

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

May 1, 2014

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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 January – March 2014. 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,

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: January 1 – March 31, 2014

Intermountain West Joint Venture
May 1, 2014

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its four focus areas: field delivery, science, communications, and partner development. The following reports on these accomplishments from January – March 2014.

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. These contributions are rolled up with other NRCS actions and reported to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), during the annual sage grouse status review process, to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act listing decision reviews.

Partner Positions Accelerate Conservation—Additional field capacity support provided by SWAT partner positions across the West has essentially enabled NRCS to double the amount of SGI conservation. Partner staff have helped plan or implement:

- **1,065,762 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.
- **177,208 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.
- **121 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

Leveraging Farm Bill funds for Wildlife—More boots on the ground means more Farm Bill conservation funding put to work for wildlife. *Every \$1 partners invest results in \$69 put into habitat improvement!*

Political Boundaries No Match for SGI: SWAT Partnership Erases State Lines to Get the Job Done

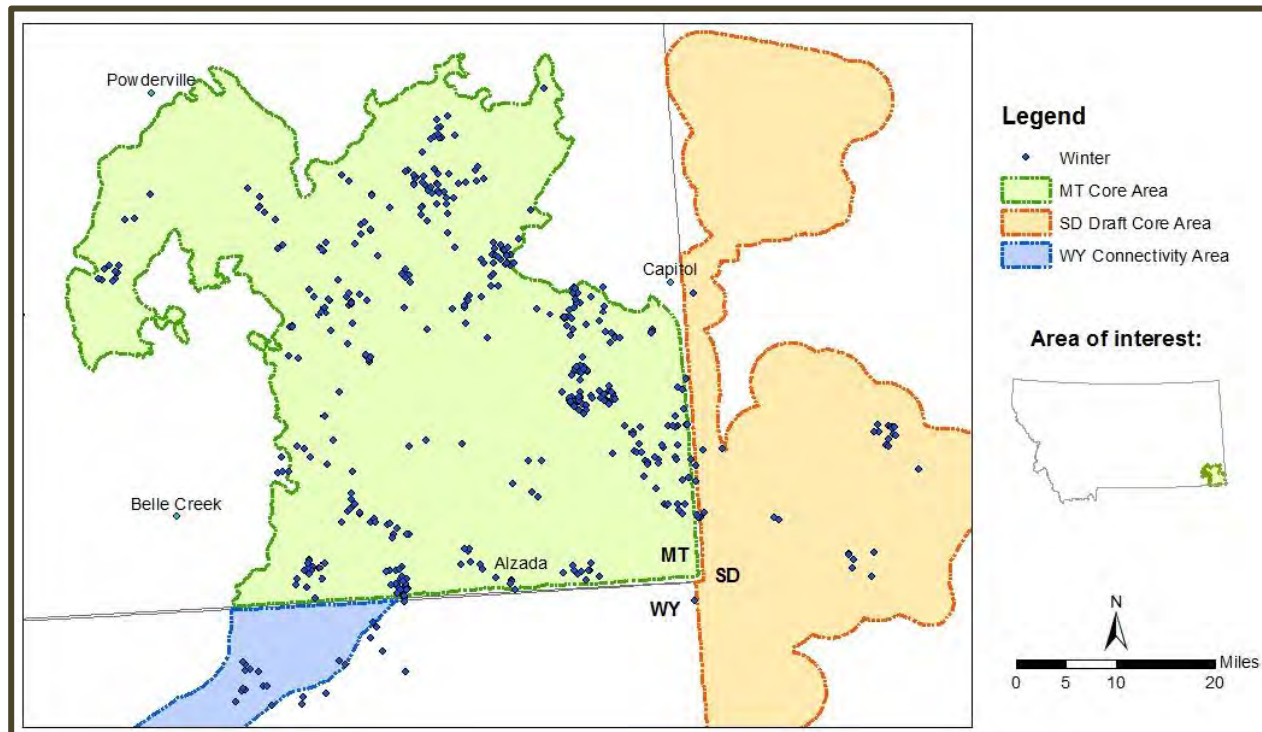
Maintaining sage grouse distribution across the West is a key element to achieving long-term conservation objectives. Gillian Brooks Bee (SGI SWAT Range and Wildlife Conservationist with Pheasants Forever in Belle Fourche, South Dakota) works collaboratively with ranchers, NRCS, and partners to secure the future of sage grouse and sustainable ranching along the eastern fringe of the range. SGI has proven popular among ranchers in this part of the world, with some of the best remaining habitats on private lands now enrolled. This has left Gillian and her NRCS colleagues in an interesting predicament: where to strategically focus her efforts next?



SWAT conservationist, Gillian Brooks Bee, works with a rancher to inspect the response of plants to SGI grazing management improvements.

Of course, birds along these borderlands don't let state lines stop them and frequently utilize habitats in southeast Montana. This ecological reality, along with a growing need for SGI technical assistance in Montana, got NRCS leadership and partners in both states thinking about how best to get the job done for this population. Because of Gillian's quality work and high SGI participation among willing landowners in South Dakota's core habitat, the door was opened to taking her expertise across state boundaries.

Montana and South Dakota NRCS State Conservationists, Joyce Swartzendruber and Jeff Zimprich, worked with SWAT partners at Pheasants Forever and South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks to strike a deal to split Gillian's time between states. Gillian now follows that path of South Dakota birds as she works with ranchers and partners to improve habitat in Carter County, Montana.



Overall dispersion of radio-collared sage grouse during winter across western South Dakota, southeast Montana, and parts of northeast Wyoming. Figure from Foster et al. 2014.

The ability to erase political boundaries to help achieve common goals for sage grouse and sustainable ranching is emblematic of SGI and the collaborative spirit of its partners. This new arrangement could not have come at a better time, as the results of research by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Bureau of Land Management sheds new light on this sage grouse population and the importance of maintaining intact, healthy ranchlands across state lines. The reports states, "...many hens made movements into South Dakota adjacent to the Core Area, and cooperation among states will be necessary to maintain this sage grouse population." Furthermore, it goes on to say, "Traditional family-owned ranching operations, the predominant local stakeholders in the Core Area, have historically managed land in a manner that is compatible with sage grouse conservation and are well-poised to collaborate with wildlife and range professionals to maintain and improve sage grouse habitat." Results of the new research can be found [here](#).

Gillian's position is made possible with the support of Pheasants Forever, South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, ConocoPhillips Company, NRCS, and the IWJV.

Seven New SGI Field Conservationists Attend Missoula Two-Day Orientation Training

SGI relies on its SWAT team to assist NRCS field offices and ranchers with scaling-up conservation in sage grouse strongholds across 11 western states. Every new rangeland conservationist or biologist comes well-qualified for the competitive positions. However, there can be a steep learning curve for new hires to carry out SGI, including learning everything from in-depth sage grouse biology to tips and tools for working with landowners and building

community partnerships. Within the last six months, SGI has hired seven new staff to fill vacant positions in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

The IWJV recently brought these staff together to fully immerse them in SGI and share some lessons-learned for working successfully with ranchers, NRCS, and partners. The group gathered, along with other partners, for a two-day orientation training in Missoula, Montana, March 25-26, with the goal of better preparing SWAT staff for delivering SGI.

The SGI and IWJV team wishes to thank our guest speakers: Greg Neudecker (Montana State Coordinator, FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program); Kyle Tackett (NRCS District Conservationist in Dillon, Montana); Sam Lawry, (Western Regional Director, Pheasants Forever); Jon Siddoway (NRCS Montana State Rangeland Management Specialist); Pete Husby (NRCS Montana State Biologist); Erik Suffridge (NRCS Montana Assistant State Conservationist for Programs); and, Lindsay Schmitt, (NRCS Rangeland Management Specialist in Dillon, Montana).

SGI also commends all our hard-working NRCS field staff who provide day-to-day leadership to our SWAT team and the more than 35 paying partners who support the positions.



SGI team participating in SWAT Orientation Training. From left: Instructor Jeremy Maestas (NRCS/IWJV SGI Technical Lead); Instructor Dave Naugle (NRCS SGI Science Advisor); Michael Brown (Pheasants Forever, Ephrata, Washington); Ed Contreras (Pheasants Forever, Mountain Home, Idaho); Kelsey Molloy, Montana Association of Conservation Districts, Malta, Montana); Blaise Allen, Meeteetse Conservation District, Meeteetse, Wyoming); Leah Lewis, (Mule Deer Foundation, Tremonton, Utah); Rachelle Peppers (Pheasants Forever, Elko, Nevada); Instructor Tim Griffiths (NRCS SGI National Coordinator); Lara Fondow (Pheasants Forever, Rexburg, Idaho).

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory Hosts Sagebrush Bird Workshops

The Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO), a key SWAT partner, recently conducted a series of workshops in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming, to teach people how to identify and manage for sagebrush birds, as well as introduce them to a new decision support tool (DST), currently being developed for land managers. The workshops proved popular and attracted diverse participants. Several SWAT staff were on hand to learn and share information related to SGI.



SGI SWAT staff participating in RMBO-sponsored workshop on sagebrush birds held in Craig, Colorado. From left: Noah Bates (RMBO, Kremmling, Colorado); Chris Yarbrough (Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Craig, Colorado); Natasha Gruber (Mule Deer Foundation, Roosevelt, Utah).

Knowing the needs of sagebrush birds not only enriches the experience for all who enjoy the sagebrush country, it's part of looking at a whole community of wildlife that thrives under what SGI likes to call, the umbrella of sage grouse habitat conservation. Managing for multiple species can be a challenge, but the new DST is designed to incorporate the responses of sagebrush-obligate songbirds with NRCS conservation practices to help decision makers optimize benefits. The tool uses RMBO's Integrated Monitoring in Bird Conservation Regions (IMBCR) bird monitoring data, state-and-transition models, and SGI monitoring data to model bird and vegetation responses to different practices.



Sage thrasher

Through the workshops and DST, RMBO is helping SGI ensure practices not only benefit sage grouse but also the full suite of other sagebrush-obligates birds as well. To learn more, please visit www.rmbo.org and like them on Facebook!

Submitted by Garrett Pantle, SGI SWAT, Saratoga, Wyoming.

SWAT Position Updates

SWAT field team talent does not go unrecognized by other employers. As position vacancies arise, the IWJV works with 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 (as needed) to minimize disruption to conservation delivery. Here are changes that occurred this quarter:

- Leah Lewis began with the Mule Deer Foundation in Tremonton, Utah (position previously located in Ogden).
- Kelsey Molloy started with the Montana Association of Conservation Districts in Malta, Montana.
- Reese Irvine (Lake DeSmet Conservation District in Buffalo, Wyoming) has taken a permanent position as the Carbon County Weed and Pest Supervisor.

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.

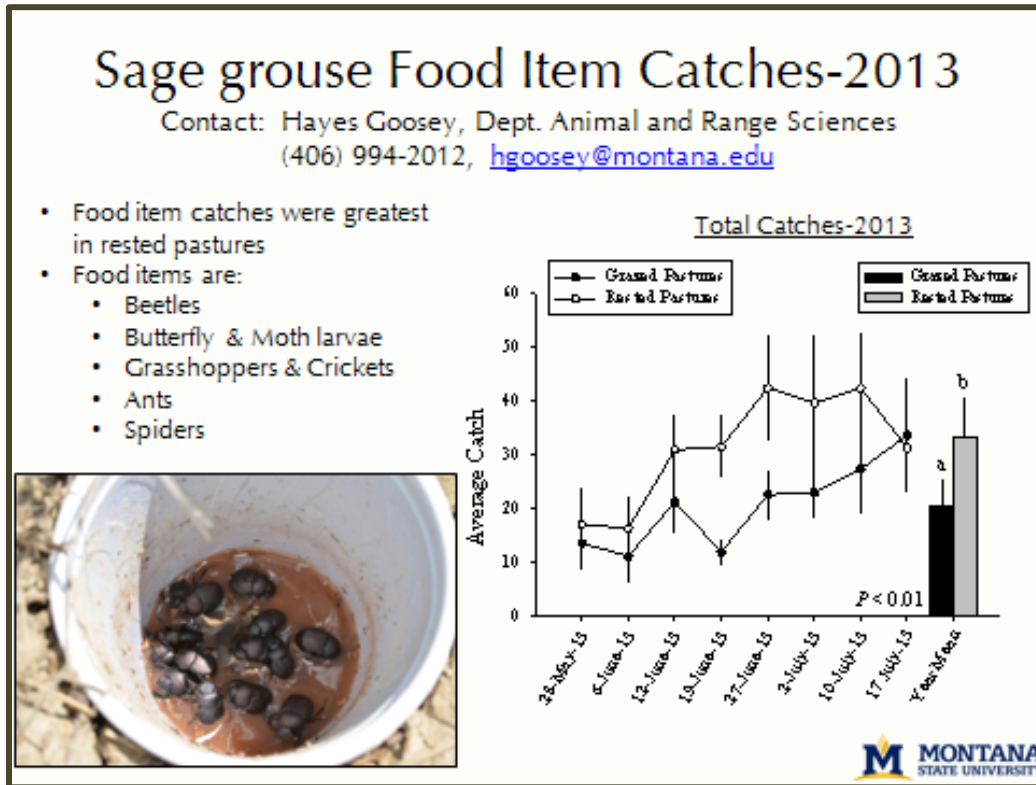
SCIENCE CAPACITY

Montana Ongoing Study Suggests More Insects in Rested Pastures

Hayes Goosey is leading a unique, four-year study near Roundup, Montana, to investigate a key part of sage grouse diet in spring and summer, particularly for the growing chicks. Specifically, he's looking for arthropods that are important for nutrition: beetles, the larvae of butterfly and moths, grasshoppers and crickets, spiders, and ants.

Preliminary findings of the study after two field seasons reveal that the SGI rest-rotation grazing program is working, when it comes to boosting the abundance of arthropods. Pastures that are rested or deferred from grazing host the most arthropods across all taxa.

Goosey is an entomologist in the Department of Animal and Range Sciences at Montana State University (MSU). He initiated the project out of his own interest in conserving sage grouse and sagebrush steppe habitats, as well as ranching.



“From my perspective and SGI as a whole, the way to serve sage grouse is from these partnerships with ranches and keeping ranches on the ground and profitable and not converting them into wheat fields,” Goosey said.

Out in the sagebrush steppe, Goosey and his crew have two techniques for sampling: pitfall traps and sweep nets. To create the traps, he digs holes in the upland shrublands and places cups inside of the holes. At night, beetles and other insects fall into the cups and can't scramble out. To sample arthropods above ground, the team walks along a transect, sweeping the shrubs and grasses with heavy canvas nets. Next comes the laborious process of counting, sorting and identifying the catch. When it comes to determining genus and species, Goosey turns to an excellent identification specialist, Marni Rolfton, research associate at MSU.

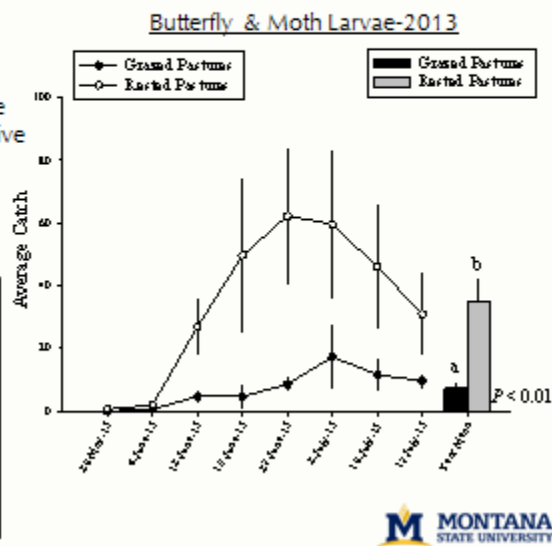
With data in hand, Goosey compares his findings with the needs of sage grouse chicks. The first six weeks are critical, a time when mortality rates are highest and the chicks are too young to make a journey to wetlands, where even more insect protein can be found. For the first 21 to 28 days, the chicks eat arthropods almost exclusively. Butterfly and moth larvae are particularly important.

So far, he's seeing a notable trend. Taller grasses and sagebrush, as well as less bare ground correlate with higher numbers of beetles, moth and butterfly larvae and other arthropods. Goosey points out in his two-year report that grazing systems that decrease the percentage of bare ground also increase the carrying capacity (Animal Unit Months) for livestock. In other words, rested pastures with plentiful bugs are a good deal for cattle and sage grouse alike. As the study progresses, he hopes to have more data to lead to conclusions about insect diversity on the rested versus actively grazed pastures.

Butterfly & Moth Larvae-2013

Contact: Hayes Goosey, Dept. Animal and Range Sciences
(406) 994-2012, hgoosey@montana.edu

- Greater larvae in rested pastures
- Gregg and Crawford 2009
 - Increased availability of these larvae should have a positive effect on chick and brood survival



To continue this important research for sage grouse across their range, Goosey will receive SGI science funding support for the next two seasons. Until now, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has played a pivotal funding role.

“We’re thrilled that SGI is now a partner and helping double the length of a study so tied to the crucial part of the sage grouse life cycle, early chick survival,” said Dave Naugle, NRCS SGI Science Advisor.

Science to Solution Series Launched: Helps to Guide Conservation on the Ground

Science is the underpinning of SGI and sets efforts apart for the emphasis on accountability and adaptability for best results. Communicating practical science for the public helps a broad sector appreciate the connection of science, and provides managers and landowners with user-friendly guidelines. Science and Communications have teamed up to produce a series of professionally designed four-page PDFs that feature published science with SGI funding. The idea of the series is to assure that science gets off the shelf and into the hands of managers, biologists, landowners, and partners. Contracted science writer, Christine Paige, has a line-up of six articles for the series in 2014, with design work by Maja Smith.

The first two are now up on the SGI website (available under [Science & Policy](#) and [Partner Resources](#)) and were broadly distributed with accompanying press releases; click the links below to read the full articles:

[Science to Solutions – Conifer Removal Restores Sage Grouse Habitat](#)

[Science to Solutions – Marking High-Risk Fences Saves Sage Grouse](#)

New SGI-funded Science Publication: [Assessment of sagebrush cover using remote sensing at multiple spatial and temporal scales](#)

Managers of sage grouse habitat across the range will benefit from a solid set of techniques for mapping rangeland resources as a basis for detecting change and documenting outcomes. The work of Eric Sant, Gregg Simonds, Doug Ramsey, and Randy Larsen is available online as a peer-reviewed science publication (official release date is August 2014 in the *Ecological Indicators* journal, 43:297–305).

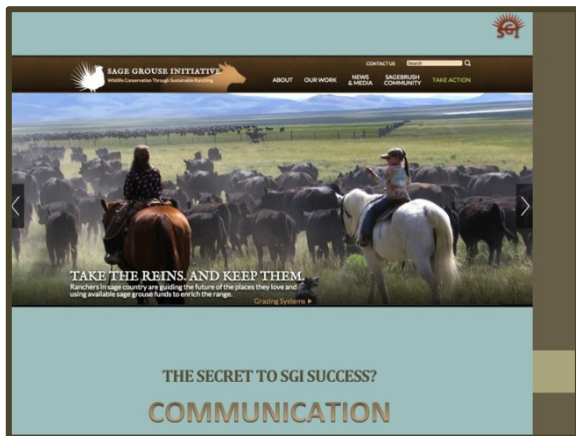
SGI, working with Charles Rewa, NRCS's Conservation Effects Assessment Project, funded this cornerstone research as one of the first SGI science contracts.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

Across the west, thousands of ranchers and partners are making a difference on the ground for the future of sage grouse. They're teaming up through SGI to proactively conserve and restore habitat on private lands, and working across boundaries for large landscape conservation. Telling the story of what's happening in remote parts of the west, far from the spotlight, is a key part of communicating SGI. The next step is to ensure that the story is heard and reaching target audiences via print, social media, radio, TV and more.

New Series: Rancher Success Stories

We've initiated a new, specific series that will spotlight a rancher, along with partners, in each of the 11 western states in the sage grouse range. Every story will be widely broadcast and offered to magazines, newsletters, and partner publications. We work closely with NRCS Public Affairs Specialists and utilize the marketing services of Vocus to promote the pieces. At the year's end, the rancher success stories will be compiled into one publication and featured prominently together on the SGI website.



Deborah Richie, SGI Communications Director, is writing two of the 11 stories; Deborah will be coordinating, reviewing, editing and publicizing the remaining nine, contracted to professional writer, Steve Stuebner. A full calendar with approved rancher success stories and contacts in every state is now in place. Stuebner completed the first story on Rob Brooks, a rancher in North Dakota, at the end of the quarter: [North Dakota Sage Grouse Initiative Partnership: Planting Wyoming Big Sage on Brooks Ranch Enhances Sage Grouse Habitat.](#)

Presentations: SGI Communications as Secret to Success

Deborah presented to both SGI state leads (at a meeting in January), as well as to new SGI SWAT staff (during a training in

March) on an overview of the success, strategy, purpose, and useful tools of SGI Communications.

Social Media Highlights

SGI taps into social media via the website, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and E-News. We are now using Vocus (marketing service) to increase reach in social media and print, as well as to analyze and monitor results.

- **Twitter:** [@SageGrouseInit](#) is proving a quick and effective way to share relevant news quickly; to “retweet” our partners’ news; to reach media and partners; and, to direct people to news on our website and Facebook. Since launching at the end of December, we have more than 400 tweets and 600 followers.
- **Facebook:** With more than 1,800 followers and few supplemental boosts for ads, the site remains an important component of the SGI Communications strategy, serving best to highlight the wonder and beauty of the seasons of sage grouse, the wildlife, and the people. Engaging people with “identify this,” “where is this lek?” or other interactive strategies generate the highest interest. When we draw in a partner who shares on another website, such as Pheasants Forever, the visits to our site rise dramatically.
- **Website:** We continue to see the website as the centerpiece of communications, the “go-to” resource for news, science, announcements, and more. The site has proven to be user-friendly and receives high compliments for its aesthetics. The site is maintained by Partners Creative.

The usefulness of the website for posting trainings and webinars continues to grow on the [SGI YouTube Channel](#).

- **Google Ad Grant:** SGI website provider, Partners Creative (PC), is managing our Google Ad Grant, which provides free ads for searches. This involves constantly refining keywords and strategies. Since PC took over the grant in early March, the clicks on the SGI website have shown an exponential increase, from a handful a day to more than 300 a day.
- **Bi-monthly SGI E-News:** Sending brief news summaries straight to inboxes is another way to draw attention to recent news, science, events, and partnerships. Each E-News has three or four short stories and links. This service (also through Partners Creative) gives us live views of clicks, when people are opening, what links, etc. The E-News list has 2,240 recipients and tends to be opened by about 30 percent of that list. Many key policymakers pay attention and open SGI E-News. The list reflects an important group of SGI influencers.

Sharing Partner News – A Closer Look at SGI Communication Features Posted on the Website

Giving partners credit and sharing their efforts is key to a cooperative, collaborative approach. Below are a few examples of partner news related to sage grouse that were shared during the quarter:

[Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust Completes Conservation Easement Near Laramie That Conserves Sage Grouse and Other Fragile Wildlife](#) (January 23, 2014)

[Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory To Hold Sagebrush Bird Workshops](#) (January 29, 2014)

[Bi-State Sage Grouse News: Three Federal Agencies, Public Come Together on Fence Marker Project to Prevent Sage Grouse Mortalities](#) (Bureau of Land Management/Forest Service/NRCS; February 11, 2014)

Press Releases & Other Original Stories from SGI Communications

Beyond promoting/elevating partners and sharing stories, it's important to produce original content to be widely distributed, as well as to help SGI appear in news stories, opinion pieces and more.

Here are two examples:

[2014 Farm Bill Signed Into Law: Sodsaver Provision a Win for Sage Grouse & Ranching](#)
The release included an interview with eastern Montana rancher, Bill Milton.

Below are a few websites where the press release gained traction:

[Appalachian Mountains Joint Venture](#)

[Intermountain West Joint Venture](#)

[Oregon Association of Conservation Districts](#)

[Pheasants Forever's Pheasant Blog](#)

[The Denver Post](#)

[Wildlife Management Institute](#)



Photo by Conservation Media

PARTNER DEVELOPMENT

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

In cooperation with Pheasants Forever, Inc. (PF), a key partner of the SGI, the IWJV has now executed 57 field capacity, science, communications, and management agreements. Together, the IWJV and PF closely manage these agreements to ensure successful implementation and achievement of SGI objectives. These projects encumber a total of \$5,585,880.63 in SWAT funds. During this quarter, our focus has been on modifying field capacity agreements in order to keep our “SWATers” on the ground through 2015. The field capacity positions are the backbone of SGI SWAT. The numbers don’t lie. These folks are making an impact and what they have accomplished in short time is nothing short of amazing. None of these accomplishments would be possible without NRCS, the hiring entities and funding partners across the West.

The IWJV devotes significant staff time and resources to maintaining existing partnerships, as well as to the development of new partnerships. Frequent communications with the NRCS SGI National Coordinator, NRCS SGI Science Advisor, and SGI Technical Lead ensures that the implementation of SGI is precisely aligned with NRCS objective. This has allowed for a solid foundation of regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. We held our eighth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in December 2013, involving NRCS, SGI, IWJV, and PF staff. This group will hold a coordination conference call in the next quarter to follow up on progress and new developments since the December 2013 meeting. These coordination meetings have proven valuable for maintaining partnerships, identifying needs and opportunities, and setting a long-term direction for the SGI SWAT.

In our last report, we noted that we had received a contribution to SGI of \$20,000 from Rocky Mountain Power. Non-federal funds such as these are important in implementing all aspects of SGI SWAT and are a key source of match to federal funding sources. This quarter, we are happy to report that we have received another non-federal donation in the amount of \$100,000. This donation comes from ConocoPhillips Company (COP), a long-time partner of IWJV and supporter of SGI. Since 2011, COP has contributed a total of \$400,000, specifically to SGI. SGI SWAT is fortunate to have such a committed partner.

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 six Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers this quarter and one new Indian Tribal member.
- 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 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 3,240.5 Technical Assistance days. This level of technical assistance provision is indicative of how the SWAT will ratchet up SGI implementation over the next few years.
- d) *Number of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) being employed through the SWAT agreement.* Thirty-four (34) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Technical Lead FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Director FTE, 1.0 Communications Support FTE, 3.0 IWJV FTEs, and 4.0 Science Support FTEs) were employed during the reporting period.
- e) *Acres of project area addressed in NRCS program contracts and/or extents of conservation activities implemented in the project area.* The SGI SWAT, to date, resulted in the following accomplishments: conservation planning for 1,065,762 acres of grazing systems; 177,208 acres of conifer removal; 638,534 feet (120 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,492 acres of wetland restoration; 9,127 acres of rangeland seeding; and, 23,413 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$12,735 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 \$40,819,693!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$4.96 million in partner funding toward all aspects of the SWAT through the first three years and project an additional \$2.03 million in partner funding leveraged in Years 4 and 5. We are in the process of securing commitments from partners for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

Appendix A.

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

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

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

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

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

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