

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

May 2, 2018

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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 2018. 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, 2018

Intermountain West Joint Venture
May 2, 2018



The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its three focus areas: people and partnerships, science and technology, and communications and outreach. The following reports on these accomplishments from January – March 2018.

PEOPLE & PARTNERSHIPS

SGI would like to thank U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, partners, and ranchers for all of their great work and dedication to conserving sage grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem in 2018. The positive momentum for SGI's proactive, voluntary working lands conservation model has continued to grow following the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service's (FWS) 2015 decision not to list sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. Thanks to the many partners, SGI is proving that this new paradigm of cooperative conservation on working lands is making a difference for ranchers, wildlife and rural economies.

SWAT Field Staff

The SWAT field staff continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state NRCS staff, funding partners, Pheasants Forever (PF) 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 PF's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

Conservation Implementation

PF and the IWJV maintain 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 FWS, during the sage grouse status review process, to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act listing decision reviews.

Partner Positions Accelerate Conservation—The 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:

- **2,603,315 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase overall rangeland health and resiliency through sustainable ranching to benefit sage grouse and other wildlife.
- **327,159 acres** of conifer removal in key nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats. Removing encroaching conifers from sagebrush rangelands to increase water availability and eliminate tall structures in otherwise suitable habitat. As birds re-colonize former habitats, increased bird abundance is anticipated.
- **227 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

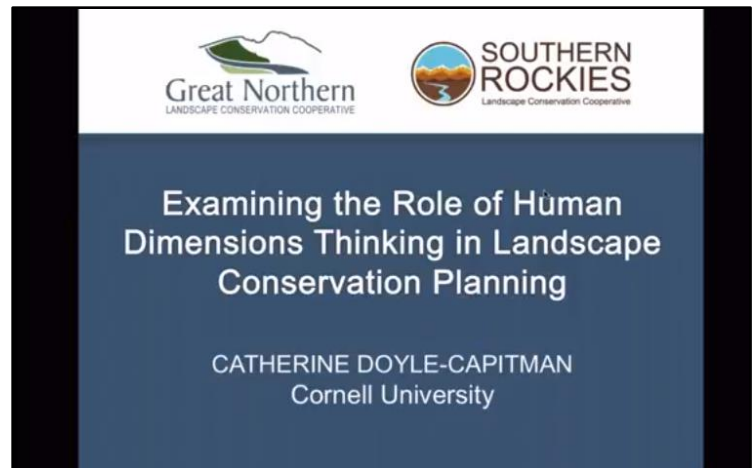
SWAT field staff talent and work does not go unrecognized by NRCS and the other partner employers that work with us. As position vacancies arise, PF works with NRCS, hiring entities and funding partners to re-assess position locations to ensure technical assistance is focused where it's needed most;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

- After more than four years in one of the two PF positions in Elko, Nevada, Rachelle Peppers has accepted a wildlife biologist position with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Battle Mountain, Nevada. Rachelle was a champion for SGI in Nevada and has developed some lasting conservation relationships in the region that will help us in the future. Additionally, we now gain another great partner within BLM in the region with firsthand NRCS SGI knowledge. We are currently having discussions with Nevada NRCS and partners to determine where they would like to refill the open position and will be hiring soon.

SWAT Field Staff Calls & Webinars

PF and the IWJV continue to host monthly coordination conference calls in which SWAT members receive SGI and agency updates, share accomplishments, experiences, and ideas, ask questions, and receive continuous technology transfer and training. Guest speakers this quarter included:

- February: Catherine Doyle-Capitman, a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University. SWAT field staff watched her webinar, *Examining the Role of Human Dimensions Thinking in Landscape Conservation Planning* (<http://greatnorthernlcc.org/event/982>), before the call and then had an extended discussion about ways to build support for SGI and other conservation within a region.
- March: Jared Talley – PhD student at Michigan State University who focuses on environmental philosophy. His research interests include the philosophy of environmental governance, concentrating on the roles of science and community engagement in environmental policy and management. Jared’s presentation built on February’s discussion of engaging communities and thinking about conservation philosophy.



Annual SGI SWAT Workshop – May 22-23, 2018 in Boise, Idaho

Planning for the annual SGI SWAT workshop in Boise, Idaho, is coming along nicely, and we are expecting another excellent turnout. The agenda has been finalized, and invitations have been sent to staff and partners; the response has been excellent, with most of the 150 spaces filled. This year’s workshop is set to be another great event, highlighting the latest SGI science, range-wide collaboration, and the Soda Fire restoration partnership that is taking place. Noppadol Paothong, a photographer and creator of the new *Sage Grouse: Icon of the West* book, will be a featured guest speaker.

SCIENCE & TECHNICAL TRANSFER

On the SGI science front, the first quarter of 2018 included two full days of live-streamed and video-taped symposia from the Society for Range Management’s (SRM) 2018 Annual Meeting in January, the addition of the Songbird Abundance layer to the SGI Interactive Web App, and webinars on livestock grazing and cheatgrass.

[Special Sessions on Science & Management in Sagebrush Country](#)

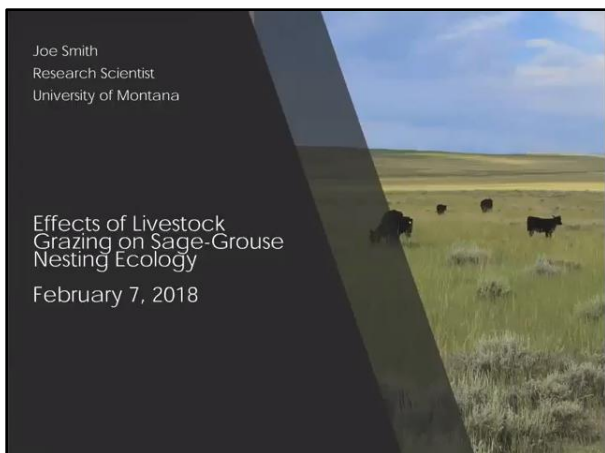
Two special symposia hosted at this year’s annual SRM meeting in Sparks, Nevada, featured 30 presentations by researchers and land managers sharing cutting-edge science and management in sagebrush country. The two, full-day technical sessions were recorded and can be found here:

- [Restoring and Managing the “Emerald Islands” of the Sagebrush Sea: New Science, Sticks and Stones, and the Eager Beaver](#)
- [A Strategic Multi-Scale Approach for Managing Threats to Sagebrush Ecosystems Based on Resilience and Resistance Concepts](#)



[New Online Tool Shows Songbird Abundance Across Sagebrush Country](#)

SGI and partners released the newest component of the [SGI Interactive Web App](#), the Songbird Abundance layer, in January. The custom maps represent the predicted abundance of nine species of sagebrush- and woodland-obligate songbirds within the U.S. distribution of sagebrush-steppe ecosystems.



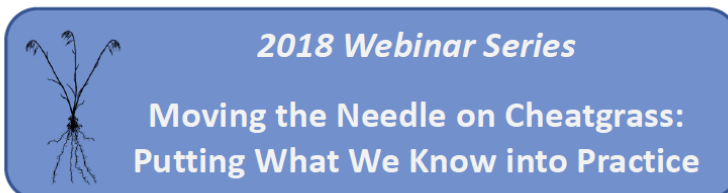
[Webinar: Effects of Livestock Grazing on Sage Grouse Nesting Ecology](#)

Joe Smith, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Montana who helped run a ten-year field study in central Montana to evaluate outcomes of rotational grazing systems designed to improve habitat for sage grouse and analyzed nesting data for his dissertation, presented a summary of the study’s findings to date regarding sage grouse nesting ecology and the effects of rest-rotation grazing on grouse and range vegetation. The webinar can be viewed [here](#).

[Webinar: Cheatgrass Control Methods & Impacts on Perennial Grass Abundance: A Systematic Review Spanning 64 Years](#)

Hosted by the Great Basin Fire Science Exchange, SGI, USDA NRCS, BLM, USDA Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and the U.S. Forest Service, this webinar featured Tom Monaco (USDA ARS and Utah State University Ecologist) presenting on work that examined published studies between 1946 and 2012 to identify how a broad range of control methods influence cheatgrass and perennial grass abundance. The webinar can be viewed [here](#).

This is part of the 2018 Webinar Series, [Moving the Needle on Cheatgrass: Putting What We Know into Practice](#). This series will provide information on integrated management approaches using specific strategies and proven tools.



COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

New Communications Products:

➤ Earned Media:

- 1) [January](#) – [USDA BLOG](#) | [The Conservation Gift That Benefits Us for Countless New Years to Come](#) – NRCS

conservation easements keep agricultural lands working for future generations. They also benefit wildlife, water quality, grasslands and soil.

- 2) [February](#) (Spring 2018 Issue) – [PHEASANTS FOREVER MAGAZINE](#) | [Making Room Out West](#) – How collaborative

removal of encroaching trees via PF and Working Land for Wildlife benefits upland gamebirds, ranching and other wildlife.

- 3) [February](#) – [BEEF MAGAZINE](#) | [Making the ground better](#) – Young ranchers improve the land for both sage grouse and cattle by cooperating with USDA SGI.



The Thomas brothers, Seth (left) and Logan (right), stand next to their father, Bob Thomas. The family has worked to improve the country they ranch for their cattle as well as a variety of wildlife, including sage grouse. Photo by Brianna Randall

➤ Symposia & Webinars:

- 1) January – [Free Live-Broadcast of Special Symposia from SRM Conference](#) (602 page views)
- 2) February – [2018 Webinar Series, Moving the Needle on Cheatgrass: Putting What We Know into Practice](#) (78 webinar flyer downloads)

➤ SGI Science & Feature Stories (17 total published stories and posts on the SGI website):

- 1) January – [SGI WEB APP](#) | [New Online Tool Shows Songbird Abundance Across Sagebrush Country](#) – Map additions to the SGI Web App allow users to easily visualize songbird distribution, bolstering multi-species conservation across the American West. (441 page views)
- 2) January – [ASK AN EXPERT](#) | [Mike Pellant, BLM Rangeland Ecologist \(retired\) – Why Is Cheatgrass Bad?](#) – Mike Pellant explains how cheatgrass and wildfire create a vicious cycle that harms wildlife and our way of life in the West, and also gives solutions that are helping to reduce these threats. (889 page views)
- 3) March – [SAGE WHIZ QUIZ](#) | [What The Heck Is A Lek?](#) – Tests the public's knowledge about the best mating dance in the West. (112 submissions)
- 4) March – [RANCHER VIDEO](#) | [Combating Cheatgrass on Private Ranch Lands In Wyoming Benefits Sage Grouse](#) – Wyoming landowner DeWitt Morris works with SGI to thwart invasive cheatgrass on Mountain Springs Ranch, creating a model for nearby ranchers. (231 video views)

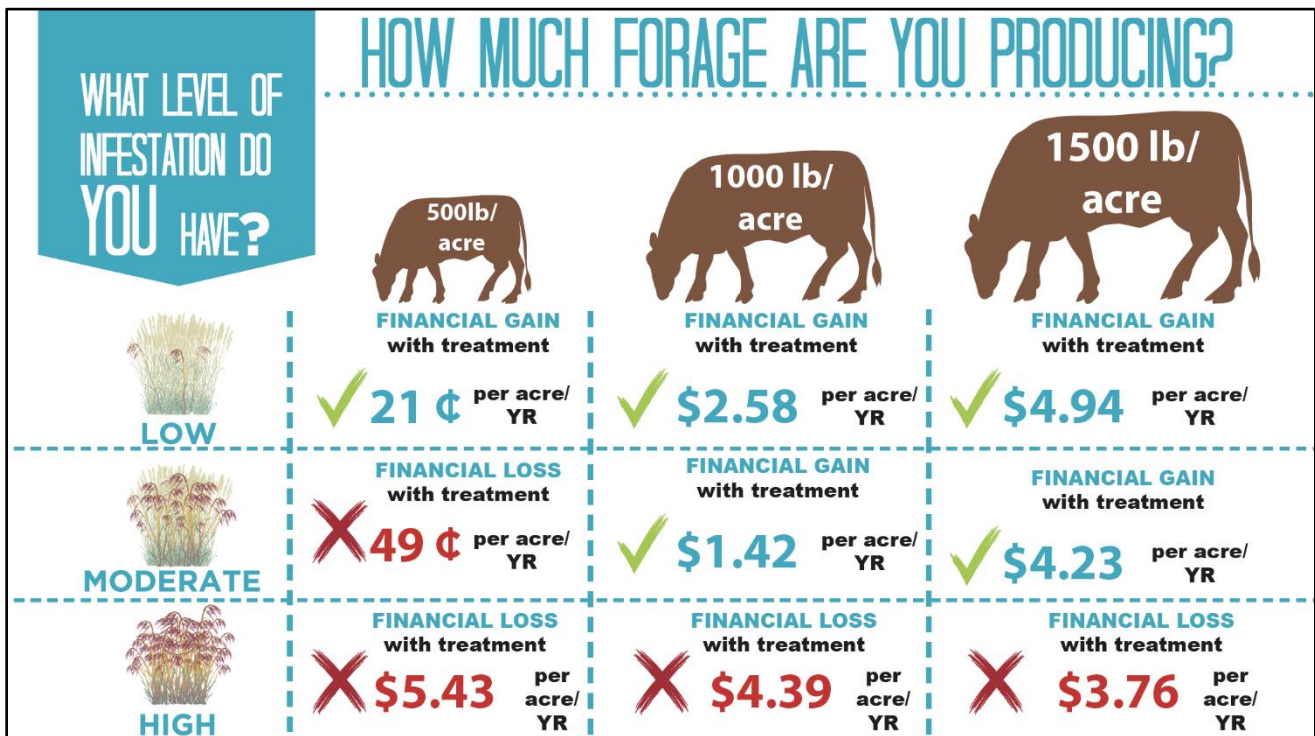


SGI enrolled landowner DeWitt Morris is setting an example for how to protect Wyoming's sagebrush range from the threat of noxious weeds. Photo by Brianna Randall

- 5) [March – SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS | Harnessing Technology Improves Conservation Effectiveness](#) – This six-page publication shows how the SGI Web App uses emerging science and technology to increase conservation effectiveness by matching the right practices to the right places on working lands.

Most Viewed & Downloaded Resources To Date:

- 1) February 2018 – [WEBINAR: Effects Of Livestock Grazing On Sage Grouse Nesting Ecology](#) (580 page views)
- 2) February 2014 – [POST: Sage Grouse Lek Viewing Tours & Places to See the Wondrous Dance](#) (649 page views)
- 3) March 2018 – [POST: New Study Shows It Pays To Treat Invasive Grass On Your Ranch](#) (437 page views)
- 4) March 2016 – [POST: How Do Sage Grouse Mate?](#) (416 page views)
- 5) January 2018 – [SRM Symposia Agendas: January 30; February 1](#) (129 downloads)
- 6) Updated Quarterly – [SGI SWAT Field Staff Contacts](#) (85 downloads)
- 7) [November 2017 – SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS | Taking the Bias Out of Sage Grouse Nesting Studies](#) (37 downloads)
- 8) Conserve Our Western Roots: [Postcard](#) (42 downloads); [Poster](#) (32 downloads)



An economics study from USDA NRCS shows that the earlier ranchers treat cheatgrass, the greater their financial reward. Graphic courtesy USDA NRCS.

Top Page Views:

- The [SGI website](#) received ~33,000 total page views this quarter.
- The [SGI Interactive Web App](#) received ~5,500 page views – twice as many as the previous quarter!

Top Facebook Posts:

- 1) January – [NEW SCIENCE TOOL!! The SGI Interactive Web App now shows the abundance of 9 songbird species to help target multi-species conservation across the West. Check out the maps here: <https://buff.ly/2DFOkvT>](#) (115 likes, 10 shares, 5,777 impressions)
- 2) February – [Check out this super cool adaptation by grouse living in southern Utah – they make little snow caves to eat buried sagebrush leaves!](#) (120 likes, 11 share retweets, 4,588 impressions)
- 3) March – [NEW VIDEO shows how landowners' efforts to thwart cheatgrass provides better habitat for sage grouse, mule deer, and domestic livestock in Wyoming](#) (71 likes, 12 shares, 2,983 video views!)

Top Twitter Tweets:

- 1) January – [NEW SCIENCE TOOL!](#) [@SageGrouseInit](#) Web App now shows the abundance of 9 [#songbird](#) species across the West to help target multi-species conservation: bit.ly/2DHsYhP [@WAFWA](#) [@USFWS](#) (15 retweets, 24 likes, 8,377 impressions)
- 2) February – [DYK – #SageGrouse](#) living in southern Utah have learned to make little snow caves to eat buried sagebrush leaves: bit.ly/2DMP3dG [@utahpublicradio](#) [@usuextension](#) [@UtahDWR](#) [@BLMUtah](#) (14 retweets, 32 likes, 8,340 impressions)
- 3) March – [Thanks to 2,154 wonderful ranchers, we've improved 7.5 million acres of western grazing lands. Happy #NationalAgDay!](#) [@SageGrouseInit](#) [@USDA_NRCS](#) [@LPCInitiative](#) (19 retweets, 31 likes, 10,760 impressions)

Top Instagram Post:

January – [Science helps most when it translates into solutions! Using radio telemetry to track sage grouse \(like this female wearing a radio collar in front of Mt. Rainier\) helps put conservation practices in the right places.](#) Photo by Tatiana Gettelman, Yakima Training Center [#sagebrush](#) [#wildlifephotography](#) [#birdsofinstagram](#) [#mountains](#) [#science](#) [#scenic](#) [#mountrainier](#) (117 likes, 3 comments)



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 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 Indian Tribe, Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producer 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 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 9,319.25 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.* Twenty-six and three-quarters (26.75) FTEs (20.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity Coordinator FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Coordinator FTE, 0.75 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 2,603,315 acres of grazing systems; 327,159 acres of conifer removal; 1,200,774 feet (227 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 30,839 acres of rangeland seeding; and 34,908 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$261,639 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 \$66,914,004!***
- 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 working landscape approach to delivering 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. Six years later, SGI SWAT has continued building field capacity and strengthening the science guiding SGI, as well as bolstering communications capacity through partnerships. SGI SWAT objectives include:

- 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 has been facilitated through agreements with two major partners. In 2011, NRCS entered into an Interagency Agreement (IA) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) was charged with implementation of the IA on behalf of FWS. NRCS obligated \$9.3 million to the IA, which the IWJV leveraged to raise an additional \$7 million from an array of conservation partners including FWS, state wildlife and agricultural agencies, conservation districts, non-governmental conservation organizations, and energy companies. Between 2011 and 2016 – the term of the IA – the combined \$16.3 million resulted in:

- 2,443,193 acres of rangeland improvements; 308,144 acres of conifer removal; and 218 miles of high-risk fence marked or removed.*
- Completion of 14 major research projects that evaluated outcomes of conservation practice implementation or identified future conservation investments.*
- Establishment of a robust communications program with a top-notch website, strong social media presence, and innovative written series including Rancher Success Stories and Science to Solutions.*
- A network of conservation partners focused on sagebrush habitat conservation, as well as a new partnership between the IWJV and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) that seeks to expand the SGI SWAT model to public lands, specifically those managed by BLM.*

In June 2016, NRCS executed a Cooperative Agreement with Pheasants Forever (PF), obligating an additional \$5 million to continue the SGI SWAT effort through September 2018. PF is committed to working with partners in providing over \$2.68 million in match to the agreement.