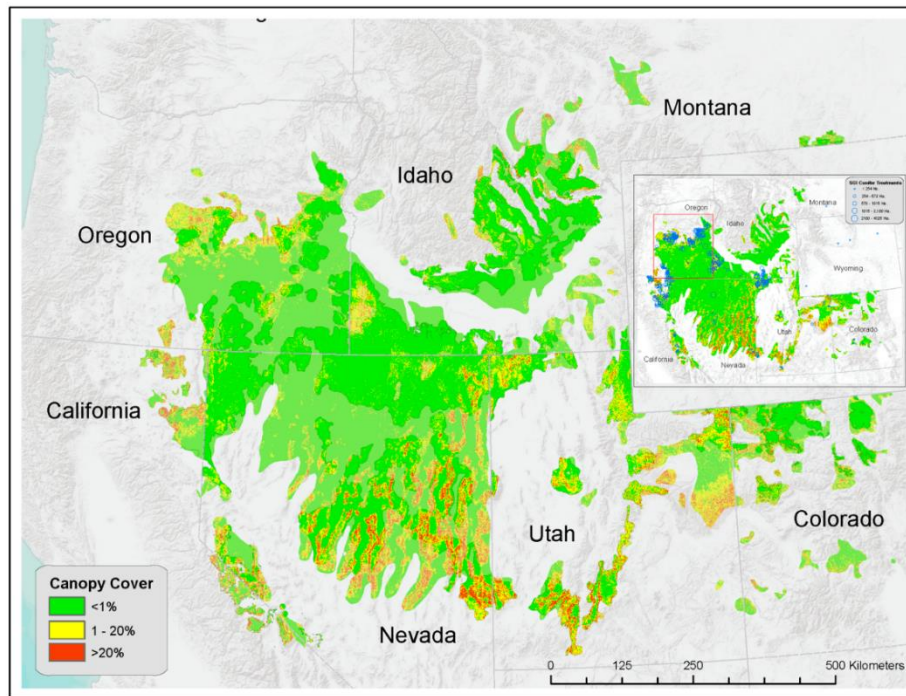
## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

### SGI & BLM Embark on New Science Partnership

One of the key hallmarks of SGI is that it is a highly targeted and science-based wildlife conservation initiative. SGI uses “actionable” science, meaning the research that is funded informs the actions that partners take to conserve the sagebrush ecosystem. This entails working with a wide swath of partners – from ranchers and policy makers to resource managers and scientists – who help shape the questions the science team tries to answer. Every effort is made to ensure science-based targeting tools and outcome-based assessments are helpful for implementing and adapting conservation practices on the ground.

The new BLM-IWJV agreement, along with SGI, is helping to fund six science projects coordinated by SGI Science Advisor, Dr. Dave Naugle, and Assistant Professor of Rangeland Ecology, Dr. Brady Allred. All projects are underway and on a two-year track for completion. Each of the science projects will result in manuscripts and spatial data. A description of each project and status of work follows:

- **Joint Tracking of Conifer Removal Across the West (University of Montana):** Partners are successfully restoring sagebrush landscapes but lack the capacity to jointly track progress or to quantify resulting conservation outcomes at watershed scales. A real-time mapping tool of conifer removal across the Great Basin sagebrush ecosystem is being created, allowing practitioners to quantify reductions of invasive conifer, plan projects at watershed scales, and track their progress. This project involves collaboration with Michael J. Falkowski through Colorado State University to remap conifer cuts across treatments and ownerships.

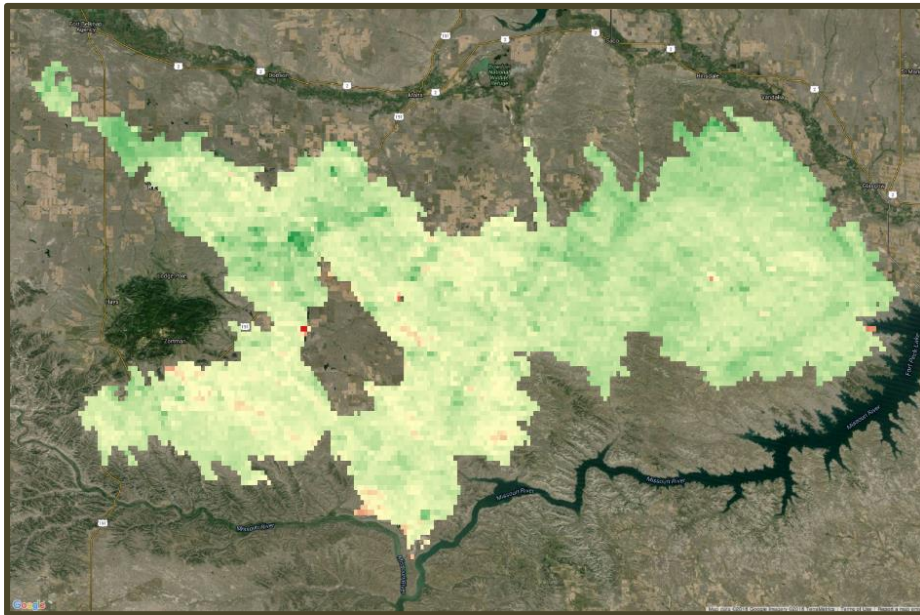


*Range-wide conifer mapping extent (Falkowski and other SGI authors 2016)*

- **Quantifying Benefits of Conifer Removal for Songbirds on Public Lands (University of Montana):** New SGI and BLM sponsored science shows that radio-marked sage grouse readily nest in areas where conifer removal has occurred and that sagebrush songbird abundance is 55-80% higher inside of cuts intended to benefit sage grouse. Range-wide songbird abundance layers will be created and coupled with the joint conifer removal tracking to quantify benefits of songbird removal to songbirds. When complete, partners will better understand and quantify the extent to which sage grouse conservation also achieves ecosystem-level benefits. In addition, the maps will help guide restoration towards landscapes with the greatest potential to benefit biodiversity. Data is currently being refined to a finer resolution to depict habitat quality for songbirds and will be available via the Interactive Web Application (see below).



- **Wetland Resilience & Resistance in Sagebrush Ecosystems (University of Montana):** Linking wetland maps with lek data revealed that water scarcity structures sage grouse populations and that our ability to enhance these systems is critical to sage-steppe conservation. Scientists are creating a targeting and science-based evaluation tool for the restoration and enhancement of wetland habitats, on both private and public land, where sage grouse raise their young. This project is near completion, in terms of data evaluation and results, and will be available spring 2017 via the Interactive Web Application (see below). A peer-review manuscript will follow.
- **Quantifying Trends in Rangeland Health (University of Montana):** Efforts to quantify outcomes of SGI to date have mostly focused on sage grouse and other sagebrush dependent species. This study will assess trends in rangeland health. By examining the return of biomass and water following the implementation of grazing management, conifer removal, or wetland restoration, we can assess the non-species benefits and ensure longevity in sage-steppe conservation. Post-doc Matt Jones has been hired to help map net primary productivity and SGI outcomes. This project has just been initiated.



*Trend in rangeland productivity (2008-2014) for a sage grouse Priority Area of Conservation (PAC) north of the Missouri River in Montana; this PAC hosts one of SGI's long-term studies where grazing has been modified to benefit sage grouse. Map depicts Net Primary Productivity; green colors indicate a more positive trend in productivity; yellows and reds indicate neutral or negative trend. Data are at a one-km course resolution; using Google Earth Engine©, SGI's Brady Allred will improve assessments by creating monitoring data at finer 30-m resolution.*

- **Conifer Removal Study in BLM's Lakeview District, Oregon (Oregon State University):** This study is the most successful and comprehensive outcome-based science evaluation of conifer removal benefits to date. The work will continue for another five years with investments from BLM and SGI. The next steps are to assess changes in sage grouse nesting and brood success between restored and unrestored sites, quantify increased space use by birds in restored habitats, and estimate improvements in connectivity in nesting and brood-rearing following restoration. Andrew Olson, PhD student with Oregon State University, continues to focus on demographic analyses with approximately 4,400 locations recorded for hens marked with GPS backpacks. BLM's Applegate (California) Field Office secured funds to purchase GPS transmitters and provide other research support to expand the project into northern Nevada and California.
- **Interactive Web Application:** The SGI [Interactive Web Application](#) is the primary mechanism for transferring spatial data tools to practitioners. Launched in February 2016, the web application contains spatial data for tree canopy cover, ecosystem resilience and resistance, fence collision, and cultivation risk. Spatial data derived from the science projects described above will be included in the web application allowing practitioners to visualize and plan potential projects. This project is being overseen by Dr. Allred from the University of Montana; however, most of the web work will be carried out by Pluton, LLC. Pluton was selected to assist with the web application through a competitive process.

## COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

### E-News

- Three total sent (monthly)
- *Most clicked: [BOO! See what's hiding under the sage grouse umbrella...](#)* (October 31)
  - 167 clicks on the new *Science to Solutions: [Sagebrush Songbirds Under the Sage Grouse Umbrella](#)*
  - 91 clicks on [New Research Provides Insights into Sage Grouse DNA](#)
- *Most popular: [Recipe For Turning Science Into Action](#)* (December 28)
  - 1,220 opens, 33% open rate for [A Recipe For Turning Science Into Action](#)

### Website:

The SGI website had ten percent more users than the previous quarter, for a total of 41,500 page views. Top posts included:

1. [Sagebrush Songbirds Under the Sage Grouse Umbrella](#) – 546 views
2. [Tag, you're it! How do researchers track sage grouse chicks?](#) – 448 views
3. [Guzzling Water & Planting Sagebrush | What's Happening For Sage Grouse On Public Land In Montana](#) – 379 views
4. [Oregon Rancher Mike Greeley Enhances Mahogany Mountain For Bird And The Herd](#) – 299 views

Note: As shown below, the top-performing posts across SGI digital media were partnership posts related to BLM success stories on the range. These great communications trends are just one example of how teamwork leverages benefits far and wide!

### Social Media

[Twitter](#) (@SageGrouseInit)

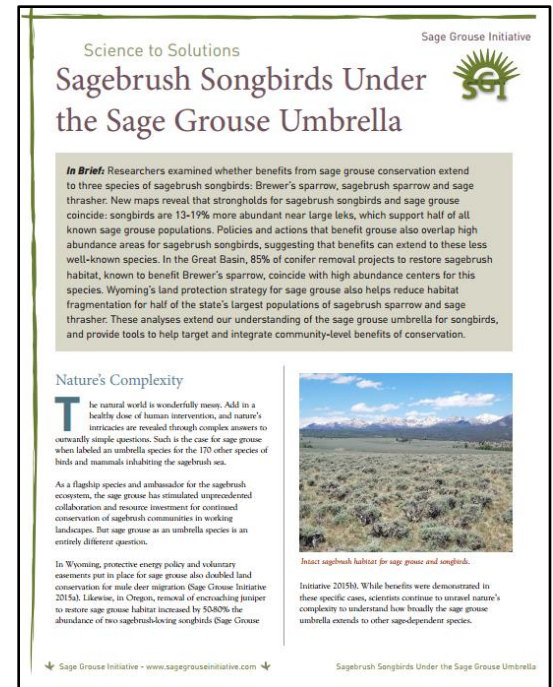
We averaged ~60 new followers per month, with a total of 2,357 followers. Top tweets from each month included:

- December 5 (seven retweets, ten likes): [Cut your own Christmas tree, and help save sage grouse in Colorado! A match made in heaven. @BLM\\_CO bit.ly/2gdg1IH](#)
- November 20 (14 retweets, 18 likes): [Collaboration between partners and the #agricultural community shows how people joining forces can conserve an ecosystem and a way of life.](#)
- October 4 (five retweets, 13 likes): ["What we are doing is making sure the ecosystem is balanced," Moore said about conifer removal work: bit.ly/2d4cljd @BLMOregon](#)

### Facebook

SGI's first-ever Facebook page promotion ran from mid-November to mid-December and was a huge success for boosting our message across broader audiences! A rundown of the results follow:

- We paid \$420 and earned 1,353 new Likes for a total cost of \$0.31 per Like.
- Total followers of SGI *jumped from 3,881 followers to 5,317 followers* last quarter. (We average ~100 Likes per month organically without paid ads.)
- The majority of *our new followers are 50+ white men*: only 99 were female vs. 1,249 men.
- New followers came from each state, with the highest numbers from Texas (116), California (70), Idaho (58), and Michigan (45).
- *Only 56 of the 1,353 used a desktop computer* to engage with Facebook. The rest used a phone or tablet.







*This collage ran as part of SGI's Facebook promotional ad during the quarter.*

**Top Posts:**

1. December 27 (306 clicks and 203 Likes/shares): [Surprise! The BLM Field Office in Dillon caught these special guests lounging at their "water guzzlers" in Montana.](#)
2. November 15 (188 clicks and 131 Likes/shares): [Superhero Scientists?! It's true: a small team in Idaho is testing whether soil bacteria can thwart the century-long invasion of cheatgrass, a weed that cheats other plants of water in the spring. Go, team, GO! \(and thanks for your efforts, too!\)](#)
3. December 29 (177 clicks and 122 Likes/shares): [The sagebrush-steppe might be the most American landscape of all. And chasing rabbits is a fun way to gauge how sagebrush country is faring.](#)

[YouTube](#)

- Newest video, posted on December 6: [How This Oregon Rancher Enhances Habitat For The Bird & The Herd](#); SGI Rancher Success Story, Mike Greeley, Greeley Ranch, Oregon (209 views)
- Most watched video in 2016: [Establishing Conservation Easements](#) (693 views)

**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 18 Indian Tribes, 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 8,852.25 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-three and three-quarters (33.75) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator FTE, 0.75 SGI Communications Coordinator 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 2,505,702 acres of grazing systems; 319,475 acres of conifer removal; 1,157,361 feet (219 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 27,831 acres of rangeland seeding; and 30,408 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$1,662,480 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 \$64,109,273!***
- 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.*