



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

November 1, 2015

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Ron & Brian:

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 July – September 2015. The report also contains the following appendix: Objectives and Evolution of the SGI SWAT.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Dave Smith".

Dave Smith  
IWJV Coordinator

# Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

## Quarterly Report: July 1 – September 30, 2015

Intermountain West Joint Venture  
November 1, 2015

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 July – September 2015.

### FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field staff continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, funding partners, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). The team's dedicated and enthusiastic range conservationists, wildlife biologists, and natural resource specialists not only help get conservation on the ground but also spread the shared vision of achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching throughout the West. Below are some of the incredible highlights from the SWAT field staff and the IWJV's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

#### Conservation Implementation

The IWJV maintains a detailed tracking system to document SWAT field staff progress on a quarterly basis. These contributions are rolled up with other NRCS actions and reported to the 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 (ESA) listing decision reviews.

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

- **2,190,662 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.
- **286,033 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.
- **193 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

#### SWAT Position Updates

SWAT field staff talent does not go unrecognized by other employers. As position vacancies arise, the IWJV works with NRCS, hiring entities and funding partners to re-assess position locations to ensure technical assistance is focused where it's needed most; positions are quickly refilled to minimize disruption to conservation delivery. Here are changes that occurred this quarter:



*SWAT field staff at the SWAT Workshop in August*

- Heather Nenninger filled the Montana Association of Conservation Districts position in Forsyth, Montana. She has a BS in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana and is currently completing a MS in Natural Resources Management from the University of Manitoba. Heather has spent the last four years working in eastern Montana as a wildlife technician and team leader, including a season on sage grouse research. Most of her professional experience over that time was working with landowners and resource professionals to examine grazing systems and grassland bird responses.
- Helen “Lisa” Dowling filled the Pheasants Forever (PF) position in Waterville, Washington (vacated in July by Scott Scroggie, a former SWAT employee who accepted a position with NRCS Washington in the Waterville Service Center). Lisa recently graduated from Northern Arizona University with an MS in Forestry and emphasis on Rangeland Ecology and Management. She has extensive experience in vegetation mapping and data collection. Lisa is excited to apply her skills in the field of conservation and will start in October.
- The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife position in Lakeview, Oregon is currently open and is anticipated to be advertised in October with interviews for the position conducted in November.

### SWAT Workshop

SGI relies on its SWAT partner positions to assist NRCS field offices and ranchers with scaling-up conservation in sage grouse strongholds across 11 western states. Every new range and wildlife 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 everything from an in-depth knowledge of sage grouse biology to tips and tools for working with landowners and building community partnerships. The SWAT currently consists of 26 partner positions across ten states.



These staff were brought together in mid-August for the annual SGI SWAT Workshop, held in Minden, Nevada. The location was chosen as a result of the success of the Bi-State Local Area Working Group (LAWG) collaboration that led to the decision in April by FWS to not list the Bi-State Greater Sage-grouse population as threatened. The focus of the meeting was development and implementation of multi-stakeholder collaboration at a landscape level. The objectives of the meeting were to enhance the SGI SWAT staff’s technical skills in building collaborative efforts, as well as to increase camaraderie among the team, build enthusiasm and encourage efforts similar to the Bi-State across the West.

Day one brought a packed agenda and began with an introduction and history of the Bi-State LAWG effort by LAWG members Tom Moore and Thad Heater, NRCS State Biologists/SGI State Leads for California and Nevada, respectively. Tim Griffiths (NRCS West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator) and Dr. Dave Naugle (SGI National Science Advisor) gave an update on SGI 2.0, highlighting both the success of the past and the road map to the future of the SGI effort. Phillip Street, a doctoral student with the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), gave a presentation on the latest science on mesic wet meadow use by sage grouse and the management implications. Nevada Division of Wildlife Upland Game Specialist, Shawn Espinosa, presented on the sage grouse population in Nevada, as well as landscape planning and ongoing management actions specific to the Bi-State effort. An overview of the newly consolidated NRCS easement programs was given by Gary Roeder, the NRCS Nevada Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.

A working lunch presentation by Sherri Lisius (Wildlife Biologist from the Bishop Bureau of Land Management [BLM] Field Office in California) and Steve Lewis (UNR Cooperative Extension Educator/Bi-State LAWG Coordinator) offered insight into how the successes, as well as challenges of the collaborative effort evolved over time with a focus on the lessons learned from the effort.

The afternoon session included a discussion about streamlining SGI accomplishment tracking with Matt Morlock, PF Assistant Director in South Dakota. In addition, each state's SWAT positions were tasked with presenting an update in the concise and fast-paced Pecha Kucha format (20 slides shown for 20 seconds each for a total of six minutes and 40 seconds).

Day two was spent touring the range of the Bi-State sage grouse population in California and Nevada. Stops included private ranches involved in sage grouse management efforts through SGI, including the Sweetwater and Sceirine Ranches and Sinnamon Meadows area. A full suite of management practices were discussed and showcased, including conifer removal, grazing management, fence marking and conservation easements.



*SWAT Workshop participants on the field tour, en route to Sinnamon Meadows*

The two-day event closed with dinner at the Bridgeport Ranch in Bridgeport, California. SGI staff took the opportunity to recognize several individuals for their contributions to SGI. Thad Heater and Tom Moore were presented with juniper-framed sage grouse prints for their overall endeavors as SGI State Leads, as well as for their efforts organizing the workshop. Sherri Lisius was also presented with a print to be shared with the BLM Bishop Office for their leadership in the Bi-State LAWG partnership. Retired NRCS biologist and current Rangeland Watershed Initiative Coordinator with Point Blue Conservation Science (PBCS), Wendell Gilgert, was presented with an SGI branding iron award for his outstanding contributions to SGI both during his time with NRCS and now at PBCS. Only two individuals in the SWAT partner positions remain from the original group hired in 2011; as such, Mandi Hirsch (Lander, Wyoming) and Taylor Payne (Randolph, Utah) were recognized for their long-term commitment to the effort with SGI wooden plaques.



*SGI award and recognition recipients and presenters at the Bridgeport Ranch in California, as part of the SWAT Workshop*

## SWAT Field Staff Calls & Events

Several events occurred during the quarter to further SGI and SWAT coordination:

- SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in Paradise, Montana (July 29-30) – attended by SGI Core Team.
- Riparian and Wet Meadow Restoration/Resilience Building Methods Training and Work Day, hosted by the Gunnison Climate Working Group (August 3-5) – attended by Seth Gallagher (IWJV/SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator).
- Audubon Rockies' screening of [The Sagebrush Sea, a PBS Nature documentary](#), at the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery in Colorado (August 13) – Seth represented SGI and provided outreach materials.
- [8<sup>th</sup> Annual Private Lands Partners Day](#) (September 23-25) – Seth represented SGI and the IWJV in North Platte, Nebraska.
- [America's Grasslands Conference, America's Grasslands: Partnerships for Grassland Conservation](#), in Fort Collins, Colorado (September 29-October 1) – Seth provided outreach materials and facilitated a group discussion on *Improving Federal Programs for Grasslands*.
- Collaboration among the IWJV and SGI staff on the SGI 2.0 proposal (September/October).



*Left: Consultant Bill Zeedyk teaching the art and science of “one rock” dam construction during the Riparian and Wet Meadow Restoration/Resilience Building Methods Training;*  
*Right: SGI display at America's Grasslands Conference*

The IWJV continues to host monthly conference calls in which SWAT members receive SGI updates, share accomplishments and experiences, ask questions, and receive continuous technology transfer and training.

## SCIENCE CAPACITY

### SGI Welcomes University of Montana Research Associate, Jason Tack

Jason joined the University of Montana in August and will be working primarily on SGI-related projects. He completed his Master's at the University of Montana, where he studied sage grouse at the northeastern edge of their range in Valley County, Montana and Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan (Canada). In this unique population, he documented the largest migration event undertaken by sage grouse, which was sustained by large, intact sagebrush rangelands. Since then, he received a PhD from Colorado State University, where he developed spatial planning tools for golden eagles with an eye towards future wind energy development. The work provided conservation practitioners and industry with a framework for siting renewable energy in areas predicted to have the least impact on eagle populations.



Jason is looking forward to playing a role in the continued success of SGI. His aim is to provide the science-based tools fundamental to SGI's mission, while measuring the biological outcomes of collaborative work on the ground. His work will focus primarily on learning about the role that mesic resources play in wildlife populations across the West, such that these limiting yet critical resources can be conserved, and developing targeting tools for songbirds to better understand how SGI can provide multiple-species benefits under the umbrella of sage grouse conservation.

*Jason Tack*  
*Photo courtesy John Carlson*

## [Greater Sage-Grouse and Range Management: Insights from a 25-Year Case Study in Utah and Wyoming](#)

Conservation of sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) systems is one of the most difficult and pressing concerns in western North America. Sagebrush obligates, such as the Greater Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; hereafter sage grouse), have experienced population declines as sagebrush systems have degraded. Science-based management is crucial to improve certainty in range management practices. Although large-scale implementation of management regimens within an experimental design is difficult, long-term case studies provide opportunities to improve learning and develop and refine hypotheses.

The study, published in *Rangeland Ecology & Management*, used 25 years of data across three large landscapes in northern Utah and southwestern Wyoming to assess sage grouse population change and corresponding land



From left to right: David Dahlgren (Utah State University and lead author), Alan Clark (Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative) and Eric Thacker (Utah State University and co-author)

management differences in a case study design. Sage grouse lek counts at the Desert Land and Livestock (DLL) study site increased relative to surrounding populations in correspondence with the implementation of small-acreage sagebrush treatments designed to reduce shrub cover and increase herbaceous understory within a prescriptive grazing management framework. The higher lek counts were sustained for nearly 15 years. However, with continued sagebrush treatments and the onset of adverse winter conditions, DLL lek counts declined to levels consistent with surrounding areas. During summer, DLL sage grouse broods used plots of small, treated sagebrush mosaics more than untreated reference sites.

The authors hypothesize that sagebrush treatments on DLL increased availability of grasses and forbs to sage grouse, similar to other studies, but that cumulative annual

## COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

### [Historic Conservation Campaign Protects Greater Sage-Grouse | ESA Listing Averted](#)

FWS announced on September 22 that voluntary sage grouse partnerships – which SGI is a catalyst for – have significantly reduced threats to the Greater Sage-grouse and thus, it does not warrant protection under the ESA. Thanks to efforts by private landowners, state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations and others, this collaborative, science-based strategy is the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history. U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell made the announcement on Twitter with a YouTube video, [Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Announcement](#). In addition, NRCS developed a factsheet highlighting SGI outcomes since 2010, [Voluntary Conservation Works for Greater Sage-Grouse](#).



## [New Sage Grouse Strategy Unveiled: \\$760 Million Invested by 2018](#)

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced a renewed commitment to voluntary, incentive-based conservation efforts to bring back sage grouse populations. A new NRCS report, [Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 Investment Strategy, FY 2015-2018](#), was released as part of Secretary Vilsack's announcement on August 27.

### New Publications

#### **September 21**

[New Guide Available | Sagebrush Bird Communities in the Intermountain West](#)

This guide provides information on breeding habitat used by several bird species commonly found in sagebrush communities throughout the Intermountain West.

#### **September 9**

[Science to Solutions – Sagebrush Songbirds Benefit from Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration](#)

New research released as part of SGI's [Science to Solutions series](#) shows that restoring sagebrush ecosystems not only benefits ranching and sage grouse but other wildlife, too. [New Data Show Efforts to Restore Habitat for Sage Grouse Benefits Songbirds, Too](#) – USDA Blog post by Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI National Science Advisor.



*Singing Brewer's sparrow in Lake County, Oregon; photo by Jacob Spendelow, [tringa.org](#)*

support and win-win agreements – as told by conservation heroes – is highlighted in the new report, [Success on the Range](#). Conservation efforts underway through SGI are improving wildlife habitat, as well as the way of life in the West. The report was unveiled in Montana, in conjunction with a landmark agreement signed by Governor Steve Bullock, NRCS and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana, Inc. The unique agreement will streamline and enhance joint efforts to conserve privately owned working rangelands that provide habitat for Montana's sage grouse.

#### **July 13**

[Science to Solutions – Reducing Cultivation of Grazing Lands Conserves Sage Grouse](#)

Sustainable grazing conserves sage grouse and the western way of life. Scientists assessed lands in eastern Montana, the western Dakotas, and northeast Wyoming to evaluate the potential impacts to sage grouse if more land is converted from sagebrush to crops.



#### **August 31**

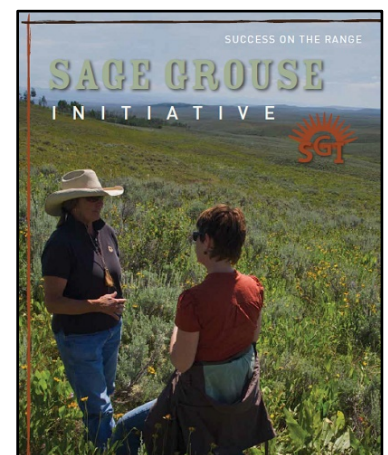
[New Tools For Land Managers | Predicting Vegetation Response to Treatments and Wildfire](#)

Several tools are now available that help conservationists better assess and manage vegetation to improve ecosystem resilience before and after wildfire.

#### **July 20**

[Success on the Range Report & New Montana Partnership Highlights Benefit of Cooperative Conservation](#)

The SGI story of partnerships, voluntary cooperation, community



## Success Stories

### **October 2**

[Safer Flights for Sage Grouse Over Washington State, Thanks To Dedicated Field Staff](#) by Michael Brown, SGI SWAT Range and Wildlife Conservationist in Wenatchee, Washington

### **September 11**

[New England Cottontail | Another Success Story for Proactive Voluntary Conservation](#) by SGI staff

### **September 1**

[Sage Grouse Conservation Leaders Recognized in California & Nevada](#) by SGI staff



Members of the 482<sup>nd</sup> Maintenance Squadron and Detachment 93, 495<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group stand in front of an F-16 and F-18 at Naval Air Station Fallon, in Nevada; photo courtesy [Homestead Air Reserve Base](#)

### **August 19**

[Department of Defense Dedicates \\$2 Million to Protect Sage Grouse in Nevada](#) by SGI staff

## SGI Partner News

### **October 2**

[The Sage-Grouse's Next Dance | What the Recent Decision Means for the Bird and Conservation](#)

The Nature Conservancy's [Cool Green Science](#) Blog post by Holly Copeland, The Nature Conservancy in Wyoming

### **September 17**

[Ranchers and Conservationists Combine to Help Sage Grouse](#)

Original editorial in *The Salt Lake Tribune* – [Op-ed: Ranchers, conservationists combine to help sage grouse without listing](#) by Jason Weller (NRCS Chief) and David Yarnold (National Audubon Society CEO)

### **September 1**

[Bi-Partisan Commentary | Voluntary Conservation Works Across Party Lines](#)

[Original editorial in Roll Call](#) by Bruce Knight and Dave White, both former chiefs of NRCS

### **August 18**

[New Report | Sage Grouse Populations On the Rise](#)

[Greater Sage-Grouse Population Trends: An Analysis of Lek Count Databases 1965-2015](#) by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

[Marking Fences Saves Lives in Sage Grouse Country](#)

[USDA Blog post](#) by Ron Francis (NRCS Utah Public Affairs Specialist) and Lori Valadez (NRCS Montana Public Affairs Manager)

## Other News

[Saving Sage Grouse | Conserving Montana's Largest Game Bird](#)

[Original story in Fall 2015 edition of Outside Bozeman magazine](#) by Brianna Randall, freelance writer and communications specialist for several groups, including SGI





# American Cowboy



Photo by Benjamin Putnam

[Building Bridges | Ranchers Are Stewards of the Land](#)  
[Original story in October/November edition of \*American Cowboy\* magazine](#)  
by Andy Rieber, freelance writer

[The Endangered Species Act's Biggest Experiment](#)  
[Original article in High Country News \(HCN\) Magazine, August 17](#) by Jodi Peterson, HCN Senior Editor  
[Little Big Bird](#) – KDNK Radio's Amy Hadden Marsh interviews Jodi Peterson on *Sounds of the High Country* program

[Wildfire Management Strategies | New Video Shows Projects that Protect the Sagebrush Sea](#)  
[Original August story from Life on the Range \(LOTR\) website](#) by Steve Stuebner, LOTR writer and producer; LOTR is an education project sponsored by the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission

[New Research Shows Grazing Plans Are Good for Grouse and for Bugs](#)  
[Original article in High Country News Magazine, August 17](#) by Marian Lyman Kirst

[Western Biologists Say Sage Grouse Numbers Surged in 2014 and 2015](#)  
[Original article on E&E News Greenwire, August 3](#) by Phil Taylor, E&E Reporter

## **SGI Staff Updates**

### [Building Conservation Capacity | What's New at SGI](#)

Tim Griffiths, former NRCS SGI National Coordinator, accepted the new position as NRCS West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator; Tim will continue to be based out of the NRCS Montana State Office.

Brian Jensen, NRCS Wyoming State Biologist, is serving as Acting NRCS SGI National Coordinator in a 120-day detail position until the National Coordinator position is filled.

Jeremy Maestas, former NRCS Oregon State Biologist, accepted the new position as Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist with the NRCS West National Technology Support Center.

Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI's National Science Advisor since 2010, has signed on to continue in this role for another five years.

Hannah Ryan, IWJV Communications Specialist, is serving in a part-time capacity as SGI Communications Specialist for a six-month detail.

## **SGI E-News**

The bi-monthly SGI E-News continues to delivery several stories within a professional template into the e-mail inboxes of subscribers (currently over 3,200). E-News from the quarter include:

- [July 13 – What's New at SGI: Building Conservation Capacity in the West](#)
- [July 21 – Success on the Range + New Montana Partnership Unveiled](#)
- [August 20 – Meet SGI's Newest Partner: The U.S. Department of Defense](#)
- [September 2 – New Sage Grouse Strategy Unveiled: \\$760 Million Invested by 2018](#)
- [September 15 – Sagebrush Songbirds Benefit from Sage Grouse Habitat Restoration](#)
- [September 30 – Wildlife Win: Sage Grouse Don't Need ESA Listing](#)



## **SGI Communications by the Numbers**

From June 1 through August 31, the [SGI website](#) received 31,800 page views, as reported by PartnersCreative communications agency. [SGI's Facebook page](#) currently has 2,834 followers, while [SGI's Twitter account](#) currently has 1,642 followers.

The top three most-read website page/articles include:

- 1) [SGI Sagebrush Community – The Bird](#)
- 2) [Success on the Range | New Montana Partnership Highlights Benefit of Cooperative Conservation](#)
- 3) [Western Biologists Say Sage Grouse Numbers Surged in 2014 and 2015](#)

## **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 SGI has played a critical role in maintaining strong support for SGI across a diverse group of conservation partners.

In cooperation with PF, a key partner of the SGI, the IWJV has now executed 81 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 \$7,363,125.41 in SWAT funds. This quarter, we finalized amendments to all field capacity agreements to keep boots on-the-ground through June 2016, as well as initiated new communications and partner development agreements to maintain these critical functions of SGI SWAT.

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 West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator, NRCS National SGI Coordinator, NRCS SGI National Science Advisor, NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist, and SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator ensures that the implementation of 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. The SGI SWAT Coordination Team met for the thirteenth time on July 29-30, 2015 in Paradise, Montana. This meeting focused on assessing the status of programs and projects as we head into the final year of SGI SWAT 1.0 and discussing the development of and transition to SGI SWAT 2.0. The Coordination Team will next meet December 2-3 in Missoula, Montana.

IWJV Coordinator, Dave Smith, and Assistant Coordinator, Ali Duvall, championed SGI extensively during their participation in the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Summer 2015 meeting in Reno, Nevada. At the request of then-WAFWA President and Nevada Department of Wildlife Director, Tony Wasley, Ali served on the *Landscapes in Transition* Plenary Session panel on partnerships for collaborative sage steppe conservation. Likewise, Dave updated the western state fish and wildlife agency directors on SGI during the IWJV-hosted Director's Luncheon. Dave and Ali distributed an array of SGI materials at this important gathering. The IWJV's connections with the leadership of state fish and wildlife agencies is at an all-time peak with five directors (from Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah) serving on the 21-member IWJV Management Board. As such, the IWJV continues to deliver on its SGI SWAT Partner Development objective of sustaining support for SGI from the state fish and wildlife agencies in the West at a high level.

FWS's decision not to list the sage grouse as threatened or endangered was a welcome one—and an outcome that we feel shows just how successful SGI and SGI SWAT have been at addressing the threats to sage grouse. The celebration was short, however, as the goal has never been to simply keep sage grouse off the ESA list but to ensure that sage grouse flourish across the West. That is why we spent much of this quarter focusing on how to continue this landmark initiative through SGI SWAT 2.0 by way of an expanded and robust partnership. We are also very excited by recent discussions with the BLM, with which we hope to apply the SWAT model to public lands and expand the footprint of SGI. Looking ahead, the commitment of the partnership to SGI implementation looks every bit as strong, or perhaps even stronger, in this post-listing decision era—a testament to the power of SGI's approach and conservation business model.

## **SUMMARY**

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

## NRCS SGI SWAT AGREEMENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

- a) *Efforts for outreach to, and participation of, beginning farmers or ranchers, and Native American Tribes within the project area.* The SWAT field capacity staff worked directly with one new Indian Tribal member this quarter.
- b) *Assistance provided to program participants to help meet local, state, and/or federal regulatory requirements.* The intent of SGI is to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat to negate the need for additional regulations. Participating producers are highly committed to sage grouse conservation, and the SGI provides an excellent vehicle for addressing threats to sage grouse populations at very large scales.
- c) *Numbers of NRCS program participants assisted and/or cooperating in the project effort.* The SWAT partner positions made 1,409 contacts (field visits, etc.) with 641 different agricultural producers as of December 31, 2012. The reporting system was revised in 2013, and we now track Technical Assistance days. Since January 1, 2013, the SWAT provided 6,915.5 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-six (36) FTEs (26.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator FTE, 0.5 SGI Communications Specialist FTE, 0.5 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: SGI SWAT Field Capacity Accomplishment Report – Activity Totals): conservation planning for 2,190,662 acres of grazing systems; 286,033 acres of conifer removal; 1,018,763 feet (193 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 15,685 acres of rangeland seeding; and, 30,185 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$3,368,251 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 \$56,041,147!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured or leveraged a total of \$7.4 million in partner contributions to date.

## **Appendix A**

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

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

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

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

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

*The IWJV, through the FWS, subsequently entered into a Cooperative Agreement with Pheasants Forever (PF) to facilitate fiscal administration and partnership-based implementation of SGI SWAT, effective August 9, 2011. PF works closely with the IWJV staff on SWAT implementation and is also playing a key role in building field capacity for SGI, specifically by supervising 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.*