



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

August 1, 2014

Joyce Swartzendruber, State Conservationist
Tim Griffiths, Sage-Grouse Initiative National Coordinator
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
10 East Babcock Street
Federal Building, Room 443
Bozeman, MT 59715

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 April – June 2014. The report also contains the following appendices: Objectives and Evolution of the SGI SWAT; and, SGI SWAT Workshop Agenda.

Please give me a call at (406) 549-0287 if you have any questions. We look forward to reporting on future SGI SWAT successes!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark 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: April 1 – June 30, 2014

Intermountain West Joint Venture
August 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 April – June 2014.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field team continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state U.S. Department of Agriculture (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:

- **1,273,123 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.
- **185,581 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.
- **132 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

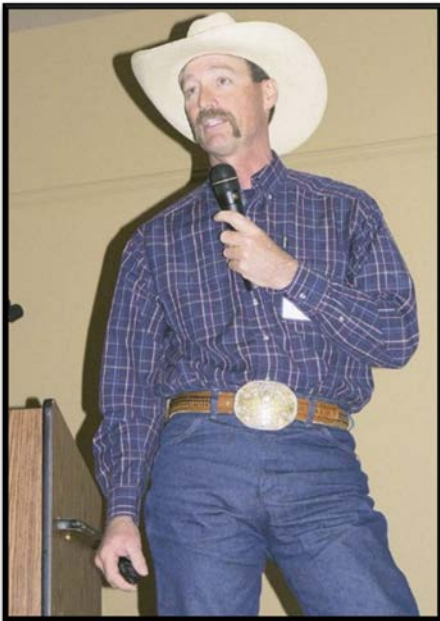
Leveraging Farm Bill funds for Wildlife—More boots on the ground means more Farm Bill conservation funding put to work for wildlife. *Every \$1 partners invest results in \$69 put into habitat improvement!*

Over 100 Gather for 2014 SGI SWAT Workshop in Twin Falls, Idaho

In early May, the SGI SWAT team descended upon the Snake River Plain in Twin Falls, Idaho, for its annual workshop. This event connects SWAT staff with NRCS and partners from around the West to showcase collaborative efforts to reduce threats to sage grouse and foster the exchange of ideas across the range. This year's workshop explored solutions to reducing impacts of wildfire and invasive species



Workshop participants hear from BLM resource experts on lessons learned in fire rehabilitation and other efforts to reduce fire and invasive species impacts. Photo by Ken Miracle



Owyhee County Rancher, Chris Black, discusses SGI conservation practices being implemented on his ranch and by other landowners in his community. Photo by Carol Dumas

in the sagebrush ecosystem, as well as, highlighted several successful partnerships underway in Idaho (see Appendix B: SGI SWAT Workshop Agenda). Over 100 participants from federal, state, local government, non-governmental organizations, ranchers, and industry were in attendance – including a few Canadians!

Attendees learned about several innovative landscape-scale efforts to benefit grouse and sustainable ranching. Scott Scroggie, SGI SWAT range conservationist, highlighted a partnership between NRCS, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Pheasants Forever, and others to treat over 30,000 acres of juniper encroachment across private and public lands in the Jim Sage Mountains south of Burley. Chris Black, rancher and chairman of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, described how landowners and partners in the Owyhee desert of southwest Idaho have been actively working with SGI to address the juniper threat on private lands. Mike McGee, BLM Wildlife Biologist, highlighted National Environmental Policy Act planning underway for targeted treatments across a half million acres of surrounding public lands. Partners from the Pioneer Alliance showcased their incredible efforts to secure permanent protections for sage grouse across a large working landscape in the Pioneer Mountains.

A key objective this year was examining what more can be done to minimize impacts of large-scale wildfires and invasive species. To help frame the issue, Jeanne Chambers, U.S. Forest Service Research Ecologist, presented cutting edge information emerging on applying “resilience and resistance” concepts to manage fire and invasive risks. An all-day field tour then took participants on a journey through the BLM Jarbidge Field Office, where partners have been on the forefront of dealing with fire and invasive impacts for many years. Julie Hilty, BLM Fire Ecologist, discussed the evolution of fire rehabilitation endeavors and proactive efforts being planned to reduce the fire cycle and protect recovery habitat. Participants learned how to assess resilience and resistance of sites in the field to help make more informed management decisions. The tour concluded on Browns Bench with a summary of lessons learned and thoughts on next steps.

The IWJV organized and sponsored the event, as part of its commitment to maintaining a highly-trained SWAT workforce. Select NRCS staff and partners also participated to foster more coordinated SGI delivery. Past SWAT workshops have been held in Salt Lake City, Utah; Pinedale, Wyoming; and Lakeview, Oregon, exposing staff to different parts of the sage grouse range. Our greatest challenge to date has been simply accommodating all the interest among partners in attending the workshops – undoubtedly a good problem to have! Discussions are underway for how to fully accommodate demand in future workshops.

Check out two stories about the workshop in the *Capital Press*: [Rancher Partners With Sage Grouse Initiative](#); [Partnerships Drive Sage Grouse Initiative](#).



Successful rehabilitation efforts seven years post-fire on the Murphy Complex. BLM and Idaho Department of Fish and Game now work closely together to design native plant mixes and transplant sagebrush shrubs to accelerate grouse habitat recovery. Photo by Ken Miracle

USDA Under Secretary Gets Firsthand Look at SGI & SWAT in Wyoming

Submitted by Blaise Allen, SGI SWAT, Meeteetse, Wyoming

USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Robert Bonnie, was in Cody, Wyoming, last month for a meeting with the Wildlife and Hunting Heritage Conservation Council. He found time to view some NRCS SGI projects at the Hoodoo Ranch and Hat 2 Ranch near Meeteetse, Wyoming. The Hoodoo Ranch is comprised of over 90,000 acres of private land and encompasses almost 250,000 acres of both deeded and leased federal land. The Hoodoo Ranch has been working with their local NRCS office under Conservation Technical Assistance for the past several years to complete two alternative grazing plans, as well as a complete structural inventory of the entire ranch. The Hoodoo Ranch sits amongst some of the best sage grouse habitat in all of Wyoming. Their efforts to provide conservation on the ground was very apparent as everyone on the tour observed productive rangelands with healthy wildlife and livestock as far as the eye could see.

After visiting the Hoodoo Ranch, the tour headed further south to the Hat 2 Ranch just outside of Meeteetse, Wyoming. Kasey and Ondi Shepperson, owners of Hat 2 Ranch, explained the value of SGI and their goal of maintaining a sustainable ranch while providing world-class wildlife conservation. Their goal has been achieved through numerous conservation practices, including: debris removal near active lek sites; herbaceous weed control and their efforts to reduce and eliminate cheatgrass; road closure and treatments in important nesting and brood rearing habitat; fence marking and placement of escape ramps; and, prescribed grazing. The Shepperson's have also enrolled their ranch into a permanent conservation easement held by the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust. Their proactive approach ensures that we are conserving wildlife habitat and managing ranchlands in ways that also create more nutritious forage for livestock. The Shepperson's, along with many other ranchers throughout 11 different states, are passing on our western heritage of vast skies, unbroken sagebrush-steppe, and room for wildlife and people to roam.



Along for the tour was (from left): Casey Sheley, NRCS Wyoming State Resource Conservationist; Tim Griffiths, NRCS SGI Coordinator; Astrid Martinez, NRCS Wyoming State Conservationist; Dr. Dave Naugle, NRCS SGI Science Advisor; Pam Dewell, Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust Executive Director; Kasey Shepperson, landowner; Steve Jones, Meeteetse Conservation District Board of Supervisors; Robert Bonnie, USDA Under Secretary; Blaise Allen, SGI Range Conservationist; Rory Karhu, NRCS District Conservationist. Photo courtesy of NRCS Wyoming



USDA Under Secretary, Robert Bonnie, (left) visits with Blaise Allen and Tim Griffiths. Photo courtesy of NRCS Wyoming

Blaise's position is made possible with the support of the Meeteetse Conservation District, FWS, NRCS, and the IWJV.

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 to minimize disruption to conservation delivery. Here are changes that occurred this quarter:

- Amanda (Mandy) O'Donnell began with Pheasants Forever in Elko, Nevada, (position previously located in Ely, Nevada). Mandy earned a degree in rangeland ecology and watershed management from the University of Wyoming, with a minor in soil science and restoration and reclamation ecology. She is a native of northeastern Nevada and has been involved in the ranching, mining, and natural resource industries of the area most of her life. She says, "it is great to be back in Nevada and working to conserve the area I call home."



*Mandy O'Donnell,
SGI SWAT,
Elko, Nevada*

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

One driver behind SGI's success is science – particularly science that's practical, applied to on-the-ground solutions, and that adapts as findings change.

SGI is involved in more than a dozen science projects, including a major genetics study with implications for connectivity of populations and more.

Birds of a Feather – By Steven T. Knick and Carmen Gondhalekar

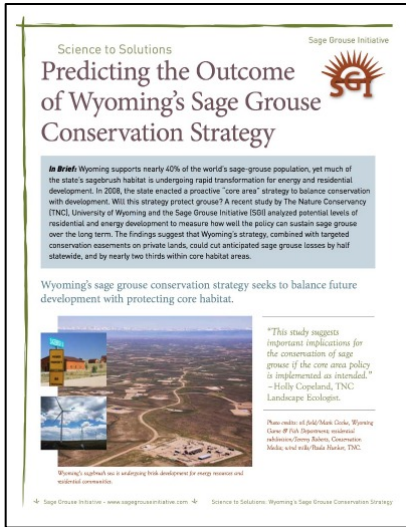
*Information contained in feathers is helping to understand sage-grouse populations
Feather Collecting on a Grand Scale*

Dawn breaks over an expansive Nevada sagebrush landscape, disturbed only by the rumbling of a truck moving along U.S. Route 50. It is late April and prime time for sage grouse mating. The biologist driving the truck is headed to a communal breeding ground for sage grouse known as a lek. After taking several side roads, she parks and walks a short distance to a relatively flat, nondescript opening in the sagebrush landscape. The day's round of mating is over, the shuffles and scuffles have ended, and the birds have dispersed for the day. Feathers lost during the dust-ups between males are the main object of the biologist's visit. She collects 20



*Greater sage grouse gather in groups at a lek to court and mate with females.
Photo by Tatiana Gettelman*

feathers, packaging each in a labeled envelope and placing the stack in her pack before heading to the next lek. She is part of a team collecting feathers from more than 7,000 leks spread across 11 Western States and two Canadian provinces. The feathers contain genetic information, which when extracted and analyzed, will reveal information about movement patterns and population structure useful for management of greater sage grouse throughout their North American range. The biologist and this project are part of a much larger integrated effort helping to solve one of the most difficult ecological challenges in North America. *The complete story can be found [here](#).*



Science to Solution Series: Third Article Released

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 third article is now up on the SGI website (available under [Science & Policy](#) and [Resources](#)) and was broadly distributed with an accompanying press release; click the link below to read the full article:

[Science to Solutions – Predicting the Outcome of Wyoming’s Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy](#)

Presentation

Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI Science Advisor, presented on Wind Energy and Wildlife at the Outdoor Writers Association of America Conference in McAllen, Texas in May.

Decision Support Tools, Mapping Products & Technical Field Guides

The SGI website now has a technical section delivering science and training: *Decision Support Tools/Mapping/Technical Field Guides*. It is housed under the [Science & Policy](#) section and includes the following important information:

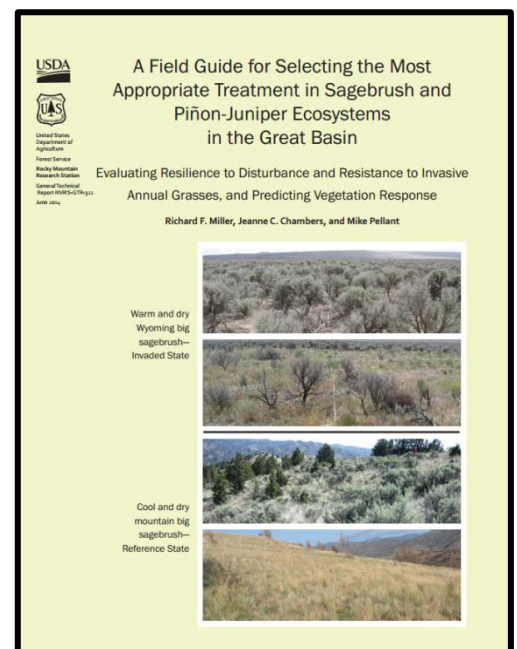
NEW! Potential Sage Grouse Summer Habitat Maps and Decision Support Tool: [California](#), [Oregon](#), [NW Nevada](#), [Bi-State DPS](#) (*other states to be posted as completed*). [CLICK HERE FOR MAP OF PRODUCT AVAILABILITY](#).

High-resolution Conifer Canopy Cover Mapping across Sage Grouse Habitat: [Utah](#) (*other states to be posted as completed*). [CLICK HERE FOR MAP](#).

Crop Suitability Model to assess Tillage Risks, [Montana](#), [North Dakota](#), [South Dakota](#), [Wyoming](#), [Colorado](#), [Kansas](#), [Iowa](#), [Minnesota](#), [Nebraska](#)

NEW! [A Field Guide for Selecting the Most Appropriate Treatment in Sagebrush and Piñon-Juniper Ecosystems in the Great Basin](#), Miller et al. 2014

[Piñon and Juniper Field Guide: Asking the Right Questions to Select Appropriate Management Actions](#), Tausch et al. 2009



COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

Communications outreach for SGI continues to expand and reach new audiences, as we become an increasingly familiar and trusted source for media and policymakers. The SGI website has become a real “go to” for sage grouse information. The non-profit Google Ads grant drives traffic to our website in excellent numbers, and our ads show up on Google searches regularly. The use of Twitter has helped us with visibility and “retweets” by prominent policymakers shows we are a respected source as well. SGI SWAT staff continue to put forward exemplary on-the-ground stories and have worked well to promote their programs in venues from *Field & Stream Magazine* “Hero for a Day” videos to documenting their own stories with photos and writing, as well as serving as resources for media.

On June 20, the USDA announced a landmark commitment to improve habitat for the bi-state population of sage grouse along the Nevada/California border. This is one of the most important milestones to date for SGI, with the USDA committing significant resources via SGI to carry out the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan. The USDA news release and SGI contributions to spreading this news resulted in impressive coverage in major news outlets nationally.

SGI also traveled to McAllen, Texas, for a presence at the Outdoor Writers Association of America Conference in late May, which resulted in many reporter contacts and included a panel presentation by Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI Science Advisor.



New SGI Brochure

We produced a new color brochure, providing a simple handout for meetings, events, etc.; it summarizes SGI and includes the same look as the SGI 2013 Tracking Success report.

The Vocus marketing service has proved an outlet for building media lists, sending short e-blasts directly to reporters, and putting out PRWeb announcements for larger news.

Finally, this quarter saw the unveiling of the latest (and best) compilation of SGI achievements on the ground, which can be found on the 2014 SGI Fact Sheet, on an

infographic on the bottom right of the SGI website home page, and in the new SGI brochure. From 2010 to 2013, SGI enrolled over 950 ranches for a total of 3.8 million acres in SGI programs that benefit sage grouse.

The Western Governors' Association released those figures in its own press release in late April, which resulted in numerous articles in national media.

Rancher Success Stories

SGI is in the process of writing and distributing rancher success stories for each of the 11 states. More than 950 ranchers are enrolled in SGI programs, yet facts and statistics can't deliver the real stories of those individuals and what they do to make a difference. We are tying the facts to real life stories in our series featuring a rancher from each of the 11 western states. All are involved with SGI, many with the SGI SWAT staff. The plan is to compile all the stories in a publication and to feature them together prominently on the website. We also aim to see every story reach a larger audience via other publications. For this quarter, we have published the following three stories:

April – North Dakota Sage Grouse Initiative Partnership: Planting Wyoming Big Sage on the Brooks Ranch Enhances Sage Grouse Habitat

June – Oregon Rancher Gary Bedortha Removes Juniper Trees to Create a Safe Haven for Sage Grouse

June – Washington: Big-scale Conservation Starts at Rancher Allen Miller’s Kitchen Table

We are pleased to report that *Working Ranch* magazine published the Washington article as a big feature with the SGI logo prominently displayed. That magazine arrives in thousands of ranchers’ mailboxes across the West and on policymaker desks as well.



Washington rancher, Allen Miller
Photo by Deborah Richie

Here is an example of how we are multiplying distribution and reach of each story to the fullest extent possible: the aforementioned North Dakota story from the SGI website then appeared on the NRCS North Dakota website and was sent out via Facebook, Twitter, Vocus and SGI E-News. This led to a response from Mr. Craig Bihrl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department Communications Supervisor, who expressed interest in running the story in North Dakota Outdoors. The press on the story prompted an article in the *Bismarck Tribune*: Ranchers, agencies knuckle down to work of helping sage grouse. This was in turn picked up by The Associated Press and printed in The Washington Times.

News Story Highlights from the SGI Website

As part of the SGI Communications Strategy, we hold up our partners as much as possible and emphasize the importance of both policy and implementation for success.

For example, we promoted the signing of the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances with FWS in Oregon’s Harney County; SGI played a large role in this success, as well.

When *Field & Stream Magazine* came to Montana to film a “Hero for a Day” project in May, the SGI partnership was in full display to assist the efforts of a willing rancher and numerous volunteers (including the Montana Conservation Corps and the Little Bighorn Future Farmers of America of the Crow Tribe). The filming also included COR Enterprises and Special K Ranch, which both contribute to sage grouse conservation and assist adults with disabilities.

The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Featured Friend" for the Sage Grouse Initiative. The featured partner is the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF). The page includes a header with the SGI logo, a sub-header "Mule Deer Foundation", and a main heading "MDF Supports SGI Partnership Positions in Utah". Below this is a paragraph starting with "When Natasha Greber and Lash Lewis head out into the field to assist Utah ranchers with sage grouse conservation, they represent the Mule Deer Foundation as the primary partner supporting their positions." There are two small images: one of a person in a field and another of a group of people. A "Meet the Mule Deer Foundation" section follows, with an "About" paragraph describing the foundation's mission. A "Role with Sage Grouse Initiative" section mentions that the foundation is a strong partner of SGI. At the bottom, there is a "Contact" section with Mike Moretti's name and email address, and a "Featured Friend: Mule Deer Foundation" label.

We were also pleased to see the excellent coverage by Capital Press (a key agricultural newspaper for the West) of the SGI SWAT Workshop in Twin Falls, Idaho, in May. The articles were a result of upfront invitations and planning with *Capital Press* reporter, Carol Ryan Dumas. Ms. Dumas has become educated on SGI and continues to mention it and initiate her own stories, showing the great value of investing time with individual reporters who will carry out stories to bring the on-the-ground successes to the world.

Featured Friend Highlights Partnerships

Each month, the SGI website home page includes a focus on a SGI partner organization, entitled *Featured Friend*. The three for this quarter included: April – Mule Deer Foundation; May – Montana Association of Conservation Districts; June – Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

SGI E-News

The Bi-Monthly SGI E-News delivers several stories within a professional template into the e-mail inboxes of subscribers. The subscriber list is now more than 3,000. Through an analytics program, we are able to view the number of openings, links, popular subjects, and more. E-News from the quarter include:

[April 9, 2014](#)

[April 22, 2014](#)

[May 8, 2014](#)

[May 20, 2014](#)

[June 11, 2014](#)

[June 16, 2014](#)

Social Media: Facebook & Twitter

Facebook continues to be a great way to visually communicate SGI and the wonders of sage grouse, ranchers, and the habitat, as well as partner news. The [Facebook page](#) at the end of the quarter was close to 2,000 "Likes," and the [Twitter page](#) had more than 750 Followers. "Tweets" are a great way to share news, make new contacts, involve new partners, and reach the media.

For those who do not subscribe to social media, the SGI website has a [Social Media page](#) (under [News & Resources](#)) that pulls in all Twitter and Facebook posts.



*From SGI E-News, June 11, 2014:
Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI Science
Advisor, at OWAA Conference
Photo by Deborah Richie*



*Mike Brown, SGI SWAT
Photo by Deborah Richie*

We strive to hold up the efforts of the SGI SWAT staff on Facebook; for example, an April post on the [Eastern Washington Sage Grouse Potential Habitat Inventory](#) included a highlight on [Mike Brown](#), SGI SWAT staff in Ephrata, Washington.

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 (PF), a key partner of the SGI, the IWJV has now executed 59 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 \$5,782,711.67 in SWAT funds. This quarter, we continued to modify field capacity agreements in order to keep the SWAT on the ground through 2015. We also began developing new agreements that will broaden our understanding of conservation effects, extend the reach of communications, and increase the number of boots on-the-ground under the SGI SWAT banner. Work under these new agreements is expected to begin next quarter.

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 Coordinator, NRCS SGI Science Advisor, and SGI Technical Lead ensures that the implementation of the SGI is precisely aligned with NRCS objectives and has built a solid foundation for regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. We held our ninth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting via conference call in April 2014, involving NRCS, SGI, IWJV, and PF staff. The SGI SWAT Coordination Team will meet again July 31-August 1, 2014, to review progress, discuss new issues, and strategize for the future. The focus of this meeting is

partnership contributions to SGI durability; our discussions will revolve around the potential commitment of long-term partner contributions to the SGI Core Team and SGI SWAT.

In addition, the IWJV continues to secure funding and explore future additional partner contributions to SGI. Specifically, we submitted a proposal for \$100,000 to ConocoPhillips Company to support the SGI SWAT in 2015, provided regular updates to key funding partners, and worked with key SGI partner organizations to develop project proposals for the current round of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Spirit of Conservation grants program. Lastly, Dave Smith, IWJV Coordinator, met individually with FWS Director Dan Ashe as part of a field tour in Montana, and provided a thorough overview of the SGI SWAT.

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 nine Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers this quarter.
- b) *Assistance provided to program participants to help meet local, state, and/or federal regulatory requirements.* The intent of SGI is to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat to negate the need for additional regulations. Participating producers are highly committed to sage grouse conservation, and the SGI provides an excellent vehicle for addressing threats to sage grouse populations at very large scales.
- c) *Numbers of NRCS program participants assisted and/or cooperating in the project effort.* The 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 3,954.5 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 1,273,123 acres of grazing systems; 185,581 acres of conifer removal; 695,207 feet (132 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 9,563 acres of rangeland seeding; and, 24,685 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$1,801,516 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 \$42,621,209!***
- 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.



SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE
Strategic Watershed Action Team Workshop



May 6-8, 2014 ~ Twin Falls, ID

Monday, May 5 ~ Travel to Twin Falls

5:30 – 7:00 p.m. Informal Welcome Reception (Hilton Garden Inn Twin Falls)

Tuesday, May 6 ~ Canyon Crest Event Center (330 Canyon Crest Dr)

8:30 a.m. Introductions

8:45 a.m. NRCS welcome to Idaho (*Jeff Burwell, NRCS, Idaho State Conservationist*)

9:00 a.m. Sage Grouse Initiative: Where we've been and where we're going (*Tim Griffiths, NRCS, National SGI Coordinator*)

10:00 a.m. The 2014 Farm Bill: Renewing the Commitment to Sage Grouse Conservation (*Kris Berg, NRCS, Idaho Asst. Conservationist for Programs*)

10:30 a.m. Break (refreshments provided)

Conifer Encroachment

10:45 a.m. Burley Landscape Project: A Model Partnership for Getting the Job Done (*Scott Scroggie, Pheasants Forever, Range/Wildlife Conservationist*)

11:00 a.m. Juniper Removal across Boundaries in Owyhee County (*Chris Black, Rancher & Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission-Chairman; Jason Pyron, USFWS-Idaho, Sage Grouse Lead*)

11:30 a.m. Taking it to the Next Level: The Bruneau-Owyhee Sage Grouse Habitat Project (*Mike McGee, BLM-Boise District, Wildlife Biologist*)

11:45 a.m. Discussion

12:00 p.m. Lunch (provided at Canyon Crest)

Easements

1:00 p.m. Conserving Working Landscapes: The Pioneers Alliance Story (*Bas Hargrove, The Nature Conservancy, Senior Policy Representative; Keri York, Senior Conservation Coordinator, Wood River Land Trust; Monte McConnell, Rancher-Invited*)

1:45 p.m. Discussion

Fire and Invasives

2:00 p.m. Using Resilience and Resistance Concepts to Manage Sage Grouse Habitat in the Face of Fire and Invasive Risks (*Dr. Jeanne Chambers, USFS-Rocky Mountain Research Station, Research Ecologist; Jeremy Maestas, NRCS, National SGI Technical Lead*)

3:00 p.m. Strategically Placed Fuel Breaks to Maintain and Restore Sage Grouse Habitat (*Lance Okeson, BLM-Boise District, Supervisory Fire Management Specialist*)

3:15 p.m. Discussion

3:30 p.m. Break (refreshments provided)

Big Picture Wrap Up

3:45 p.m. Tying it all Together to Conserve Sage Grouse Long Term: Rangewide Connectivity Study (Dr. Steve Knick, USGS-Boise, Supervisory Research Ecologist; Dr. Dave Naugle, NRCS National SGI Science Advisor/The University of Montana, Professor)

4:15 p.m. Proactive Partnerships Key to Reducing Fire, Invasive, and Conifer Threats (Tim Murphy, BLM National Interagency Fire Center, Assistant Director for Fire and Aviation & Acting Director for Idaho BLM)

4:30 p.m. Idaho State's Perspective on Sage-Grouse Conservation and the SGI Partnership (Dustin Miller, Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation, Administrator)

4:45 p.m. Discussion

6:00 p.m. Dinner ~ Provided at Canyon Crest Event Center

Wednesday, May 7 ~ Field Tour: Kinyon Road/Murphy Complex Fires

7:45 a.m. Meet in front of Hilton Garden Inn Twin Falls (1741 Harrison St N)

8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Field Tour of Fire and Invasive Impacts and Rehabilitation in the BLM Jarbidge Field Office (Buses depart Hilton at 8:00 a.m. Box lunches provided. Come prepared for sun, snow or rain!)

This tour will highlight BLM's efforts to reduce impacts of altered fire regimes and annual grass invasion and discuss: challenges with wildfire-cheatgrass cycle, greenstrips/fuel breaks, seeding success/failure, pre- and post-fire grazing management, how to assess resilience & resistance, etc. We'll close with a summary discussion on fire/invasives tour and strategies for moving forward.

(Dinner on your own)

Thursday, May 8 ~ Hilton Garden Inn Twin Falls (1741 Harrison St N)

8:00 a.m. Working Lands for Wildlife: ESA Predictability and the Listing Decision (Tim Griffiths & Galon Hall, NRCS, National WLFW Coordinator)

8:30 a.m. Planning Rangeland Seedings – Group Exercises (Derek Tilley, NRCS-Aberdeen Plant Materials Center, Agronomist; Brenden Brazee, NRCS, State Rangeland Management Specialist)

10:30 a.m. **Full workshop concludes**

11:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. **Work Session for SWAT staff and SGI state leads only** (Lunch provided)

- State-by-State presentations – Pecha Kucha style: 6 min, 40 sec each (~2 hrs total)
- Topical Break-Out Sessions - 30 min concurrent sessions on topics of interest (easements, conifers, grazing, others) (~2 hrs)
- Q&A Panel and Group Discussion (1 hr)

6:00 p.m. Dinner: BBQ on Snake River ~ Centennial Waterfront Park

Sage Grouse Initiative Workshop Tour Itinerary

Tackling Fire and Invasive Threats in the Sagebrush Ecosystem

Wednesday, May 7, 2014

8:00 AM – 5:00 PM

Tour Itinerary (box lunches and drinks provided; bring sunscreen, hat, bug spray, appropriate field attire)

7:45 AM Meet in front of Hilton Garden Inn Twin Falls (1741 Harrison St N)

8:00 AM Buses depart promptly

9:15 AM Stop #1: Kinyon Road

Westside of road

- Brief intro to Great Basin fire/invasives threats, Jarbidge FO landscape context, and site history (Hilty/Brown)
 - Show where we are in the world from a grouse standpoint
 - Discuss the challenges now with altered fire regimes and cheatgrass
- Discuss historic approach with ESR introduced seedings (Hilty/Klott)
 - Limited plant material options at the time
 - Mind set of natives won't work, go with what we know
- Brief overview of fuel breaks (Brown)
 - Purposes, expectations, techniques
 - Effectiveness of crested greenstrips; why forage kochia is now preferred
- Rancher perspective on fire impacts and the role of RFPA's (Guerry)

10:00 AM Eastside of road

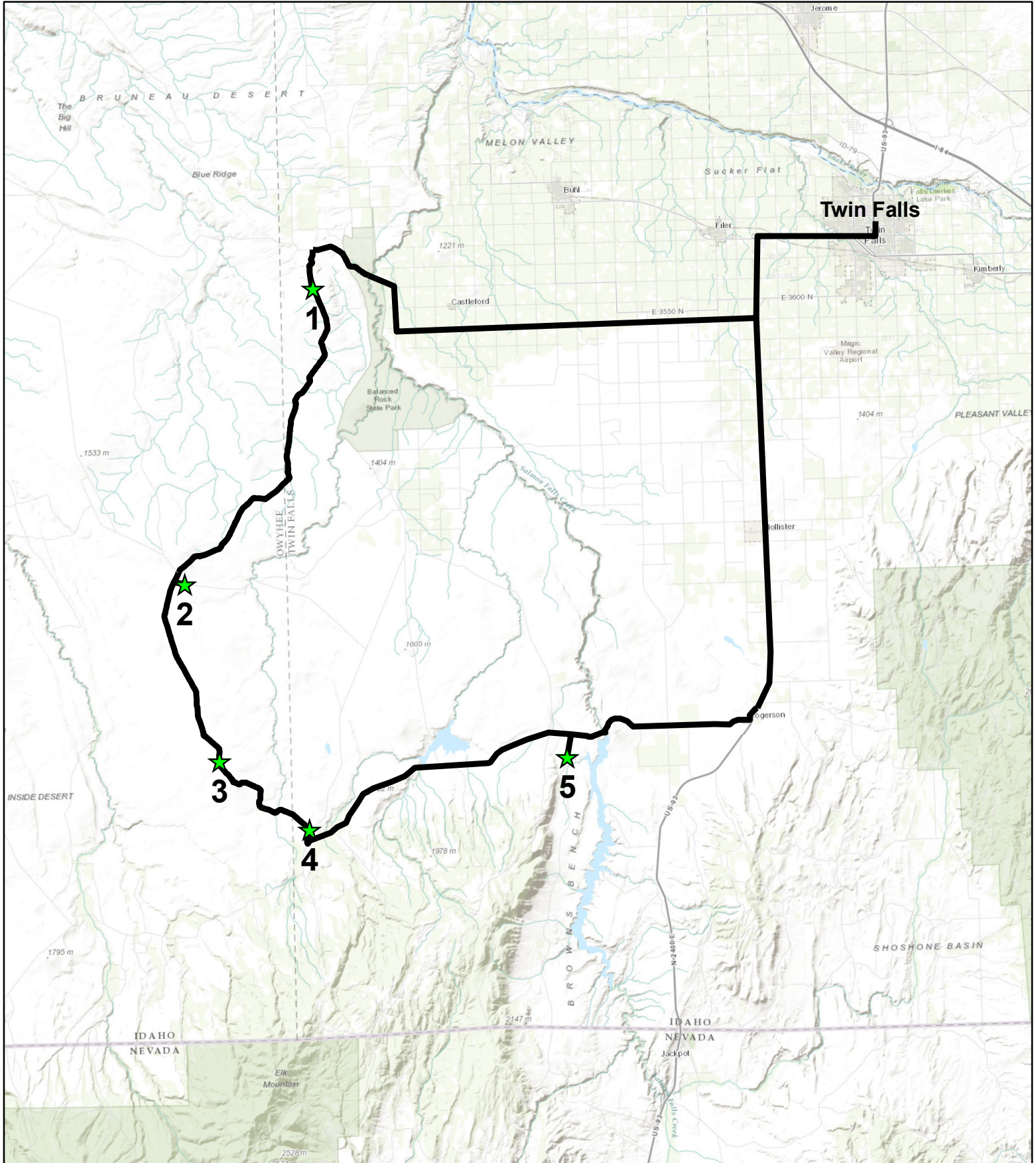
- 2005 Clover Fire ESR w/Snake River wheatgrass (Hilty/Klott)
 - ESR started to evolve; still very limited availability of native-likes for low precip sites at that time
- Effects of seeding vs. doing nothing
- Establishment of sagebrush from aerial seeding
 - Caution about evaluating seeding success on too short a time scale
 - Sagebrush subspecies issue; difficult to ensure the seed we ask for is the seed we get
- Assessing resilience & resistance (Chambers/Maestas)
 - Overview of maps (temp-moisture, fire, SB cover)
 - Walk through a completed score sheet as a group

11:15 AM Grab lunch and eat during ride to next stop

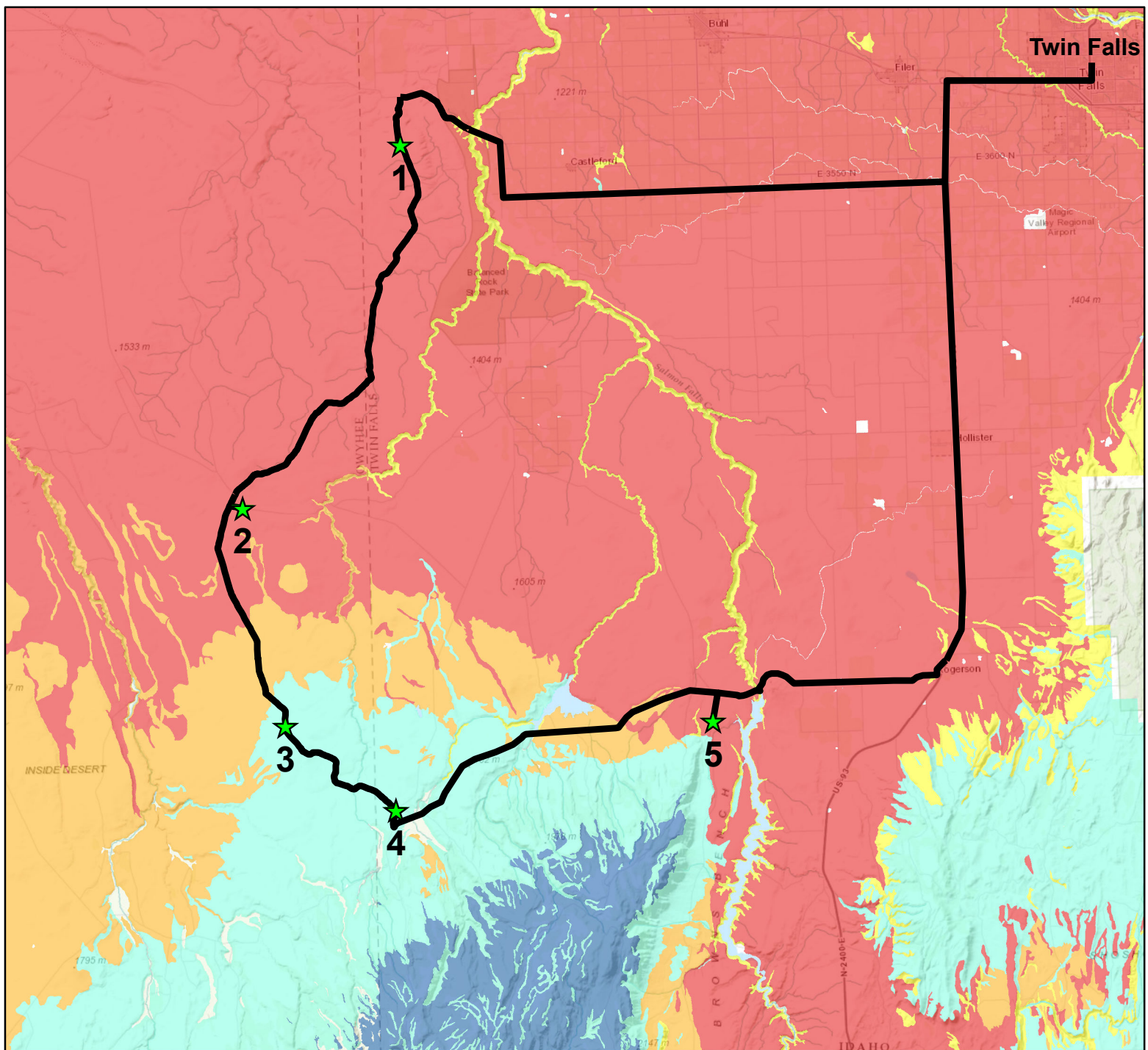
- Coonskin Butte: Stop buses but don't get out. View greenstrip pre- and post-fire.

- 11:45 AM Stop #2: Big Bend Road
- 2007 Murphy Complex Fire ESR w/native mix (Fleming/Crane)
 - Rehab in transitional area
 - Sagebrush plantings
 - Next gen rehab: drill seeding with more diverse native mix (Hilty)
- 12:45 PM Stop #3: Grassy Hills Road
- Landscape view of Jarbidge Field Office
 - Sagebrush landscape cover (Maestas/Chambers)
 - Rehab on a cool and moist site (Klott)
 - Did we need to seed here? What might we do differently now?
 - Seeding at landscape scales – Making it happen (Russell/Uhrig)
- 1:30 PM Stop #4: Grassy Hills/House Creek Road Intersection
- Mountain/Low sagebrush/Idaho fescue reference area
 - Group exercise to assess resilience & resistance (Chambers/Maestas)
 - Teams of 4-5 complete score sheet together
- 3:00 PM Stop #5: Browns Bench
- View intact sagebrush site potentially at risk
 - Brief overview of landscape history (Klott)
 - Summary of tour and strategies for moving forward
- 4:00 PM Depart for Twin Falls

SGI Workshop Tour Route May 7th, 2014



Soil Temperature and Moisture Regimes as indicators of Resilience and Resistance



Resilience & Resistance ↑

Soil Temperature & Moisture Regimes

- Cold and Moist (Cryic-Xeric)
- Cool and Moist (Frigid-Xeric)
- Warm and Moist (Mesic-Xeric)
- Cool and Dry (Frigid-Aridic)
- Warm and Dry (Mesic-Aridic)

Soil temperature and moisture regimes can be used as indicators of sagebrush ecosystem resilience and resistance to annual grass invasion. This map displays soil temperature and moisture classes determined from soil surveys (NRCS SSURGO). Hotter colors indicate relatively lower resilience/resistance potential while cooler colors represent more resilient/resistant sites (e.g., Warm & Dry = lowest, Cold & Moist = highest).