



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

May 2, 2016

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Ron & Thad:

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 2016. 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 black ink, appearing to read "Dave Smith".

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: January 1 – March 31, 2016

Intermountain West Joint Venture
May 2, 2016

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 2016.

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 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:

- **2,293,260 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.
- **291,613 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:

- Charles Sandford was selected for the Mule Deer Foundation position in Tremonton, Utah (vacated in January by Kourtney Stonehouse, who accepted a position with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game). Charles holds a BS in Wildlife Management from New Mexico State University and an MS in Wildlife Biology from Utah State University; he conducted his MS research in northwestern Utah, the area he now covers for SGI SWAT. Charles is excited to work in an area where he has already developed an understanding of the landscape and a positive relationship with the landowners.



Charles Sandford

- Ryan Platte was selected for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife position in Lakeview, Oregon (vacated by Brandi St. Clair who accepted a position with Lakeview Soil and Water Conservation District). Ryan received a BS in Wildlife Science and Management from New Mexico State University. He is currently working on the completion of his MS from University of Illinois Springfield; his graduate work focused on semi-aquatic mammal habitat use within a restored wetland complex in west-central Illinois. Ryan's prior positions included work on a diversity of species including bighorn sheep, mule deer, burrowing owls, elk, sage grouse, Franklin's ground squirrel, and osprey.
- Luke McCarty was selected for the Montana Association of Conservation Districts position in Glasgow, Montana (vacated in early 2016 with the retirement of John Fahlgren). Luke will start the position in May, after completing his BS from Colorado State University (CSU) in Rangeland Ecology-Conservation and Management. He served as a range technician on several projects at CSU, as well as with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.



Ryan Platte



Luke McCarty

SWAT Field Staff Calls & Events

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. The following webinar trainings occurred this quarter:

- The NRCS West National Technology Support Center hosted a presentation by Sandy Wyman (Rangeland Management Specialist with the Bureau of Land



Management's National Riparian Service Team in Prineville, Oregon) on January 20 entitled, *Grazing Strategies for Riparian and Wet Meadow Improvement in the Sagebrush Steppe*. The webinar reviewed key principles of grazing management in riparian and meadow areas, and how to manage grazing to initiate improvement of ecological function. Participants gained an understanding of common grazing strategies and typical vegetation response during each season. The presentation also showcased examples from around the sage-steppe of successful improvements to riparian and wet meadow areas after adjustments in grazing management, with the understanding that there is not

one practice or strategy that will work for every management scenario. The webinar was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).

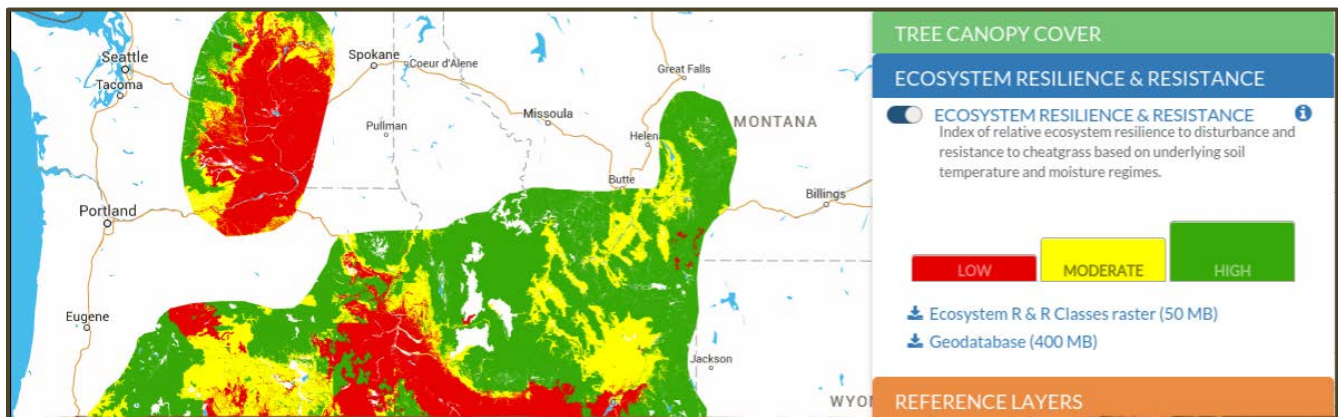
- The Intermountain West Joint Venture hosted a presentation by Dr. David Dahlgren (Wildlife Extension Associate with Utah State University) on February 3 entitled, *Sagebrush Management Lessons Learned: Insight from a 25-Year Case Study*. The presentation allowed Dr. Dahlgren to build upon SGI's *Science to Solutions* article, [Grazing and Sagebrush Treatments: A 25-year Case Study in Utah](#), released in December. The webinar highlighted that sustainable grazing practices and sagebrush treatments enhanced herbaceous understory for sage grouse in years with average winters, but that bird populations declined following severe winters. The results of the study can help conservationists working to achieve self-sustaining sagebrush ecosystems capable of supporting sage grouse and other sagebrush-dependent wildlife. While sagebrush manipulation can be an important component of sage-steppe restoration, the webinar illustrates the delicate balance needed when conducting sagebrush treatments in sage grouse habitat. The webinar was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).

SCIENCE CAPACITY

New Tool Turns Science into Actions that Benefit Working Lands & Wildlife

In February, SGI unveiled a new tool to catalyze and improve habitat conservation efforts across the western United States. The [SGI Interactive Map](#) is free and available to the public, presenting cutting-edge geospatial data covering 100 million acres. The SGI science team has developed an easy-to-use web application that helps visualize, distribute, and interact with information about the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem.

Developed in partnership with the University of Montana (UM) and others, SGI used Google Earth Engine to build a new interactive online map that, for the first time, combines layers of related data to better target invasive species damaging habitat and rangeland in 11 states. The new app currently allows farmers, ranchers, conservationists and other partners to analyze data on the encroachment of conifers and cheatgrass on key rangeland. The SGI science team will continue to add more layers to the map as they are developed – such as data on fence collisions and subdivision risk – to help address threats to sage grouse, as well as the 350+ species that depend on healthy sagebrush-steppe habitat.



The goal is to put information directly into the hands of the resource managers who need it. The layers available now include high-resolution tree canopy cover and ecosystem resilience and resistance index data across the range of sage grouse. All data can be easily downloaded, allowing custom analysis to make the most difference for working lands and wildlife.

“By putting cutting-edge products at the fingertips of practitioners and landowners, it helps us more quickly turn science and technology into targeted action on-the-ground,” said Jeremy Maestas, NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist with the West National Technology Support Center.



Brady Allred
Photo courtesy UM

Brady Allred (UM Rangeland Ecology Assistant Professor) developed the new web app and said he is excited that SGI will continue to build on the tool over time.

“Since we focused on such a large area, we are able to provide the big picture—it’s a better view of what’s occurring across boundaries, so that each effort supports the greater goal and helps reduce future threats,” Allred said.

The newly created tree canopy cover layer – developed by Dr. Michael Falkowski at CSU – shows where conifers are degrading critical habitat on the range. SGI and partners can use this information to target projects that improve sage grouse habitat by removing invading conifers when the trees are young and more easily eradicated. Another layer now available provides an index of ecosystem resilience and

resistance to cheatgrass based on underlying soil temperature and moisture, which will help resource managers protect and restore crucial sagebrush ecosystems.

All of the information can be easily visualized on top of physical maps or the latest satellite imagery. Users can quickly identify and compare areas of concern, evaluating potential restoration or prevention opportunities. Data

can be imported from the web application directly into geographical information system software, which allows the public to customize the information for land management or conservation purposes. Data for individual counties can be downloaded [using these simple instructions](#).

The interactive web application aligns with the [Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 Investment Strategy, FY 2015-2018](#), a four-year, \$211 million effort to help conserve sagebrush habitats in 11 western states.

“Our Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 investment strategy has science at its core, and this new website brings crucial information to conservation planners to enable them to craft the best plan for specific locations,” NRCS Chief Jason Weller explained. “Not only will this be pivotal for NRCS staff, but for our partners as well.”



John Severson
Photo courtesy The Wildlife Society

Severson Successfully Defends Dissertation on Conifer Encroachment

John Severson, University of Idaho, successfully defended his dissertation on conifer encroachment and the effects of conifer removal on nesting site selection by sage grouse. SGI supported John’s data collection and research from 2012-2014.

This is the first study to evaluate effects of conifer encroachment and removal on habitat selection and survival throughout multiple life stages of sage grouse. John observed negative effects of conifer encroachment on habitat selection. Conifer removal increased habitat availability at a landscape scale, potentially resulting in increases in demographic parameters important to population growth. This study will be crucial in evaluating the efficacy of conifer removal for sage grouse conservation and how management can be focused to maximize benefits.

John is now working on several manuscripts related to this study.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

People

- Brianna Randall became the SGI Communications Coordinator in late January, supporting SGI with a variety of media and outreach needs.



Brianna Randall

Publications

- *Featured Friend*: [Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative](#) (January 7)
- *Science to Solutions*: [Grazing and Sagebrush Treatments: A 25-year Case Study in Utah](#) (January 9)
- *Featured Friend*: [The Conservation Fund](#) (February 23)

Website Updates

Overview:

- 25 new website posts published this quarter
- NEW [Events & Webinars](#) page created and populated
- NEW [Map](#) page created for SGI Interactive Map, along with accompanying [Map Description and Instructions](#) page
- SGI [home page](#) slider and tiles updated/formatted with new content
- \$93,862 in advertising funds spent by the Google Ad Grants program (40% more than last year); this resulted in almost four million impressions to people searching on Google, with 5,400 more click-throughs to SGI’s website
- 41,000 total page views this quarter (up 13% from last quarter)
 - 16,000 views of [Get Involved](#) (where GoogleAdWords directs searchers)
 - 3,800 views of SGI home page (up 27% from last quarter)



Highlights of Top Posts & Pages:

1. [Events & Webinars](#) (new page launched this quarter): 567 views
2. [Science to Solutions: Grazing and Sagebrush Treatments: A 25-year Case Study in Utah](#): 479 views
3. [SGI Map Description and Instructions](#): 403 views
4. [Meet Thad Heater, SGI's New Coordinator](#): 402 views
5. [New Research + Movie: Wet Habitats On Private Lands Critical For Sage Grouse](#): 343 views
6. [From Sagebrush Experts: What the heck is a lek?](#) (Ask an Expert: Trisha Cracroft, NRCS Idaho State Biologist/SGI Idaho State Lead): 341 views
7. [SGI Unveils Interactive Web Application To Bolster Wildlife Conservation Work](#): 288 views



Trisha Cracroft

User Profiles:

- Ten percent more user sessions (compared to last quarter)
- 13% more page views (compared to last quarter)
- 25% longer average stay on SGI site (compared to last quarter)
- 20% returning visitors and 80% new visitors
- How visitors arrived at SGI website:
 - 55% of visitors via paid search from GoogleAdWords (down two percent in total numbers from last quarter)
 - 33% of visitors via organic/self-prompted search (up 65% in total numbers from last quarter)
 - Six percent of visitors via social media (up 61% in total numbers from last quarter)
 - Five percent of visitors via referral sites (373 people referred from SGI's new [Map](#) page)

Social Media

[Twitter](#) (@SageGrouseInit)

- 203 total Tweets
- 410,000 total Impressions (views) of our Tweets
- 181 new Followers, bringing the total to 1,896
 - Top Tweets:
 - January (earned 2,398 impressions, 12 retweets, 13 likes): [Sage grouse range is vast, even in the winter.](#)



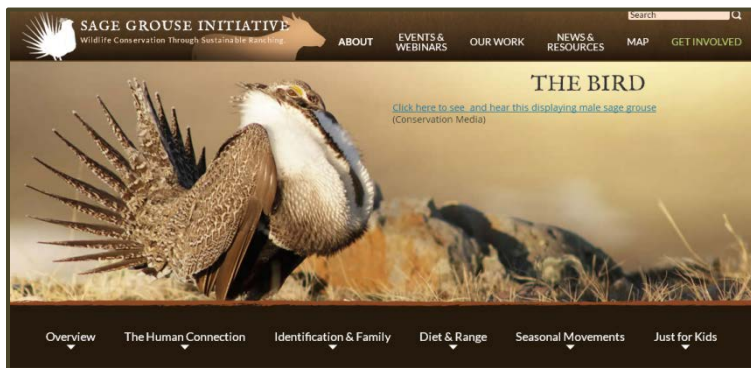
- February (earned 2,878 impressions, 15 retweets, 7 likes): [Data matters, for #birds and for #ranchers. Introducing our new interactive mapping tool.](#)
- March (earned 2,861 impressions, 11 retweets, seven likes): [DYK: Wet habitats cover less than 2% of the western landscape, but 80% are on private land.](#)

[Facebook](#)

- 189 page Likes (followers), bringing the total to 3,692
- 67 total posts
- Top Posts:
 - January (1,990 people reached, 3 comments, 33 likes): [Read this Oregon rancher's resounding words about game-changing conservation in the West!](#)
 - February (4,061 people reached, 29 shares, 2 comments, 36 likes): [BREAKING NEWS: Introducing the new SGI Interactive Web Application! We believe that data makes a difference -- and that everyone should be able to use it.](#)



- o March (3,948 people reached, 19 shares, 1 comment, 49 likes): [In the arid American West, life follows water. And so do sage grouse.](#)
- o March (3,660 people reached, 16 shares, 4 comments, 89 likes): [Spring is dawning on the sagebrush sea. Time to gear up and go see the spectacular sage grouse mating dance!](#)



- o March (4,127 people reached, 18 shares, 4 comments, 36 likes): [Ranchers in Montana manage their land to sustain grass production, which benefits bovines and birds.](#)



E-News

- 71 new subscribers (4,492 total)
- Three total sent (monthly)
- 33% open rate
- 27% click rate on links
- Most popular edition from the quarter: [Sage Grouse E-News: Meet Our New Coordinator!](#)

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 Pheasants Forever (PF), a key partner of SGI, the IWJV has now executed 88 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 \$7,600,765.03 in SWAT funds. This quarter, we established a new agreement with writer Jesse Bussard, who will help develop *Rancher Success Stories* in Idaho and Nevada. We also initiated a new agreement with Oregon State University, in order to continue the conifer removal study in eastern Oregon.

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 WLFW 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 via conference call in both February and March 2016. The focus of these calls has been wrapping up SGI SWAT 1.0 and ensuring a smooth transition to SGI SWAT 2.0. An in-person SGI Coordination Team meeting is scheduled for April 26-27, 2016 in Missoula, Montana.

We are pleased to report that Rocky Mountain Power/Pacific Power (RMP/PP) has provided another \$80,000 to the IWJV to support SGI SWAT, bringing their total SGI SWAT contributions to \$120,000! The new funding will largely support SGI SWAT 2.0 through 2018. Non-federal contributions to SGI SWAT are critical as they provide match to federal funds and are proof of the wide-ranging partnership built by this unique initiative. More importantly, these non-federal funds provide flexibility, allowing SGI SWAT to be nimble and innovative. We are proud to have RMP/PP as a partner and thank them for their continued involvement and support!

SGI CORE STAFF

The SGI Team is happy to announce the recent selection of Thad Heater as SGI's permanent National Coordinator. Thad brings extensive experience and a history of success working to conserve natural resources throughout the West. Thad understands ranching first-hand from his upbringing on a working cattle ranch in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon. His diverse resume includes a decade at the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station, as well as seven years in the private sector and with Nevada Department of Wildlife. Thad joined NRCS in 2009 as a shared biologist, in partnership with FWS and the IWJV, eventually transferring to the state biologist position. He has been the SGI State Lead in Nevada since the initial rollout of SGI in 2010 and has been very active in sage grouse conservation at the state and local level, serving on a variety of technical teams. His work has been instrumental in making SGI and NRCS easement programs a success in Nevada by protecting key sage grouse habitat for the Bi-State and Greater Sage-grouse populations. Thad started in his new role on January 24. (Tim Griffiths will continue to be highly involved in SGI leadership in his position as the NRCS West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator.) Welcome, Thad!



Thad Heater

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 three Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers and 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 7,825.25 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 and three-quarters (34.75) FTEs (25.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator FTE, 0.75 SGI Communications Coordinator 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 2,293,260 acres of grazing systems; 291,613 acres of conifer removal; 1,018,763 feet (193 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 16,917 acres of rangeland seeding; and 30,408 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$430,308 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 \$56,881,748!***
- 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 eight of the SWAT 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.