

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: April 1 – June 30, 2012

Intermountain West Joint Venture

August 1, 2012

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to demonstrate exciting successes in the areas of field delivery, science, and communications (see attached Objectives & Evolution of the SGI SWAT). The following is a report of our accomplishments from April 1 – June 30, 2012.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

With all 24 partner positions in place around the West and initial orientation trainings completed, the SWAT field team began to hit full stride this reporting period helping NRCS increase the quantity and quality of SGI conservation delivery. Technical assistance provided by the team filled field capacity needs during this critical period of Farm Bill program fund obligation deadlines for SGI. The SWAT team's ambitious and dedicated range conservationists, wildlife biologists, and natural resource specialists now have their feet firmly planted and have been working to establish the kind of relationships within their rural communities that can lead to lasting conservation. True to the essence of SGI SWAT, the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) continues supporting the partner position workforce through specialized trainings, regular coordination, and agreement administration.

In accordance with the NRCS-U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Interagency Agreement, the IWJV accomplished the following during the reporting period:

- **Monthly Coordination Conference Calls:** The IWJV continues to host monthly conference calls in which SWAT team members receive SGI updates, share experiences, trouble shoot issues, and coordinate range-wide activities. SWAT team managers also meet quarterly to discuss contract administration, invoicing, and progress tracking.
- **Rangeland Management Training:** Equipping the SWAT team with a solid understanding of western rangelands is fundamental to their ability to work with livestock ranchers to affect change for sage grouse. Recognizing this critical need, the IWJV enlisted the assistance of experts Pat Shaver, Rangeland Management Specialist, and Marcus Miller, Wildlife Biologist, at the NRCS West National Technology Support Center (WNTSC) to develop and implement a training curriculum that would prepare SWAT employees for success in the field. The training included several self-paced videos, four webinars by topical specialists, and a capstone field workshop held in Pinedale, Wyoming, June 26-28. Team members learned about rangeland inventory and monitoring techniques, ecological site descriptions, and wildlife habitat assessment, among other topics. During the Pinedale workshop, participants toured the area to see some of the world's best sage grouse habitat, as well as some of the effects of habitat fragmentation in that landscape. SWAT employees then got to work one-on-one with WNTSC and local Wyoming NRCS staff collecting and analyzing field data, developing prescribed grazing plans, and discussing plan alternatives.



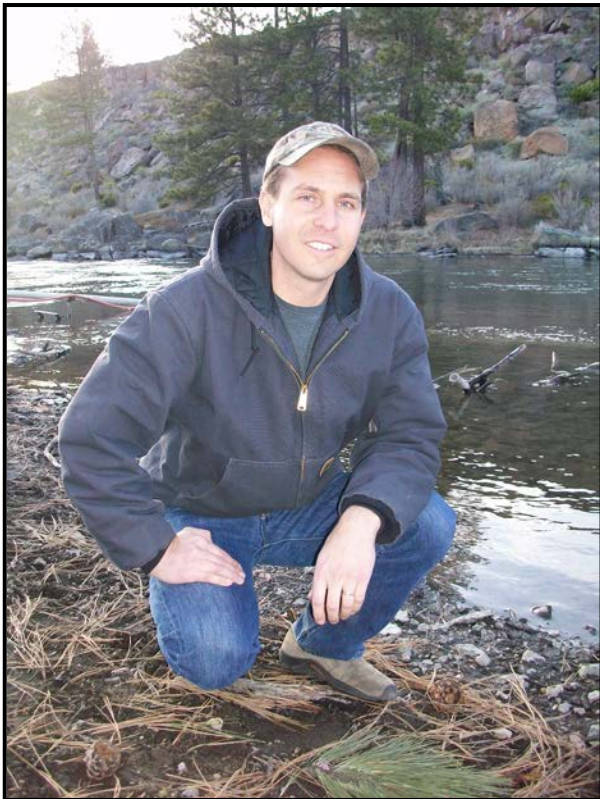
SGI SWAT Team, Pinedale

- **Managers Coordination Meeting:** The IWJV hosted the first annual coordination meeting for SWAT managers in Pinedale, Wyoming, June 28, 2012. The intent was to provide hiring entity supervisors and other partners contributing funding (i.e., the “paying partners”) for the 24 SWAT field team positions with an annual review of SGI SWAT implementation to facilitate information exchange and action among the SWAT partnership. Specific objectives included: 1) highlighting the extent and focus of habitat conservation being accomplished through SGI that is critically supported by the SWAT field delivery capacity; 2) reiterating the current framework of the SGI SWAT and how it works; 3) reviewing administrative processes, discussing any existing or potential issues, and making adjustments as needed to enhance efficiency and effectiveness; 4) identifying successes and challenges relative to SWAT field delivery capacity implementation in the context of adaptive management and fine-tuning the SWAT; and 5) building a collective vision and strategy for making the SWAT a durable, long-running, and highly effective model for delivering SGI to achieve mutual objectives. The results of a pre-meeting survey revealing SWAT field team members’ candid feedback on challenges, bottlenecks, and potential solutions were discussed, with IWJV and partners noting areas of needed action. Overall, the assessment of the group was that things are going very well with SWAT staff, and the partners remain committed to this effort.
- **SWAT Celebration:** The SWAT Training and Managers Meeting in Pinedale was topped off with a Celebratory Event on Friday, June 29, to celebrate successes and recognize contributions of the SWAT partnership to date. The SWAT field team and managers, NRCS staff, and other conservation partners gathered to hear perspectives on SGI from local representatives (Eric Petersen, Sublette County Conservation District Manager; Paul Shelton, NRCS Wyoming Assistant State Conservationist for Operations; and Astrid Martinez, NRCS Wyoming State Conservationist), as well as, several prominent conservation leaders including

Steve Ferrell, Advisor to Wyoming Governor Matt Mead on Wildlife and Endangered Species Policy; Alan Clark, IWJV Management Board Chairman and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Deputy Director; and Howard Vincent, Pheasants Forever CEO. An amazing keynote address was delivered by NRCS Chief Dave White who recognized and applauded the contributions of the SWAT team while inspiring them to continue their important work. A highlight of the day was the surprise announcement by Chief White that NRCS has made available an additional \$2.3 million to extend SWAT agreements for two more years! The IWJV reiterated its commitment to SGI SWAT and has already begun work with partners to raise matching funds.

- **Conservation Implementation:** The IWJV continues to maintain a detailed tracking system to capture SWAT field team progress on conservation implementation. This tracking system documents specific conservation activities that NRCS reports to the USFWS under the Conference Report.

Finally, in April, Randy Gray, SGI Field Delivery Capacity Coordinator, retired from the IWJV after tirelessly working to assemble and stand up the SWAT field team. He was instrumental in building the SGI SWAT partnership and raising \$3.6 million of partner funding to make the field delivery component a reality. In order to maintain the momentum that Randy built and also address some emerging needs and opportunities, the IWJV pursued a unique partnership with Oregon NRCS to secure the assistance of NRCS State Biologist, Jeremy Maestas, on the conservation delivery elements of SGI SWAT. Jeremy has been leading Oregon's highly successful SGI delivery efforts, and brings a decade-long track record of developing strong partnerships to implement wildlife conservation on private lands as an NRCS biologist in Utah and Oregon.



The IWJV is in the process of developing an Interagency Agreement between the FWS and Oregon NRCS that will bring Jeremy on to the SGI SWAT team as the SGI Technical Lead for two years. Under this arrangement, Jeremy will not only assist the IWJV by assuming technical leadership of the field delivery capacity component of the SGI SWAT, but he will also work directly with NRCS staff to fully

Jeremy Maestas integrate the partnership-based SWAT activities with SGI implementation at multiple levels. This work will expand our collective effectiveness by further blurring the lines between the work of NRCS and the massive partnership that has stepped up to champion and implement SGI through the SWAT. Jeremy will continue to be based in Redmond, Oregon, and will retain his status as an NRCS employee. However, he will work under the day-to-day direction of the IWJV office, in cooperation with the National SGI Coordinator and SGI Science Advisor. He will be half time on this assignment until October 1, 2012, when he will begin full time.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

We are excited to report on our efforts to expand the reach and breadth of IWJV science-based projects funded with SWAT funds. Several additional agreements have been or are in the process of being developed and finalized. These agreements add tremendous value to SGI by, for example, diversifying species focus and improving land management practices, as follows:

- **Relating Mule Deer Corridors to Sage Grouse Conservation (The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter):** Agreement with The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter to assess SGI benefits to mule deer and to create spatial tools that guide future conservation actions to maximize benefits to both sage grouse and mule deer.
- **Sagebrush Decision Support Tool (Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies):** Agreement with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to develop a guidance tool for resource managers to utilize when considering whether or not treatment is necessary, and/or justified, in sagebrush habitats for the benefit of Greater Sage Grouse. The guidance document will be used as a framework to evaluate areas of concern relative to ecological conditions, risks associated with treatments, and the current role of these areas relative to seasonal sage grouse habitat needs.
- **Greater Sage Grouse Response to Season-Long and Prescribed Grazing (NRCS Conservation Practice 528) on Paired Ecological Sites (Phase 1 – Year 2) (Utah State University):** Agreement with Utah State University to document Greater Sage Grouse individual and population responses using a BACI design to vegetation changes that may occur under prescribed grazing of paired sites located in Rich County, Utah.

And, as previously reported, the IWJV has coordinated and contracted a variety of other scientific assessments and projects aimed at conserving sage grouse and sage grouse habitat. These projects are summarized below:

- **Assessing Sage Grouse Response to the Removal of Encroaching Juniper (University of Idaho):** Agreement with the University of Idaho to conduct multi-year assessment on the effects of juniper removal on sage grouse habitat and populations.
- **Assessing the Range Condition of Core Sage Grouse Habitat near Roundup, Montana (Open Range Consulting):** Agreement with Open Range Consulting to perform rangeland habitat mapping and related data analysis services on eight private ranches comprising 500,000 acres in North Central Montana.
- **Evaluating Effects of Rest-Rotation Grazing on Greater Sage Grouse Habitat and Population Dynamics in Central Montana (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; The University of Montana):** Agreements with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and The University of Montana to implement a long-term research project evaluating rest-rotation grazing practices on sage grouse population dynamics.

- **Improving Fence Structure in Sage Grouse Core Areas of North Central Montana (The University of Montana):** Agreement with The University of Montana to implement a multi-year research project assessing the impact and success of removing, relocating, and/or marking fences in high risk grassland areas in hopes of reducing sage grouse mortality.
- **Measuring Intra- and Inter-annual Wetland Persistence and Variability During Sage Grouse Brood-rearing Periods over a 30-year Time Span in Oregon, Nevada and California (IWJV/Nevada Department of Wildlife/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife):** This collaborative project among the IWJV, NRCS Science Advisor, Oregon NRCS, Nevada NRCS, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Nevada Department of Wildlife will result in a spatially explicit decision support tool that will help SGI target the most productive sage grouse brood rearing habitat as well as facilitate related outcome-based evaluations. This project will provide tools that will be particularly useful with the utilization of conservation easements in SGI, including the Wetlands Reserve Program. Initial planning tools will be available in fall of 2012.

In all, the IWJV science agreements are supporting excellent work and critical analyses, all toward the end of meeting SGI's goal of building potent, science-based targeting tools and thoroughly evaluating the biological outcomes of SGI implementation. The IWJV science agreements reach across millions of acres of private sagebrush grasslands and wetlands in Montana, Nevada, California, Oregon, Wyoming, and Utah and now also include a project that will result in range-wide tool (WAFWA Sagebrush DST). The results will play a pivotal role in effectively targeting SGI as needed to realize sage grouse conservation objectives and help ranchers conserve sustainable rangelands.

Assessment partners in this work include The University of Montana, University of Idaho, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Utah State University, The Nature Conservancy, Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, FWS, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and others.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

The Sage Grouse Initiative communications effort is in full swing, with its website (www.sagegrouseinitiative.com) and Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sage-Grouse-Initiative/408072312539614>) that gain new "likes" almost every day.

Reaching Agricultural Media

A goal this quarter was to place SGI articles in key agricultural publications that reach ranchers and agricultural policymakers. An Oregon and Northern California June field trip to interview ranchers and agency partners participating in SGI juniper removal projects resulted in three articles in: **Western Livestock Journal** – a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 19,000 readers who match the target audience for SGI; **Public Lands Council June newsletter**; and **National Cattlemen's Beef Association** monthly magazine.

The trip to Oregon and Northern California provided many Facebook posts and photos that added more "likes" and demonstrated the Sage Grouse Initiative brand of "achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching."

SGI in the News—Features on the Website

The website also features news from media that shows the SGI message is coming through well locally, regionally and nationally. The news selected for posts now embraces the lesser prairie chicken, too, where the new paradigm for conservation is applying to this declining species as well.

The 19 news stories featured on the SGI website from April through June included several that reached agricultural audiences as well:

“She’s for the Birds: This Texan Hopes to Save the Prairie Chicken,” in **The Furrow**, (John Deere magazine), April 20.

“Prospects looking up for the greater sage grouse as Obama administration works across agency lines,” in **The Hagstrom Report, Ag News as It Happens**, April 23.

“Landowners Share Experience on Sage Grouse, Cattle,” in **Elko Daily** (Nevada newspaper), May 31.

Highlighting Sage Grouse & Tribal Ties – Crow Earth Day

SGI Communications wrote and posted several articles on the website and on Facebook as well and encouraged their use in publications, including one of the most popular posts on Facebook to date, focusing on the Crow Reservation of Montana: *“Crow Earth Day Children Discover Sage Grouse and Bonds to Their Culture,”* May 9.

Partnership Profile Pieces

This quarter marked the start of a series written by SGI Communications that profile SGI SWAT employees in the field. The profiles are providing popular handouts to illustrate the effectiveness of “boots on the ground” staff in rural locations working one on one with landowners.

The completed profile pieces can be found on the website under Resources/Brochures and in the News Story sections. They feature SGI SWAT employees and science partners in four states:

Lorelle Berkeley, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: From One Grouse to Another

Sam Sanders, Pheasants Forever, Nevada: Rancher Forum a Success

Gillian Brooks, Pheasants Forever, South Dakota: Kitchen Table Conservation

Brandi St. Clair, Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife: It’s My Backyard Too

Pinedale, Wyoming, SGI SWAT Training & Awards – Featured on Website/Facebook

SGI Communications covered the inspiring June training session, awards session, and announcement from NRCS Chief White of the extension of the SGI SWAT partner contracts from three to five years.

Two articles written by SGI Communications are featured on the website and were linked to Facebook as well:

“Whole Ranch Planning: Sage Grouse Initiative Staff Training in Pinedale, Wyoming”

“NRCS Chief Dave White Doubles Down on Sage Grouse Conservation Efforts”

SGI Facebook Page – By the Numbers

The Sage Grouse Initiative Facebook page continues to grow and attract more “likes” and readership. A late April concerted effort to reach out to more groups and to “like” as many partner pages as possible resulted in an impressive spike in new “likes” and outreach.

The SGI Facebook page “likes” 77 groups and agencies and has posted on all their pages with information on the page and website. The “likes” that are displayed on the page are rotated periodically to highlight five at a time—a strategic technique to show the diversity of partners and interests. For example: Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, FWS Migratory Birds, California Cattlemen’s Association, The Nature Conservancy, and Mule Deer Foundation.

A weekly “insights” report provides a useful tool for marketing, showing which posts have the most engaged users, are most shared with others. This helps refine the selection of Facebook posts.

Popular postings include a YouTube video of sage grouse strutting, the Crow Agency Earth Day photo album and story, and the “timeline” event, NRCS Chief Dave White Commits More Resources to the Sage Grouse Initiative.

Facebook statistics from the April to June time period for 30 postings, nine photo albums and approximately 200 “likes” include:

People Who Like the Page (Demographics & Location)

- Gender: Females – 51.4 %; Males – 46.8 %
- Age: Females
 - 13-17: 1.4%
 - 18-24: 5%
 - 25-34: 13.3%
 - 35-44: 13.3%
 - 45-54: 11.5%
 - 55-64: 5.5%
 - 65+: 1.4%
- Age: Males
 - 13-17: 0.5%
 - 18-24: 5.5%
 - 25-34: 13.8%
 - 35-44: 12.4%
 - 45-54: 7.3%
 - 55-64: 6.4%
 - 65+: 0.9%
- Countries: U.S plus Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Pakistan, United Kingdom, China, Afghanistan
- Cities: 20 in the U.S.
- Languages: English, Spanish, Dutch

How Did People Find the SGI Facebook Page?

Top referral: www.sagegrouseinitiative.com (80)

Others: Yahoo search, blog spot

Expanding Social Media Efforts

The Sage Grouse Initiative now has a blog (<http://sagegrouseinitiative.blogspot.com/>) that's referenced on the Facebook page. This is a work in progress and more will be needed to make the blog an effective tool with subscribers and a link to the website.

SGI Communications participated in a webinar that provided helpful advice regarding expansion to other social media outlets, such as Twitter and Google+, to make sure all are effective and well-coordinated.

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. In cooperation with Pheasants Forever (PF), a key partner of the SGI SWAT, the IWJV effectuated 15 science, communications, and SWAT management agreements. In addition, we are nearing completion on an additional four agreements. These projects will encumber a total of \$716,355 in SWAT funds and associated matching dollars.

The SGI SWAT is made possible by the IWJV's fund distribution mechanisms and ability to efficiently build the administrative and contracting capacity needed for successful implementation. The IWJV devoted a tremendous amount of staff time and resources during the reporting period to assembling the partnerships and developing the agreements needed to achieve SGI objectives. Specifically, we are strengthening SGI by building and maintaining partnerships that result in additional funds contributed to SGI capacity; supporting NRCS staff in coordinating SGI implementation among a diverse array of wildlife conservation partners – including 11 state fish and wildlife agencies and, to date, 15 non-governmental conservation organizations or corporations; and, effectively managing contracts and agreements to facilitate the objectives of the SWAT.

The IWJV engages the SGI National Coordinator and Science Advisor on essentially a daily basis to ensure that the implementation of the SGI SWAT is precisely aligned with NRCS objectives. Collectively, we have built a solid foundation for regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. We implemented our third SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in May, involving SGI, IWJV, and PF staff; a vast array of administrative and implementation items were discussed and decisions were made by the team.

We continued to strengthen our partnership with ConocoPhillips Company's (COP) support of SGI. COP made a \$300,000 donation to the IWJV through a non-governmental conservation partner to directly and specifically support SGI SWAT field capacity and communications. IWJV staff met with COP leadership in Denver and presented on the progress of SGI and the SWAT. The SGI videos and other communications products were extremely well received by COP leadership. COP's fiscal commitment of SGI through the SWAT is an excellent model for corporate support of SGI through the SWAT partnership.

Beyond the specific scope of the SWAT, the IWJV recently secured matching funds from the FWS Migratory Bird Program to facilitate outcome-based evaluations of SGI treatments on migratory birds, bringing our total to \$60,000 of secured funding. These funds will be allocated to specific projects carried out by reputable independent scientists of academic institutions, agencies, and/or nongovernmental conservation organizations. We anticipate that fieldwork and modeling will begin

in the spring of 2013. These projects will be implemented by IWJV science partners entirely with IWJV, FWS, and other science funding support, thereby leveraging NRCS' commitment of SWAT funding to sage grouse science projects. This investment of non-NRCS funds in science-based evaluations is another example of the power of the IWJV partnership in SGI implementation.

SWAT PERFORMANCE METRICS

The 24 partner positions facilitated substantial habitat conservation during the April-June 2012 reporting period, as quantified through our detailed accomplishment tracking system administered by the IWJV's SGI Project Coordinator. SWAT field staff continued to become familiar with their landscapes and received additional training; the "boots-on-the-ground" delivered impressive outcomes, as follows (data below encompasses progress to date):

- 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 nine beginning farmers or ranchers and nine Native American Tribes. SWAT field staff in Elko, Nevada, and Craig, Colorado, were particularly active with beginning farmers and ranchers.
- 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 24 SWAT partner positions made 746 contacts (field visits, etc.) with **459 different agricultural producers**. This level of technical assistance provision is indicative of how the SGI 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-eight (28) FTEs (24.0 Partner Positions FTEs, 1.0 SGI Field Delivery Capacity Coordinator FTE, 1.0 Communications Specialist FTE, and 2.0 IWJV FTEs) were employed during the reporting period. This will expand during the next reporting period with the start-up of science projects and full-scale implementation of communications projects.
- 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 365,795 acres of grazing systems; 45,988 acres of conifer removal; 215,822 feet (40.8 miles) of fence marking or removal; 300 acres of wetland restoration; and 1,034 acres of rangeland seeding.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$4,168,850 in Grasslands Reserve Program funds and \$3,947,787 in EQIP funds were obligated during the reporting period!

- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$1.60 million toward the 24 partner positions and leveraged an additional \$2.03 million in partner funding for other elements of the SGI SWAT. This includes a challenge contribution of \$80,000 in cash from the FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Mountain-Prairie Region for Year 4 and 5. Finally, we have already secured commitments from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

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. In closing, the SGI is currently one of the best examples of Strategic Habitat Conservation in North America, and the accomplishments described herein bode extremely well for the future!



SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE *PARTNERSHIP PROFILE*

Gillian Brooks, South Dakota Kitchen Table Conservation

By Deborah Richie, SGI Communications
June 2012

Sipping coffee around a kitchen table on a sheep ranch near Belle Fourche, South Dakota, sounds like a welcome break from work. For Gillian Brooks, a range and wildlife conservationist for Pheasants Forever, those informal conversations are vital to advancing sage grouse conservation.

Within a few months of starting her partnership position at the end of 2011, Gillian demonstrated the power of kitchen table chats as part of reaching out to landowners. Before she arrived, an average of five South Dakota ranchers applied for Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) funding to enhance rangelands. This year, 22 turned in applications.

The dramatic increase reflects a dedicated person spending time with private landowners where the birds live. SGI is a partnership effort of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that conserves sage grouse through sustainable agriculture. The program dates to 2010 and already has enrolled more than 460 ranchers in 11 western states.

"It's not all business when you go out," Gillian says of her job. "One producer was getting in a shipment of ewes when I arrived. I helped him out first."

She's a biologist who understands what sage grouse need. At the same time, her role is much broader. You'll often find her bouncing around in a truck, and then hopping out to discuss grazing practices with sheep or cattle ranchers. The mutual goal

is to put more pounds on livestock and turn around grouse declines to prevent an endangered species listing.

Gillian joins 23 other new employees located in rural sage grouse strongholds across the west. Each position is funded as a partnership between the NRCS and an organization or agency.

The staff work out of NRCS offices. Funding comes from a three-year Farm Bill allocation called the Strategic Watershed Action Team.

Before coming to South Dakota, Gillian had worked on sage grouse projects in three other states. She saw first-hand the multiple threats facing the iconic bird of western open lands, from encroaching junipers in Oregon to fires in Nevada and energy development in Wyoming.

When she heard about the SGI positions, she applied at once. "I enjoy the concept of proactive conservation rather than reactive," she says. "It's a good concept to follow."

Belle Fourche revealed a new landscape and set of challenges. Here in western South Dakota near the Black Hills, sagebrush rarely grows taller than knee-height, likely because it's a landscape at the edge of the plant's range, Gillian says. For decades, Belle Fourche was known as a sheep capital. Today, cattle and sheep grazing are the two primary agricultural uses.

The birds still find habitat in the low sagebrush and grasses, yet numbers are dropping, from a count of 603 male sage grouse



statewide in 2006 to only 250 in 2012. While trees, fire, energy development, and even tilling are not problems here, it's possible that West Nile Virus is taking a toll, says Gillian. More research is needed to pinpoint the cause, but what does help the birds is to give them the best habitat conditions possible.

A key aim of rotational grazing funded through SGI is to improve the quality and quantity of native grasses and leafy plants that are critical to the survival of breeding hens and chicks. At the same time, the grazing plans aim to preserve sagebrush that can be choked out by abundant grass.

The first step for Gillian when she arrived in the bitter cold winter was to identify the landowners within the core area, where the most breeding birds are found. With funding coming her way, she felt she had no time to lose.

"When I saw the allocation for South Dakota, I thought, 'Oh my gosh,' that's so much money," she says, recalling her first days. "We need to get a lot of sign ups."

The allocation from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) for the two South Dakota counties is \$580,000 for 2012. Since then, the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) added even more. Both sources are from the Farm Bill. With over a million dollars in hand, Gillian hopes they can fund every application.

To get to this point, Gillian credits the helpful team around her, especially the local NRCS field staff, whose long-term positive relationships with landowners are critical to success. She also benefited from the Bureau of Land Management biologist who provided a map showing prime sage grouse areas from telemetry data (tracking radio-collared grouse). She added an overlay of land ownerships, coming up with a match of 80 producers and tracking down addresses.

Gillian then developed outreach materials and mailed invitations. Soon, the phone started ringing. After each call, Gillian and a NRCS rangeland specialist would head out to meet at SGI

For more information about the Sage Grouse Initiative, visit our website at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com.

central – a rancher's kitchen table and the ever-present pot of coffee.

"We'd talk about SGI, listen to their goals for the ranch, then jump in the truck and go look together and come up with an initial grazing plan even before they turned in their application," she says.

For example, they might discuss changing from a three-pasture to a four-pasture rotation system to give more rest time between grazing, so grasses grow taller in places. That's good for livestock and adds cover for nesting sage hens. More rest from grazing also helps wildflowers and leafy plants thrive. In turn, those plants support many kinds of insects that chicks eat to grow strong.

Each grazing plan builds in flexibility for seasonal conditions, a popular feature with landowners, says Gillian. For instance, a plan may call for producing seven to eight inches of residual grasses, but in a dry season that might not be possible.

Landowners also appreciate knowing that if they receive federal funding and apply SGI conservation practices, they will be considered in compliance with federal law if the sage grouse should ever be listed as endangered (a decision anticipated in 2015).



Fence markers prevent sage grouse collisions near leks (breeding grounds)

Gillian finds many landowners are as interested in the sage grouse recovery as they are the financial benefits to their operations. "A lot of the people I talk to want to see the sage grouse come back," she says. "They remember seeing them where they were young, or hearing the stories from their grandparents. One producer asked me, 'If you don't like wildlife, why are you out ranching?'"

Every day, Gillian admires the rugged and friendly nature of the rural people she is getting to know well. She has become an ambassador for the birds and a community member willing to lend a hand in the hardscrabble sagebrush country of South Dakota.





SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE *PARTNERSHIP PROFILE*

Sam Sanders, Nevada Rancher Forum a Success

May, 2012

Sam Sanders knows that when ranchers tell other ranchers that new management practices are working well on their land, those words carry a lot of weight. While new this past year to his job as range and wildlife conservationist for Pheasants Forever, he's a longtime Nevadan with strong rural roots.

"It's better having neighbors and friends talk about the Sage Grouse Initiative than anyone else," he says.

Working with a local stewardship group, Sam reached out to landowners who were voluntarily enhancing sage grouse habitat with federal assistance. Most ranchers agreed right away to share their experiences at an open house. The article below captures the success of that forum.



Sam Sanders holds a sage grouse during field research.

Landowners Share Experience on Sage Grouse, Cattle

By Dylan Woolf Harris, reprinted from the Elko Daily Free Press

May 31, 2012



Helping out sage grouse with habitat preservation might not be so bad for ranchers after all. And government agencies and landowners might not have to butt heads either. Instead of combative relationships, the two might be able to work cooperatively toward mutually beneficial ends.

At least that's what a few ranchers said Tuesday at a forum organized by the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group. Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Nevada Department of Wildlife all have programs available to assist landowners in nurturing sage-grouse habitat on private land.

“Ranching and wildlife habitat are very compatible. They are the same thing in my estimation,” said Elko rancher Mitch Heguy. While some landowners are fearing the worst — fettering regulations that cripple revenue — as agencies scrupulously monitor sage-grouse populations and habitats because of the bird’s potential endangered species listing, others are saying the goals of the agencies and those of the ranchers aren’t necessarily at odds.

Heguy and his wife Rhonda Heguy were one set of four landowner speakers who shared their personal experience working with agencies in cost sharing projects. Heguy’s PowerPoint covered the projects he has worked on and also shared his philosophy on the perceived controversy:

“Fortunately, what is good for the sage grouse is good for the rancher.”

Heguy said on his ranch, as a partnered project, he put up a fence creating a riparian pasture and worked to get two streams functioning properly in the area. He let the field grow for two years without any grazing, then began lightly grazing. “That project has been a great success,” he said.

Others shared similar sentiments, but most important, these projects do not take away from business, they said.

Rancher Duane Coombs of Smith Creek Ranch said selectively choosing projects that benefit grazing is a luxury landowners

have. “When it comes to projects, the cows are the economic engine that drives the bus. We don’t cut them out,” Coombs said.

“The sage grouse is the issue. I’m going to figure out where the sage grouse and the cows’ paths cross and that’s where I’m going to focus my energy,” he said.

Not only did the projects not take away from production, but the undertakings, which improved rangeland, were often not feasible without cost sharing.

For more information about the Sage Grouse Initiative, visit our website at www.sagegrouseinitiative.com.



Mitch Heguy, owner of the Heguy Ranch west of Elko, talks to a crowd of landowners at the Western Folklife Center in Elko Tuesday. Heguy was sharing a presentation on the benefits for landowners to create more natural habitat for sage grouse (photo Matt Unrau/Elko Daily Free Press).

Jesse Braatz from Squaw Valley Ranch also talked about a few ventures over the years, which include seeding and thinning stretches of sagebrush too dense for the bird.

Coombs showed before and after photographs of a strip of land affected by a pinyon tree removal project. The trees, Coombs said, were sapping up water and little was available for growing feeding vegetation. In a few short years after clearing the trees, the once sparse basin grew verdant.

However, none of the ranchers spoke on behalf of others in their industry. The speakers only told the crowd how the cooperative experience affected their own operations, and acknowledged that not all projects will be right for all ranches.

“We don’t come here today to think that we know more than anybody here. A lot of you know more than us. We’re just here to share our views and share our experiences of the programs we’ve participated in,” said rancher Sam Mori. Mori said his ranch is “forage dependent.”

“The better job we can do of managing that forage, the more profitable we’re going to be in the ranching business and the cattle business,” he said. “The better situation we set up for cattle, the better situation we set up for wildlife. Real simple.”

Sam Sanders, Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Group sage grouse pod chairman,

said after the forum he was pleased with the presentations and the afternoon’s civil dialogue. He said cost sharing, cost reimbursement, and technical assistance projects include wildfire management, removal of invasive plants, and habitat conservation.

The Western Folklife Center donated its facilities for the forum, and refreshments were provided by Midas Chapter Nevada Bighorns Unlimited and Starr Valley Conservation District.



Partnership Profile
By Deborah Richie, SGI Communications
June 2012

Brandi St Clair, Lakeview, Oregon
Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife
It's My Backyard too

When Brandi St Clair knocks on the door of a rancher to discuss signing up for Sage Grouse Initiative funds to remove invading junipers, she has an automatic foot in the door.

Besides her friendly demeanor and youthful energy, the 26-year-old wildlife biologist happens to be born and raised in Lakeview, Oregon, as were her parents.

“Not only do most of them know me, there’s a trust there,” she says. “They know it’s my backyard, too. They listen when I tell them I want to see great things going on for multiple reasons, not just for sage grouse but for rangeland in general, and for all the other sage-steppe species, too, like mule deer and pronghorn and pygmy rabbits.”

Great things are happening, and fast here in one of the best sage grouse strongholds in the west, where SGI funds have helped landowners cut a whopping 7000 acres of juniper in critical sage grouse areas in less than one year, as of mid-June, 2012.

“Signing up thousands and thousands of acres of juniper and watching it all go down is unreal,” says Brandi. “You can visualize it but seeing it in action is something else.”

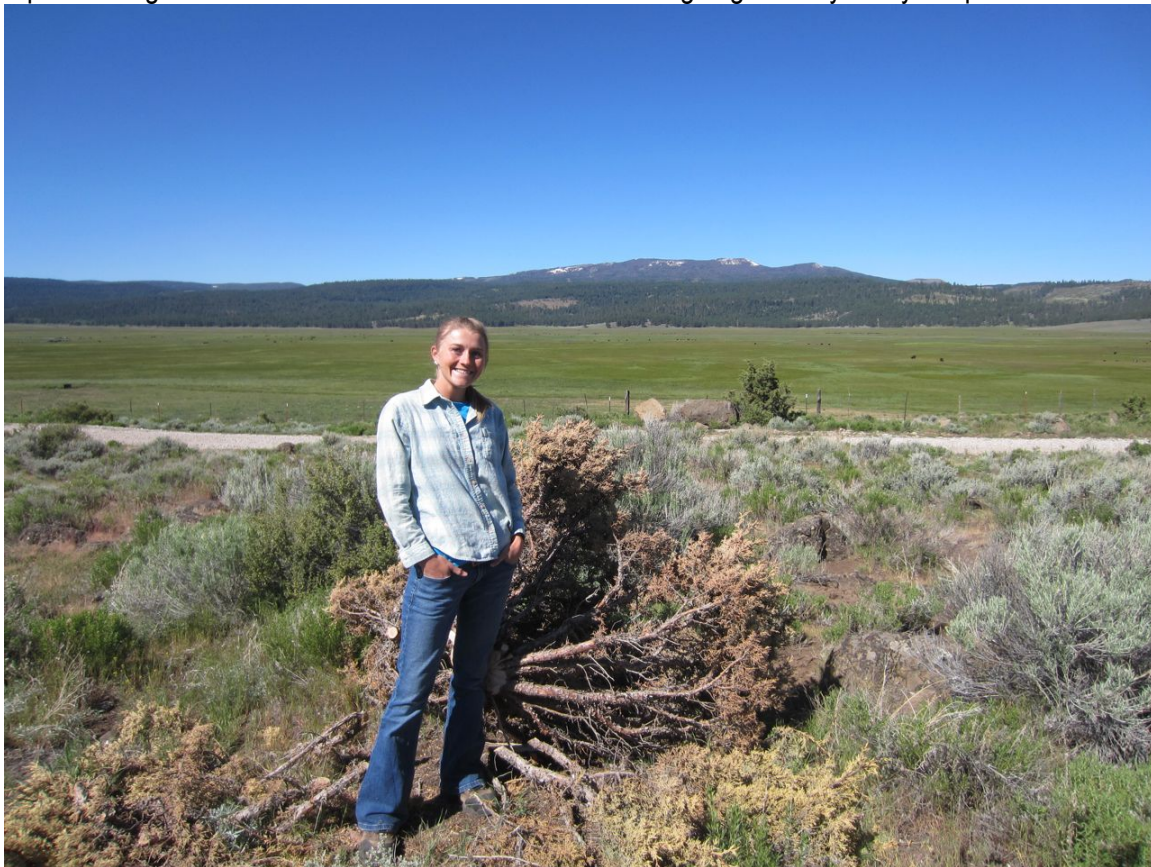
The private land juniper removal ties in well with a landscape-level effort of the Bureau of Land Management, the major land holding agency in the region. The public-private partnership works almost seamlessly in this vast country where juniper removal is linked to scientific studies looking at the benefits to sage grouse. The birds flourish only in treeless landscapes with plentiful sagebrush and a mix of native forbs and grasses and wetlands. While the populations are still relatively high in places, their current range is shrinking from encroaching junipers and other threats.

Brandi knows the country and the wildlife as well as the people here. Even before she finished her wildlife and fisheries degree at Oregon State University, she tracked peregrine falcons, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, and sage grouse for the BLM in Lakeview.



In her new position since November 2011, Brandi works for the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, yet like all the other SGI partner positions, she's stationed at the Natural Resources Conservation Service office. Her primary responsibility is to contact and build relationships with the ranchers in the sage grouse core areas, strongholds for the birds.

"During the winter you're developing the plans, learning acronyms, and then you get the contract and get word to start cutting. You flag the units and then head out while they are cutting. It's important to go out with the contractors and make sure it's going the way everyone planned."



Brandi stands by freshly cut juniper. Without the encroaching trees and a healthy complex of sagebrush, native grasses and forbs, the habitat will be inviting for sage grouse and a suite of other wildlife species. It's better for cattle grazing as well.

Brandi stresses that her job goes far beyond signing up landowners and the actual contract on their property.

"What's key is working with landowners and being available for them," she says. "You have got to be on their schedule. They are doing brandings and moving cattle. You might need to go out there at 7 pm on a Wednesday evening or on a Sunday. It makes it easier for them, and they really enjoy that. They don't feel constrained."

"The contract ends and the relationship stays," she says.

At the same time, Brandi keeps close tabs on the property owners participating in SGI to make sure their needs are met, she's constantly looking ahead. Brandi helped enlist landowners to the north of the Warner Mountains in a key sage grouse area called Valley Falls, where 3,000 to 4,000 acres of juniper will be cut in fall of 2012. She's aiming her sights next on Picture Rock Pass far to the north.

Brandi developed a colorful map for the Warner core area that shows plans for SGI juniper removal on private lands all the way up through 2016. Those are matched with the BLM project treatment areas for an impressive tally of more than 32,000 acres.

"I just want to take on the world," Brandi says with a laugh.

Every time a project is finished, she is thrilled to share the results. With the knowledge that downed juniper offers new life to the shrub-steppe, she and others here see the restoration as a thing of beauty.

"You just want to show everyone," she says. "I've taken my parents out and they can't believe it. They grew up here and are baffled by how different the landscape looks and tell me, 'this is amazing! It looks completely different. I can't wait to see the wildlife response.'"

Brandi can't wait to see that either. She has visions of sage grouse nesting and finding shelter and food in the rejuvenated sagebrush, while Brewer's and sage sparrows sing and pronghorn race across open country.

She is never shy about talking to the landowners about the wildlife benefits as a huge part of the success story in addition to the healthier range for their grazing needs.

"They love to hear that," she says. "When they are out running on the ranch, they enjoy seeing mule deer and other wildlife out there."

"It's extremely fun," she says of her job. "I love coming in every day. I love going out in the field and seeing all that hard work put into action."



SGI SWAT Training/Managers Meeting/Celebration
FINAL AGENDA
June 26 - 29, 2012
Pinedale, WY

Monday, June 25th

- Arrive at Hampton Inn & Suites, 55 Bloomfield Avenue, Pinedale, WY 82941, (307) 367-6700

Tuesday, June 26th

- SWAT Team Field Tour (*specific field tour agenda to be provided onsite*)
 - 7:30 AM – Bus departs from Hampton
 - Lunch & refreshments will be provided
 - 5:30 PM – Bus returns to Hampton
 - Dinner on your own (*please refer to brochures provided in your hotel room for restaurant options*)

Wednesday, June 27th

- SWAT Team Technical Training
 - 7:30 AM – Bus departs from Hampton for data collection in the field
 - 12:00 PM – Bus returns to Hampton; lunch provided in the Hampton's Wind River Range Room
 - 1:00 PM – Training in the Wind River Range Room
 - 4:30 PM – Bus departs from Hampton for Double J Ranch
 - Informal tour of sage grouse habitat
 - Welcome by J.J. Healy, Double J Ranch Owner
 - Sublette County Landowners (*invited*)
 - Maggie Miller
 - Albert Sommers
 - Chad Espenscheid
 - Dinner
 - Presentations after dinner
 - Wyoming Land Trust
 - Sage Grouse Initiative – Wyoming Conservation Easement Film
 - 8:00 PM – Bus returns to Hampton

Thursday, June 28th

- SWAT Team Technical Training (Field & Classroom)
 - 7:30 AM – Bus departs from Hampton for data collection in the field
 - 12:00 PM – Bus returns to Hampton; lunch provided in the Hampton's Wind River Range Room
 - 1:00 PM – Training in the Wind River Range Room
 - 4:30 PM – 1 hour break
- *SWAT Managers Coordination Meeting (Sublette County Library's Lovatt Room)*
 - 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM
 - *Agenda to be provided at the meeting*
 - 5:30 PM – Bus departs from Hampton for Rodeo Grounds
 - Pitchfork Fondue Dinner & Music by Jared Rogerson
 - USDA NRCS Chief Dave White will be in attendance
 - 8:00 PM – Bus returns to Hampton

Friday, June 29th

- SWAT Celebration (Sublette County Library's Lovatt Room)
 - 8:00 AM – Bus departs from Hampton for Sublette County Library
 - 8:30 AM – 8:35 AM
 - Welcome by Eric Petersen, *Sublette County Conservation District Manager*
 - 8:35 AM – 9:00 AM
 - Introductions & Acknowledgements by Paul Shelton, *Emcee & Wyoming NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Operations*
 - 9:00 AM – 9:10 AM
 - Sage Grouse Initiative Overview Film
 - 9:10 AM – 9:20 AM
 - Astrid Martinez, *Wyoming NRCS State Conservationist*
 - 9:20 AM – 10:00 AM
 - Keynote by USDA NRCS Chief Dave White
 - 10:00 AM – 10:20 AM
 - Steve Ferrell, *Advisor to Wyoming Governor Matt Mead on Wildlife & Endangered Species Policy*
 - 10:20 AM – 10:30 AM
 - Sage Grouse Initiative – Wyoming Conservation Easement Film
 - 10:30 AM – 10:50 AM
 - Alan Clark, *Intermountain West Joint Venture Management Board Chairman/Utah Division of Wildlife Resources Deputy Director*
 - 10:50 AM – 11:10 AM
 - Howard Vincent, *Pheasants Forever CEO*
 - 11:30 AM – Bus returns to Hampton

*Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Lori Reed, Intermountain West Joint Venture Operations Specialist; **Lori will be onsite for the entire week & accessible via (307) 760-7008.***

ATTACHMENT

Objectives & Evolution of the SGI SWAT

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 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 the 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 a subsequent modification 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. As with all SWAT projects, the IWJV leveraged the 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 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 \$10.6 million effort as the SGI SWAT, even though only \$4 million arose from NRCS' FY 2011 SWAT appropriation.