

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

February 1, 2013

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Joyce & Tim:

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

Please find attached the SGI SWAT NRCS Quarterly Report for October – December 2012. The report also contains an appendix: Objectives and Evolution of the SGI SWAT.

Please give me a call at (406) 329-3120 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". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: October 1 – December 31, 2012

Intermountain West Joint Venture

February 1, 2013

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) shows no sign of slowing down and, in fact, made significant gains this past quarter in each of its three focus areas: field delivery, science, and communications. The following reports on these accomplishments from October 1 – December 31, 2012.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field team continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, funding partners, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). The team's 24 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 team and the IWJV's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

- **Conservation Implementation:** The IWJV maintains a detailed tracking system to document SWAT team progress on a quarterly basis. This tracking system captures the key conservation activities identified in the NRCS-U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Interagency Agreement for SGI-SWAT. 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.

To date, the increased SWAT field capacity has yielded:

- **733,872 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.
- **116,954 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.
- **73 miles** of "high risk" fence near leks marked or moved. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.



Photo by Jeremy Roberts, Conservation Media

- **SWAT Field Team Spotlight:** Passionate individuals with a propensity for action are key drivers of SGI success. Here are a few examples of how the SWAT field team is working every day to build broad support for sage grouse conservation and get more done on the ground.

- *Taylor Payne (Randolph, Utah) – Utah Department of Agriculture and Food:* Taylor helped organize a symposium at the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative conference in Orlando, Florida. The session highlighted rancher and partners efforts to implement the Three Creeks Project that Taylor is working on – a ground-breaking grazing management plan across private and public lands to improve rangeland health and sage grouse habitat in Rich County, Utah. *This SWAT position is made possible with the support of the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, Bureau of Land Management, Intermountain West Joint Venture, NRCS, and the U.S. Forest Service.*
- *Kelli Bartholomew (Ephrata, Washington) – Pheasants Forever:* Sage grouse recovery in eastern Washington took a giant stride forward in 2012 with the help of Kelli and her NRCS colleagues, partners, and ranchers. Thanks to their efforts, over 14,400 acres of priority grouse habitat were enrolled in improved grazing management systems; conservation was also focused in one area within Douglas County, Washington, to achieve landscape-scale impacts required by sage grouse. “We’ve developed a program to work for producers and sage grouse,” says Bartholomew. “That’s the key. We listened to what they wanted first.” *This SWAT position is made possible with the support of Pheasants Forever, ConocoPhillips Company, Intermountain West Joint Venture, NRCS, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*
- *Natasha Gruber (Roosevelt, Utah) – Mule Deer Foundation:* Natasha gave a presentation to over three dozen ranchers, conservationists and agency personnel, regarding opportunities for assistance with sage grouse conservation, at a Utah State University ranching forum in the Uintah Basin. Natasha conveyed the shared vision of SGI with participants saying, “What we want to do with SGI is to help landowners improve habitat for sage grouse and wildlife and also help keep the rangeland healthy for their ranching.” *This SWAT position is made possible with the support of the Mule Deer Foundation, ConocoPhillips Company, Intermountain West Joint Venture, National Wild Turkey Federation, NRCS, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Utah Chukar & Wildlife Foundation, and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.*
- **SWAT Position Updates:** SWAT field team talent does not go unrecognized by other employers. As position vacancies arise, the IWJV collaborates with hiring entities and funding partners to re-assess position locations, in order to ensure technical assistance is focused where it’s needed most. They then work to quickly refill positions and minimize disruption to conservation delivery. Here are changes that occurred this quarter:
 - Joe Parsons (Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory – Saratoga Springs, Wyoming) accepted a position as the District Manager for the Saratoga-Encampment-Rawlins Conservation District in Saratoga Springs, Wyoming; this vacancy has been advertised and will be filled shortly.
 - Jeff Reese (Pheasants Forever (PF) – Burley, Idaho) accepted a position as a Rangeland Management Specialist with the Bureau of Land Management in Cedar City, Utah; Scott Scroggie (PF – Ely, Nevada) moved from Ely to Burley; Tyrel Brown has been selected for the Ely, Nevada, position and will begin on February 4, 2013.

- Laura Schnapp (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife – Ontario, Oregon) was hired for the Ontario position; this position was relocated from Baker City, Oregon, to take advantage of growing SGI opportunities in Malheur County.
- **Monthly Coordination Conference Calls:** The IWJV continues to host monthly conference calls in which SWAT team members receive SGI updates, share accomplishments and experiences, ask questions, and receive continuous technology transfer and training.
- **SWAT Field Team Support:** To help ensure SWAT team success, IWJV provides two support staff that work one-on-one with team members. Jeremy Maestas, NRCS-IWJV SGI Technical Lead, specializes in conservation delivery assistance by providing direct technical support to team members and NRCS staff. He also fosters regular team coordination and helps maintain funding partner relations. Tina Dennison, IWJV Project Coordinator, provides assistance to the team with accomplishment tracking and reporting, as well as administrative support for team meetings.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

The SGI Science Capacity effort continues to run smoothly, track progress, and yield important scientific results. What's more, it is growing – adding significantly to current achievements and progress.

SGI also initiated two interagency agreements – one with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Rocky Mountain Research Station (RMRS) and the other with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Fort Collins Science Center – which cumulatively will invest nearly \$800,000 toward expanding on our knowledge and understanding of sage grouse genetic connectivity. Targeting our conservation to core areas to maximize benefits to birds is a solid approach, but understanding how core areas are linked to one another is also critical to SGI success. Implementation of these landscape connectivity projects will inventory the current state of sage grouse genetic connectivity; provide data that will assist in decision support for sage grouse conservation; and, generate new and integrated maps showing connectivity among core areas for sage grouse for use by states, federal management agencies, and other partners.

Collectively, the IWJV science agreements are moving us closer to reaching SGI's goals of building potent, science-based targeting tools and thoroughly evaluating the biological outcomes of SGI implementation. Including agreements under development, IWJV science efforts extend across the 11-state sage grouse range and cover millions of acres of private sagebrush grasslands and wetlands. Results 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, the University of Idaho, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Utah State University, The Nature Conservancy, Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, FWS, USFS RMRS, USGS, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and others.

- **Investing in the Sage Grouse Initiative: A Range-Wide Framework for Maximizing Conservation Benefits by Assessing Trade-offs in Implementation Strategies (The Nature Conservancy):** An agreement is in development with The Nature Conservancy to evaluate the effectiveness of SGI investments, range wide, by weighing relative costs of various strategies against resulting benefits to sage grouse.

- **Relating Mule Deer Corridors to Sage Grouse Conservation (The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter):** This agreement with The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter allows for assessment of SGI benefits to mule deer and creation of 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):** This agreement with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies will develop a guidance tool for resource managers to use when considering whether sagebrush treatment is necessary, and/or justified, to benefit sage grouse, is near completion. 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):** This agreement with Utah State University (USU) will document Greater Sage Grouse individual and population responses to vegetation changes that may occur under prescribed grazing of paired sites located in Rich County, Utah, using a Before-After Control-Impact design. In 2012, USU surveyed lek routes, captured and radio-collared 99 sage grouse, recorded locations and vegetation at nesting and brood sites of collared sage grouse, and conducted predator surveys. Data collected during 2012 is being analyzed to evaluate lek attendance, nest initiation and success, brood success, and survival; data analysis will continue in 2013, along with additional field data collection.
- **Assessing Sage Grouse Response to the Removal of Encroaching Juniper (University of Idaho):** This is an agreement with the University of Idaho to conduct multi-year assessment on the effects of juniper removal on sage grouse habitat and populations. Field crews captured and radio-collared 64 sage grouse hens, in both treatment and control areas, in 2012. Tracking hens allowed nesting, nesting success, as well as brood success data to be collected. Field crews also completed vegetation surveys at and near nests, while establishing long-term monitoring points in treatment and control areas. Similar field work and further data analysis is planned for 2013.
- **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):** These agreements with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and The University of Montana are for the implementation of a long-term research project evaluating rest-rotation grazing practices on sage grouse population dynamics. At the close of 2012, the second year of a planned seven to ten year study, work completed includes: the capture and radio-marking of hens and chicks; the finding and monitoring of nests; and, the measuring of key vegetation characteristics in sage grouse habitat and in areas with varying grazing treatments and strategies. Similar data collection efforts are planned for 2013, as is a preliminary data analysis report.
- **Assessing the Range Condition of Core Sage Grouse Habitat near Roundup, Montana (Open Range Consulting):** This is an agreement with Open Range Consulting to perform rangeland habitat mapping and related data analysis services on eight, private ranches, which comprise 500,000 acres in north central Montana. The mapping is in support of the spatial data necessary to analyze nesting and chick survival data in the SGI prescribed grazing study in central Montana. Preliminary mapping spatial data has been received and final ground-truthing will soon be completed.

- 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 is a collaborative project among the IWJV, NRCS SGI Science Advisor, Oregon NRCS, Nevada NRCS, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Nevada Department of Wildlife. The result will be 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 NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program. Project work began in 2012; data analysis is ongoing and delineation of sage grouse brood rearing habitat is being finalized in lieu of available National Wetlands Inventory data.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

The SGI depends upon communicating successes, at all levels – from local newspapers to radio, TV, and specialized publications for our target audiences, particularly popular agricultural venues. Starting October 15, Deborah Richie, SGI Communications Specialist, went from a half-time to a full-time contract. She oversees media outreach; researches, writes, and edits articles; increases the lines of communication with partners; manages the website (www.sagegrouseinitiative.com) and [Facebook page](#); and, is in charge of the annual report and strategies for improving and expanding communication efforts. Deborah heads into the field for interviews and coverage; this quarter, she traveled to Minden, Nevada, where she attended the Sage Grouse of the Bi-State Area Symposium, as well as interviewed ranchers and partners in the field.

We’ve seen superb activity from the SGI SWAT in their communication of SGI successes. They’re working closely with the NRCS Public Affairs Specialists and with SGI communications to craft articles and get them published. Further, they are taking on their own projects and displaying creativity and innovation. The connection with the NRCS Public Affairs Specialists could not be possible without the outstanding guidance of Lori Valadez (NRCS Montana Public Affairs Specialist), who has generously taken on the role of the liaison for SGI communications with the NRCS Public Affairs Specialists.

Here are two examples of the SGI SWAT communication efforts that serve as a model for others to build upon:

“What’s Good for Sage Grouse is Good for the Cows,” by **Scott Scroggie (formerly in Ely, Nevada, and now located in Burley, Idaho)** appeared in the December 2012, issue of *Progressive Rancher Magazine*, a popular agricultural publication that serves the Ely, Nevada, area. The monthly magazine is mailed to 6,000 people in the area and is “free to people working and active in the livestock industry” (see www.progressiverancher.com for more on the magazine). Deborah and Scott met in Nevada, to outline the article together in October. Scott wrote the initial draft and gathered photos; Deborah provided editing assistance. The article next went to Liz Warner, NRCS Nevada Public Affairs Specialist. Liz then used her direct contact, Leana Stizel, Owner/Editor of *Progressive Rancher*. The article was a real hit for this magazine and for the landowners interviewed, as well as for the excellent quote that Scott was able to obtain from rancher Don Phillips. Don’s quote is now featured on the SGI



*Sheila & Don Phillips, Nevada Ranchers;
Photo by Scott Scroggie*

website (and many other places). It's very powerful to have a rancher say this about fence markers: "I was headed out in the field, and the sage grouse took off and headed right for that fence; but sure enough, at the last minute, they went up and over those markers!"

Sublette County Conservation District's SGI Website Page, created by Meghann Durbrow (Pinedale, Wyoming); see <http://www.sublettecd.com/pid/73/sage-grouse-initiative.aspx>

Meghann displayed her innovation and talents by putting together an SGI website page with rotating photos, featuring the people and landscapes of the sagebrush-steppe. The page introduces herself to the community, explains the partnership, and invites people to contact



her; the page is welcoming and informative. She ties her page to the main SGI website and includes two SGI videos, as well as useful publications. It's a great resource for producers and for anyone interested in SGI efforts in

Pinedale. In addition, it shows the terrific partnership with a conservation district that makes Meghann's position possible – she certainly provided a model for others to follow.

Success Story Highlights from the SGI Website

[10/17/2012 – Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration in Idaho features Pheasants Forever & Partners](#)

Multiple partners combined efforts to improve a landscape-level number of acres for sage grouse – 32,000 acres of juniper removal across public and private lands.

[10/19/2012 – Conservation Could Save Sage Grouse & Ranchers from Endangered Species Listing](#)

Featured on the Private Landowner Network's blog, *Keep Working Lands Working*, author, Amos Eno, highlighted SGI, promoted the SGI video, and showcased the success of conifer removal.

[10/23/2012 – Unlikely Allies: In Blaine County, Conservationists and Ranchers Join to Protect Wildlife and Rural Business](#)

This was an article written by Deborah for *Idaho Magazine* about conservation easements in the Pioneer Mountains in Idaho.

[10/26/2012 – Partnering for Sage Grouse & Elk](#)

This featured the reprint of the article (written by Hannah Ryan and first published in Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's *Bugle Magazine*) that's now circulating online and available in hard copy.

[10/26/2012 – Ruler of the Roost](#)

Paul Rauber's highlight on sage grouse for The Sierra Club was included in both a *Sierra Daily* blog post and in an article in the November/December 2012 issue of *Sierra*.

[11/05/2012 – Sage Grouse on the Sun Ranch](#)

Haley Lockwood, NRCS Wyoming Public Affairs Intern, wrote this story for realranchers.com; it focuses on the Sun Ranch near Casper, Wyoming, and the SGI conservation practices of landowner, Dennis Sun.

[11/07/2012 – King of the Prairies](#)

Montana Sporting Journal ran this visually rich, personal narrative by Brandon Moss about his sage grouse hunting experiences and why he's embraced SGI.

[11/09/2012 – 100,000 Fence Markers: Community Employment Service Teams Up to Help Sage Grouse Survive](#)

Bruce Waage, NRCS/Bureau of Land Management Sage Grouse Liaison, wrote a wonderful piece about COR Enterprises (located in Billings, Montana); there, people with disabilities are offered work opportunities. In particular, they help to make fence markers to prevent sage grouse collisions and reached a landmark of 100,000 markers – enough to mark 60 miles of high-risk fences.

[11/09/2012 – A Landowner's Guide to Wildlife-Friendly Fences](#)

How to Build Fence with Wildlife in Mind, Second Edition, was updated for Montana, by Christine Paige. Christine also produced a companion edition for Wyoming. Multiple partners were involved, including Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; The Wyoming Land Trust; Wyoming Game and Fish Department; and others.

[11/19/2012 – Public Lands Council Offers Sage Grouse Online Library](#)

This story promoted the new online *Sage Grouse Conservation Library*; "graze" the library at grazingforgrouse.com.

[11/26/2012 – Montana Racks Up Sage Grouse Conservation Successes](#)

Pete Husby, NRCS Montana State Biologist, captured the impressive SGI successes in Montana, in an article published in the *Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society Fall 2012 Newsletter*.

[11/28/2012 – Don and Sheila Phillips-a Nevada sage grouse success story](#)

A story by Scott Scroggie, SGI SWAT in Ely, Nevada, was first produced in a press release with photos; a full article was then published in *Progressive Rancher* in December: [Local Ranchers Improve Wildlife Habitat and Cattle Operations Through NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative](#).

[11/30/2012 – New Tool for Ranchers/Managers: Marking Fences Efficiently Prevents Sage Grouse Collisions](#)

Deborah wrote this press release, which was provided to NRCS Public Affairs Specialists for circulation and distribution; it describes an important new tool, developed through SGI science.

[12/06/2012 Sage Grouse Recovery in Washington Takes Giant Stride Forward](#)

This was a collaborative article by Deborah, Kelli Bartholomew (SGI SWAT, Ephrata, Washington), and Jennifer Van Eps, NRCS Washington Visual Information Specialist. The piece was used as a flyer to attract ranchers to several forums on SGI and is part of a great success story – enrolling not just more ranchers but a block of ranchers with adjoining properties to achieve landscape-level conservation in eastern Washington.

[12/11/2012 – Pheasants Forever Editor Earns Silver Medal for Sage Grouse Article](#)

This press release celebrated the prestigious award given to Mark Herwig, *Pheasants Forever Journal* Editor.

SGI Facebook Page

The SGI Facebook page “likes” have increased by 100, bringing the total to more than 400. A total of 43 posts have been made.

A few highlights:

- SGI SWAT employees and where they work were featured in eight photos, plus a map, on December 15th;
- A photo album was created to with the Washington success story on December 7th;
- An NRCS story on the Lava Lake Ranch was shared as a photo album on December 2nd;
- A post with photo (including of Meghann Durbrow, SGI SWAT in Pinedale, Wyoming) was made in regards to the sage grouse and road crossing effort on November 27th;
- A Thanksgiving Day post linking sage and sagebrush engaged 268 people;
- An exciting photo of sage grouse and cattle sharing a lek in Wyoming was shared on November 19th;

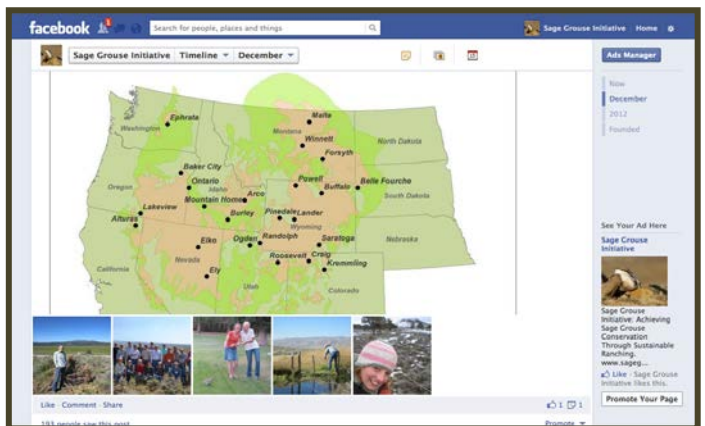


Photo by Tatiana Gettelman

- Several posts and photo albums from a Nevada field visit to cover bi-state sage grouse conservation were created – November 13th, 12th, 1st, and October 29th;
- A photo album to go with the 100,000 fence marker story was posted on November 8th; and,
- SGI was linked to soil health with a great dirt photo and Ray Archuleta quote on November 6th.

Most Popular Facebook Post: a picture of a sage grouse flying across Nevada (taken by Tatiana Gettelman) was posted on December 4th; statistics from this post included: a virality of 19.9 percent; 382 viewers; 100 engaged users; and, 76 talking about it.

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 has now effectuated 41 science, communications, and SWAT management agreements. In addition, we are nearing completion on two additional agreements. These projects encumber a total of \$4,254,819 in SWAT funds.

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 significant staff time and resources during the reporting period to assembling the partnerships and managing 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.

We continue to engage both the NRCS SGI Coordinator and NRCS SGI 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 fifth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in December 2012, involving NRCS, SGI, IWJV, and PF staff; a vast array of administrative and implementation items were discussed, and decisions were made by the team.

The IWJV partnership with ConocoPhillips Company (COP) through the SGI SWAT is paying significant dividends for the initiative. The IWJV recently received another \$50,000 contribution from COP to directly support our on-going coordination of the SGI SWAT. In addition to such contributions, we are currently utilizing a portion of COP's special 2012 SGI SWAT \$300,000 donation to directly and specifically support SGI SWAT field capacity and communications from 2012-2014. The fiscal commitment of COP to the SWAT is an excellent model for corporate support of SGI through the SWAT partnership and presents an excellent roadmap for working with other corporate partners.

SUMMARY

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

NRCS SGI SWAT AGREEMENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

- a) *Efforts for outreach to, and participation of, beginning farmers or ranchers, and Native American Tribes within the project area.* The SWAT field capacity workforce worked directly with four new beginning farmers or 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 have made 1,409 contacts (field visits, etc.) with **641 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.* Thirty-four (34) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Technical Lead FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Specialist FTE, 1.0 Communications Support FTE, 3.0 IWJV FTEs, and 4.0 Science Support FTEs) were employed during the reporting period.
- e) *Acres of project area addressed in NRCS program contracts and/or extents of conservation activities implemented in the project area.* The SGI SWAT, to date, resulted in the following accomplishments: conservation planning for 733,872 acres of grazing systems; 116,954 acres of conifer removal; 341,214 feet (64.6 miles) of fence marking or removal; 4,300 acres of wetland restoration; and 2,680 acres of rangeland seeding. Notable accomplishments during this period included **33,041 acres of conifer removal applied (a 12-fold increase from the previous reporting period)**; an additional 33,026 feet (6.25 miles) of fence marking or removal applied (the highest amount of any reporting period to date); 35,550 acres of grazing system applied by Reese Irvine (Buffalo, Wyoming); and, 15,939 acres of conifer removal applied by Joshua Uriarte (Baker City, Oregon)!
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$520,398 in Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds; \$3,942,900 in Grassland Reserve Program funds; and, \$235,467 in Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program funds were obligated during the reporting period, for a combined total of \$4,698,765 in contract obligations. ***This brings the total amount contracted by the SWAT, to date, to an impressive \$22,829,153!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$1.6 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 are in the process of securing commitments from partners for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

Appendix A.

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

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

The SGI Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) was established to strengthen NRCS' capacity to implement SGI. The SWAT builds field capacity and strengthens the science guiding SGI, as well as bolsters communications capacity – all through partnerships that leverage the NRCS SGI funding with significant contributions from other sources. The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV), in close collaboration with NRCS at multiple levels, continued to make significant progress toward the following objectives in launching the SGI SWAT during the reporting period:

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

This work is facilitated by execution of an Interagency Agreement (IA) between NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and 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. Further, NRCS provided an additional \$2.3 million to extend the agreement through December 1, 2016, through a "Phase 3" modification to the IA on September 28, 2012. As with all SWAT projects, the IWJV leveraged NRCS' investment by raising 25% of the funds needed to implement the SGI SWAT from an array of conservation partners, including the FWS, state wildlife and agricultural agencies, conservation districts, non-governmental conservation organizations, and corporations.

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