



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

August 1, 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 April-June 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: April 1 – June 30, 2016

Intermountain West Joint Venture
August 1, 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 April – June 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:

- **2,443,193 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.
- **308,144 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.
- **218 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 Update

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 is a change that occurred this quarter:

- Matt Gottlob was selected for the Pheasants Forever position in Belle Fourche, South Dakota (vacated in March by Mary Beth Albrechtsen, who accepted a position with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies). Matt received a BS in Environmental Biology from Black Hills State University and a MS in Wildlife Sciences from South Dakota State University. Matt started the position in June.



Matt Gottlob

SWAT Field Staff Calls & Webinars

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. Several webinar trainings occurred this quarter, including the two highlighted below:

- The NRCS West National Technology Support Center hosted a presentation by Brian Mealor (University of Wyoming Sheridan Research and Extension Center Director/Rangeland Weed Science and Restoration

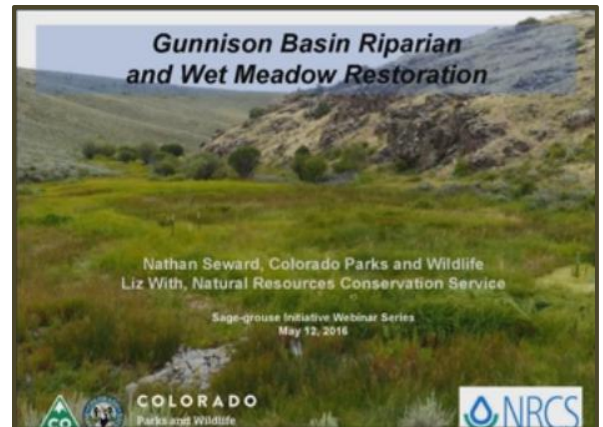


Cheatgrass

Associate Professor) on April 6 entitled, *Strategic Cheatgrass Management in Sagebrush Ecosystems*. The webinar reviewed cheatgrass biology and ecosystem impacts, presented considerations for prioritizing cheatgrass management, and discussed chemical, mechanical, and biological weed treatment options. Invasion of the exotic annual grass, cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*), across sagebrush ecosystems is causing widespread rangeland degradation and wholesale shifts to novel ecological states currently beyond the ability of managers to reliably repair. To date, effects have been most pronounced in the Great Basin, but cheatgrass is a significant and growing problem across the West. Concerns over impacts to sage-grouse populations have brought additional focus and resources to address cheatgrass, but land managers still seek effective treatment options and strategic approaches to tackling the problem to maximize

return on investment. Many opportunities exist for managers to proactively address cheatgrass invasion before critical thresholds are reached. The webinar was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).

- The Intermountain West Joint Venture hosted a presentation by Nathan Seward (Colorado Parks and Wildlife Terrestrial Biologist) and Liz With (Colorado NRCS District Conservationist) on May 12 entitled, *Gunnison Basin Riparian and Wet Meadow Restoration and Resilience Project*. The webinar showcased the Upper Gunnison Basin Riparian Restoration and Resilience Project, a landscape-level effort led by the collaborative Gunnison Climate Working Group. Participants learned the restoration techniques employed, as well as the administrative model used to manage the complex partnership of 18 agencies and numerous landowners, with the goal of replicating this large-scale project across the 11-state sage grouse range. The webinar was recorded and can be viewed [here](#).



Western Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) 30th Sage & Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse Workshop

WAFWA's biennial Grouse Workshop was held June 14-16 in Lander, Wyoming. Presentations on the latest grouse management and science across the range were provided, as well as a field tour on the middle day, which gave participants the opportunity to see the cooperative sage grouse conservation work being implemented in Wyoming.

Karen Clause (Wyoming NRCS Range Management Specialist), Mandi Hirsch (SGI Rangeland and Wildlife Specialist in Lander), and Jennifer Hayward (NRCS Wyoming District Conservationist in Pinedale) represented Wyoming NRCS on the tour and gave excellent presentations on NRCS' cooperative SGI work with Wyoming private landowners and partners. Jennifer explained the role of NRCS SGI conservation easements – completed with private landowners and the help of partners – play in Wyoming's sage grouse conservation strategy by providing long term habitat protection. Karen showed tour participants how the recent periods of drought, followed by a year of higher precipitation, have led to natural changes in the sagebrush canopy on the Wyoming landscape.



From left: Karen Clause, Mandi Hirsch & Jennifer Hayward at the White Acorn Ranch in Wyoming, as part of the WAFWA Grouse Workshop field tour. Photo by Jeremy Maestas

Mandi's grazing field tour presentation described how rangeland pastures in Wyoming, like most of the West, often consist of mixed private and public (Bureau of Land Management [BLM]) land ownership acreage that are managed together. The tour stop at the Bertagnolli family's White Acorn Ranch, located at the base of the Wind River Mountains, highlighted a prime example of that combined ownership and shared management. Through SGI, NRCS worked cooperatively with the ranch manager and the BLM Rock Springs Field Office to write a grazing plan to ensure the new prescribed

grazing plan meets the existing Allotment Management Plan guidelines and improves rangeland health. A grazing rest rotation system was developed and implemented. The positive results for both livestock and wildlife are proof that with the dedication of landowners and partners, we can implement conservation practices at a large landscape-scale benefiting wildlife, livestock and the sagebrush ecosystem.

6th Annual SGI SWAT Workshop & Field Tour

SGI is comprised of hundreds of partners and dozens of field staff, all of whom are scattered across the vast sagebrush range. When everyone gets together at the annual workshops, it offers a chance to swap stories, share experiences, and learn about cutting-edge research on range management and wildlife biology. Over 150 participants attended the 2016 Workshop, held June 28-29 in Lewistown, Montana, which featured a full day of presentations on sage grouse conservation efforts in Montana, cultivation risk in the northern Great Plains, and conservation through prescribed grazing, to name a few. Many of these presentations were based on studies that will be published in upcoming issues of scientific journals. Presentations of SGI- and partner-funded research included: sage grouse genetic diversity within regions; entomological studies that help determine range health; nesting habitat preferences; migration patterns across the U.S./Canada boundary; response to managed grazing based on the height of grass on the range; and effect of cropland cultivation on sage grouse habitat.



Todd Cross (University of Montana) explains his research on genetic diversity within Montana sage grouse populations during the SGI field tour.

Photo by Brianna Randall

Day two was spent hearing from numerous speakers – representing Montana Association of Land Trusts, BLM Montana/Dakotas, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, University of Montana, Montana State University, NRCS, area producers, FWS, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, among others – while touring roundtrip from Lewistown to the Shirley Ranch and Lake Mason Grazing Association.



SGI SWAT field staff at the SGI Workshop in Lewistown, Montana. Photo by Brianna Randall

SWAT Field Capacity Coordinator Update

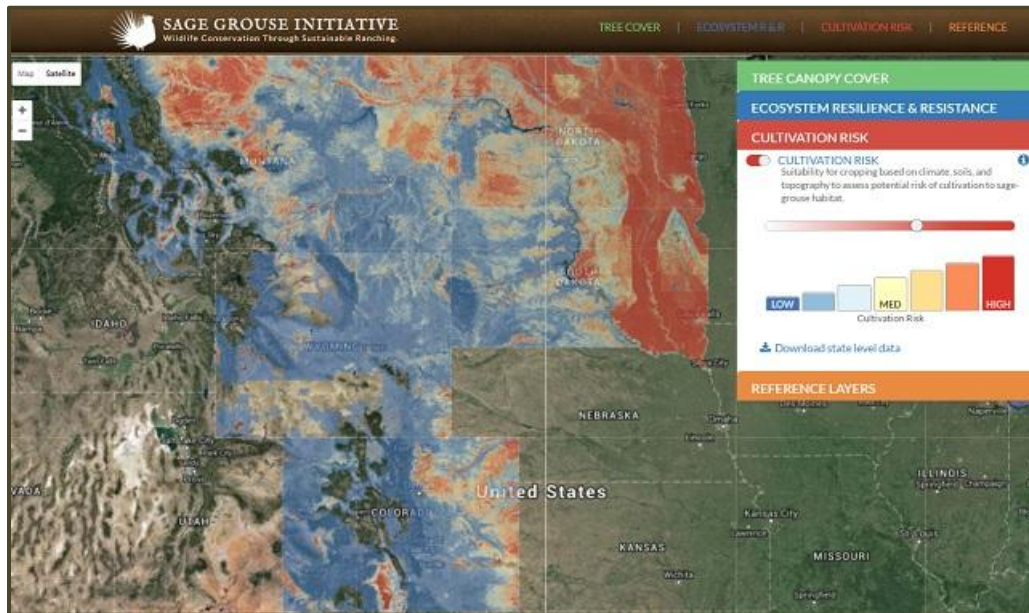
During the quarter, Seth Gallagher, IWJV/SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator, accepted a position as the Rocky Mountain Regional Programs Manager with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The IWJV wishes to express its appreciation to Seth for his efforts towards ensuring the success of SGI SWAT during his tenure!

SGI staff intends to refill the position by the end of the summer—look for an update in the next quarterly report.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

[New Map Layer Identifies Risk of Converting Sagebrush to Cropland](#)

A new layer on the [SGI Interactive Map](#) shows where the risk of cropland conversion is highest. This layer was developed from past SGI- and partner-funded science tools. Mapping the threat of potential crop cultivation helps put conservation easements where sage grouse need them most.



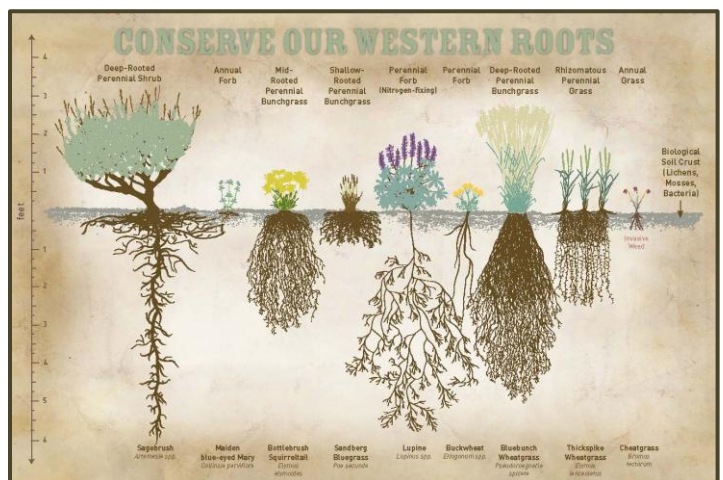
[Conserve Our Western Roots](#)

New resources show why and how to promote native plant health and diversity in the sagebrush sea. These print materials (poster and postcard), along with the page on the SGI website, give scientific explanations on why maintaining and enhancing diverse plants on the range will: improve soil health, resist weeds, support wildlife, rebound from wildfire, build drought resilience, and sustain people across the West.

[Science to Solutions](#)

SGI staff, writers and researchers worked on compiling recent sagebrush-related studies into three different *Science to Solutions* articles this past quarter. All were completed by June 30, and they will be released one at a time later in the year based on communications priorities.

These new articles are based on a few of the approximately 17 studies that will be featured in a special issue of *Rangeland Ecology & Management*, the journal of the Society for Range Management, which is slated to come out later this year. Each of the new *Science to Solutions* will be featured in future reports, as they are released.



COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

Publications & Features

- [SGI Introduces New Resources That Show Why Roots Matter in the Sage-Steppe](#) (April 21)
- *SGI Featured Rancher:* [Oregon Ranchers Raise Cattle with a Conservation Vision](#) (April 25)
- *Featured Friend:* [South Dakota Sage Grouse Local Working Group](#) (June 14)
- *SGI Featured Rancher:* [Rockin' TD Ranch Champions Rangeland Conservation in Nevada](#) (June 21)



Website Updates

Overview:

- 23 new website posts published this quarter
- NEW [Conserve Our Western Roots](#) page created
- Two NEW layers (Fence Collision, Cultivation Risk) added to [SGI Interactive Map](#)
- SGI [home page](#) slider and tiles updated/formatted with new content
- 39,000 total page views this quarter (down 4% from last quarter). *Note: Summer is always the lowest engagement in terms of media communication across the globe due to vacations; SGI website designer, PartnersCreative, shows the same trend for the SGI website in past years.*



Tony & Diane Stobiecki, Rockin' TD Ranch in Nevada. Photo by Jesse Bussard

Top Posts & Pages:

1. [About: The Bird](#) (due to social media links): 2,195 views
2. [Conserve Our Western Roots](#) (new this quarter): 1,415 views
3. [About: The Habitat](#) (due to social media links): 855 views
4. [Sage Grouse Lek Viewing Tours](#) (2014 post): 627 views
5. [Events & Webinars](#): 563 views
6. [About: Our Staff](#) (contact info): 431 views
7. [New NRCS Resource Aims to Reduce Wildfire Impacts in Sage Grouse Country](#): 277 views
8. [Kevin Guinn, USDA "Unsung Hero" Awardee, Tells How Range Conservation Makes A Difference](#): 269 views
9. [Rockin' TD Ranch Champions Rangeland Conservation in Nevada](#): 260 views
10. [New Map Layer Identifies Risk of Converting Sagebrush to Cropland](#): 230 views



Kevin Guinn, USDA's 2016 "Unsung Hero" Awardee

Social Media

[Twitter](#) (@SageGrouseInit)

- 230 total Tweets
- 178,100 total Impressions (views) of our Tweets
- 136 new Followers, bringing the total to 2,039
- Top Tweets:
 - April 24 (earned 21,500 impressions!): [We partner with ranchers to manage for healthy, abundant native plants.](#)
 - April 30 (earned 2,233 impressions, 16 retweets, 16 likes): [Since 75% of #sagegrouse occupy just 25% of the range, targeted conservation maximizes the return on investment.](#)
 - May 18 (earned 3,502 impressions, 10 retweets, 14 likes): [When we work together, anything is possible. Thanks for conserving the #sagebrush sea for 100s of #wildlife species!](#)



Facebook

- 149 page Likes (followers), bringing the total to 3,791
- 58 total posts
- Top Posts:
 - April 14 (2,319 people reached, 13 shares, 54 likes): *See how special sage grouse are with this [live lek camera!](#) Thanks to [The Nature Conservancy](#) and [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) for the cool view ;-)*
 - May 7 (3,423 people reached, 12 shares, 170 likes): [Sage grouse on display under the full moon in Montana. Beautiful!!! Photo: Mike Daniels, Townsquare Media](#)
 - May 24 (4,382 people reached, 21 shares, nine comments, 137 likes): [Spectacular tail-shakin' show by a sharp-tailed grouse! This species' range overlaps with sage grouse, but also includes steep, mountainous country. Video by Tim Torell](#)
 - June 9 (3,126 people reached, 16 shares, three comments, 76 likes): [Grassland birds and cows can be friends. Learn how: \[photo+link\]](#)
 - June 28 (4,744 people reached, 29 shares, three comments, 161 likes): ['Livestock & grouse can be on the same page, and persist side by side in a vast sea of sage.'](#)



Photo by Mike Daniels, Townsquare Media



Photo by Ken Miracle

E-News

- 139 new subscribers (4,633 total)
- Three total sent (monthly)
- 30% open rate
- 22% click rate on links
- Most popular edition from the quarter: [Roots Matter. Here's why.](#)

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

The screenshot shows the Sage Grouse Initiative website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'ABOUT', 'OUR WORK', 'NEWS & MEDIA', 'SAGE GROUSE WORLD', and 'TAKE ACTION'. Below the navigation bar is a large image of two sage grouse. The main content area features two news articles. The first article is titled 'New Resources Show Why Roots Matter in the Sagebrush Sea' and includes a sub-image of a tree with roots. The second article is titled 'SGI Map Now Identifies the Highest Risk of Converting Sagebrush to Cropland' and includes a sub-image of a map. At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a link that says 'View the map and download the data >>'.

objectives. These projects encumber a total of \$7,585,583.18 in SWAT funds. The majority of our time this quarter was dedicated to amending existing agreements to accommodate the transition to SGI 2.0. No new agreements were issued.

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, and NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist 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 convened April 26-27, 2016, in Missoula, Montana, for its fifteenth meeting. The agenda included reallocations and fiscal status of SGI SWAT 1.0, transitioning to SGI 2.0, incorporating BLM work and priorities, and reviewing the status of SGI programs (field capacity, science and communications).

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 eight 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 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 8,418.25 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-three and three-quarters (33.75) FTEs (24.0 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 2,443,193 acres of grazing systems; 308,144 acres of conifer removal; 1,150,381 feet (193 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,782 acres of wetland restoration; 21,518 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 \$2,782,045 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 \$59,663,793!***
- 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.