

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

November 5, 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 July-September 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: July 1 – September 30, 2018

Intermountain West Joint Venture  
November 5, 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 July – September 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 continues 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 have 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:

- **2,816,766 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase overall rangeland health and resiliency through sustainable ranching to benefit sage grouse and other wildlife.
- **329,786 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.
- **257 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 discussions with Nevada NRCS and partners, one of two PF positions in Elko, Nevada, will be moved to Winnemucca from Elko to better meet the needs of the state. The position was vacated in early 2018 and is expected to be refilled by the end of the year. The other PF position will remain in Elko.
- Lindsey Latham was selected for the PF position in Marsing, Idaho (vacated by Zack Foster, who is now an Idaho Department of Lands Resource Specialist). Lindsey graduated from the University of Idaho in 2018 with a degree in Conservation Biology, as well as a minor in Fisheries Resources and Restoration Ecology. She has previously worked for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game and U.S. Forest Service. Lindsey started August 20.
- The hiring process is underway for the Mountain Home, Idaho, position (vacated by Hayden Boll). Partners have decided to move this position to Rexburg, Idaho; it is expected to be refilled within the next quarter.



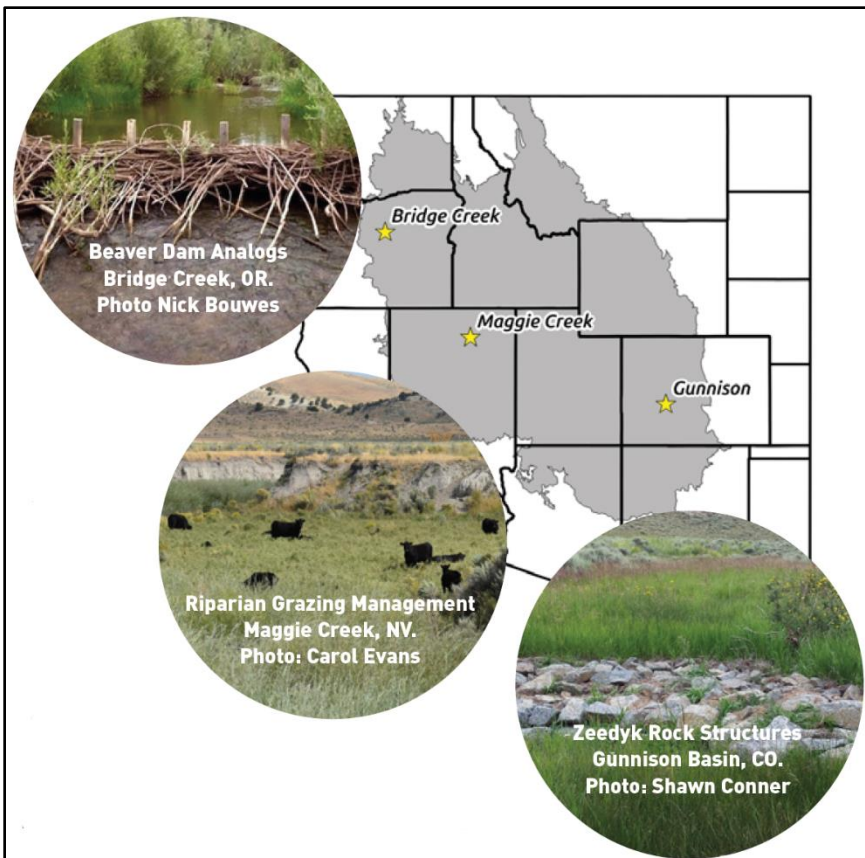
Lindsey Latham

### 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.

### SCIENCE & TECHNICAL TRANSFER

On the SGI science front, the third quarter of 2018 included the release of new science related to low-tech riparian and wet meadow restoration; four in a series of five workshops held to help local NRCS conservationists and partners learn the benefits of [beaver dam analogues \(BDAs\)](#); and new technology for landowners and resource managers and a corresponding webinar.



### [Low-Tech Riparian and Meadow Restoration Keeps Rangelands Greener Longer](#)

A study sponsored by SGI and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) evaluated the outcomes of three different low-tech wet habitat restoration projects – simple rock and wood structures, BDAs, and time-controlled grazing management – around the American West. Published in August in the Society for Ecological Restoration’s *Restoration Ecology* Journal, [Low-tech riparian and wet meadow restoration increases vegetation productivity and resilience across semiarid rangelands](#) showed that the low-tech restoration techniques are indeed making riparian and meadow areas more productive, and helping them stay greener longer.

**Partnering with Beaver in Restoration – 2018 Field Workshop Series**

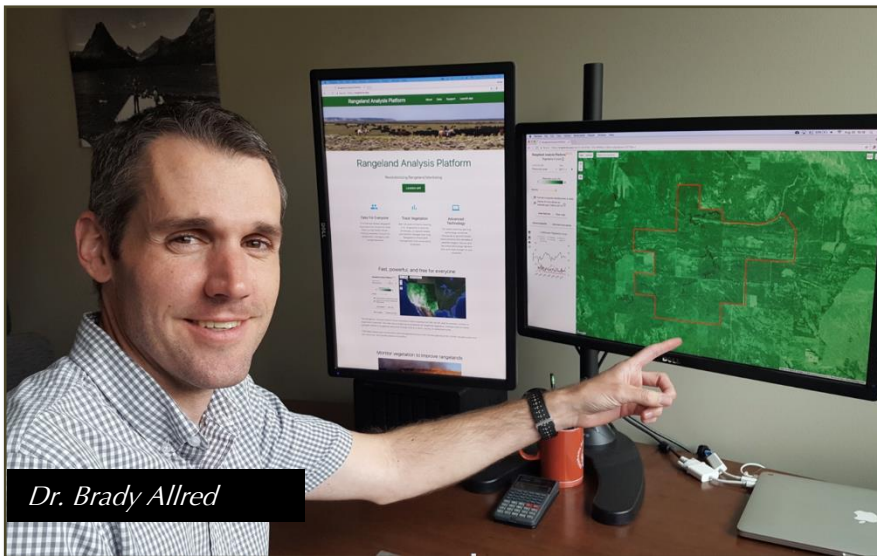
A series of five workshops were hosted June through September in Idaho, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming, to connect local NRCS conservationists and interested partners in how to use beaver and BDAs as low-cost tools to restore riparian areas to benefit wildlife and working lands. The workshops discussed how to restore hydrologic processes that promote riparian resilience/mesic vegetation and how to identify opportunities for restoration, as well as examined how BDAs can be applied as a bioengineering technique to achieve SGI mesic habitat goals. Participants gained the knowledge of/skills needed to design and implement appropriate low-cost practices and foster technology transfer within their respective work areas.

**New Technology For Landowners And Resource Managers Revolutionizes Rangeland Monitoring**

In September, Dr. Brady Allred, University of Montana (UM) Rangeland Ecologist, announced the creation of a new online application, the Rangeland Analysis Platform (RAP), in partnership with USDA and BLM. The RAP provides the first-ever vegetation cover maps for rangelands from the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean. It revolutionizes monitoring by providing rangeland resources at an unprecedented blend of time, space and scale—accomplished through field data, satellite imagery, and the cloud-based computing power of Google Earth Engine.

**Rangeland Analysis Platform: Introducing a free, online tool to help manage and monitor western rangelands**

In conjunction with the release of the RAP, USDA NRCS Science and Technology hosted a webinar led by Dr. Allred, Dr. Matthew Jones (UM Research Scientist), and Jeremy Maestas (NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist) to help educate participants about this exciting new tool. The webinar can be viewed [here](#).



*Dr. Brady Allred*

*The RAP is a free, online tool that helps landowners and natural resource managers track vegetation through time and plan actions to improve America's grazing lands. It can be used to provide strategies to improve productivity of grazing lands, manage weeds, mitigate impacts of wildfire and drought, and benefit wildlife habitats.*

## COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

### Stories & Posts

NEW SCIENCE | [Middle Ground Found On The Range](#)

– This post summarizes a study led by UC Santa Barbara and co-authored by SGI Science Advisor Dr. Dave Naugle that was published in the *Journal of Applied Ecology*. The research shows that policies to restrict grazing access on public lands may have the unintended consequence of exacerbating sage grouse habitat loss.



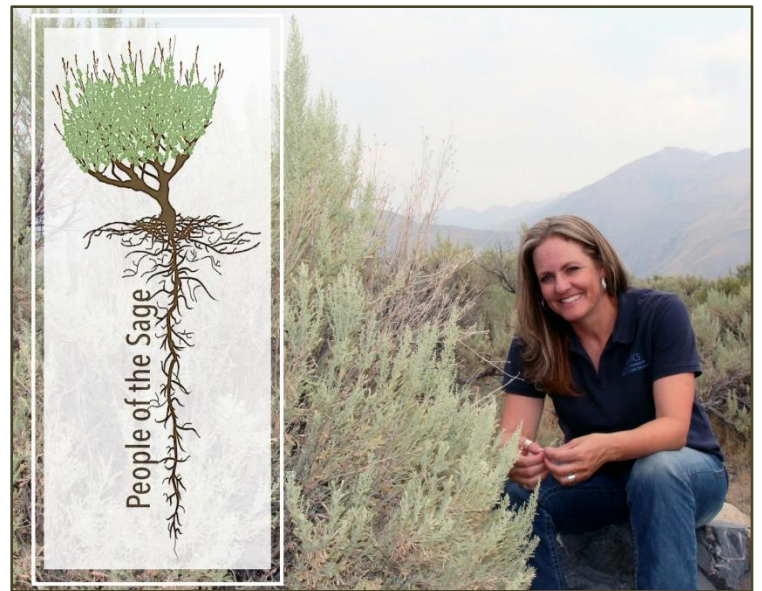
*Photo by Ken Miracle*

NEW RESOURCE | [New Technology For Landowners And Resource Managers Revolutionizes Rangeland Monitoring](#)

– This SGI story introduced the new RAP and was cross-posted on the USDA Blog. In addition, SGI helped produce the new [RAP Fact Sheet](#), [User Guide](#), [website](#), and icon to help the public understand how this new technology can benefit working lands and wildlife. We also created [this Event page](#) to help promote the RAP Demonstration Webinar.

FARMERS.GOV BLOG | [Running The Ranch](#) – Written by Tim Griffiths, this fun post recounts his race through a Montana ranch, weaving in tidbits about how USDA helps improve water, forage and wildlife habitat on the wide open lands that support recreation as well as agriculture.

ASK AN EXPERT | [What Is Low-Tech Stream Restoration?](#) – Joe Wheaton, Associate Professor and Fluvial Geomorphologist from Utah State University, describes cost-effective, hand-built solutions that help repair degraded streams and meadows on working lands. The story features fabulous photos from SGI co-sponsored workshops this summer. **TOP VIEWED POST! 590 views**



*Leah Mori*

FIELD STAFF PROFILE | [Meet Leah Mori: Helping Ranchers Weather Wildfire Storms in Nevada's Sagebrush Sea](#)

– This story by Heather Emmons (NRCS Nevada) features Leah Mori, a soil conservation technician in Winnemucca, Nevada,

who is combating the twin threats of mega-wildfires and invasive species. It's part of SageWest's "[2018 People of the Sage: Fire & Invasives](#)" storytelling series. **TOP VIEWED POST! 316 views**



FEATURE | [Range Conservation Across Continents: What Australia and America Have In Common](#)

– Mandi Hirsch, SGI Range Specialist in Wyoming, hosted a two-day field tour for Matt Cameron, a conservation biologist with the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage in Australia. This story describes how Mandi and Matt learned that voluntary conservation strategies working on behalf of America's sage grouse can also help Australia's plains-wanderer.

*Left: Matt Cameron and Mandi Hirsch*

## RANCHER MULTIMEDIA STORY |

[#ConservationRoadtrip: Taking No-Till To The Next Level](#) – With help from NRCS, Montana producer Jason Brewer returns cropland to permanent grasses and forbs to provide forage for livestock and sage grouse.

PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT | [High School Students Help Restore Montana Sagebrush](#) – SGI worked with Montana Conservation Corps, FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, local ranchers, BLM, and The Nature Conservancy to have high school students cut down conifers and repair degraded wet meadows. **TOP VIEWED POST! 323 views**

SAGE WHIZ QUIZ | [How Are Weeds Linked To Wildfire?](#) – In addition to engaging audiences with multiple choice questions, this quiz features ‘fun facts’ about how invasive annual grasses are linked to wildfires in the West. (Note: This quiz linked to last quarter’s Ask An Expert post, [Why Is Cheatgrass Bad?](#), which received an additional 565 views this quarter.) **TOP VIEWED POST! 449 views**

## Most Downloaded Resources:

1. [TECHNICAL NOTE: Hand-Built Structures for Restoring Degraded Meadows in Sagebrush Rangelands](#) (87 downloads)
2. SGI SWAT PARTNER POSITIONS: Field staff contact information (79 downloads)
3. ‘Conserve Our Western Roots’ [POSTCARD](#) (44 downloads) and [POSTER](#) (37 downloads)

## Website Analytics:

- The [SGI website](#) received ~17,600 total page views, a decrease of 35% from last quarter. This is due to continued poor “click rate” on SGI Google Ads (a grant-funded campaign run by PartnersCreative). In the 2nd quarter, 89% of website traffic originated from “paid search” ads. That fell to just 17% in the third quarter.
- Interestingly, the average time spent on the SGI website increased by 18% per session. Likely, this is because users who find the website on their own (e.g., through social media/searching the internet/direct E-News links) are more likely to be interested in the content versus those who arrive by clicking on a Google Ad.
- The [SGI Interactive Web App](#) received ~1,900 page views, similar to last quarter. The average time spent on this site increased as well, up 7% from last quarter.



Montana Conservation Corps crew



The Soda Fire burned nearly 280,000 acres of sagebrush country in 2015. Photo courtesy BLM Idaho

## Top Social Media Posts:

TWITTER (August) | 13 retweets, 22 likes, 6,786 views | [Darcy McDaniel](#) spent 11 years fighting [#wildfires](#) on the ground, and is now a zone fire planner with [@blmnv](#). Read her take on changing fire regimes in [#SagebrushCountry](#): [bit.ly/2Kb7Wuq](https://bit.ly/2Kb7Wuq)

INSTAGRAM (August) | 101 likes | [Whisky is for drinkin' and water used to be for fightin'. Luckily, simple low-tech restoration options help stretch water – and conservation dollars – much further. This summer, we took a road trip around the West to teach people how to build structures that heal degraded streams.](#) Photo by John Coffman of a workshop in [#Wyoming](#)

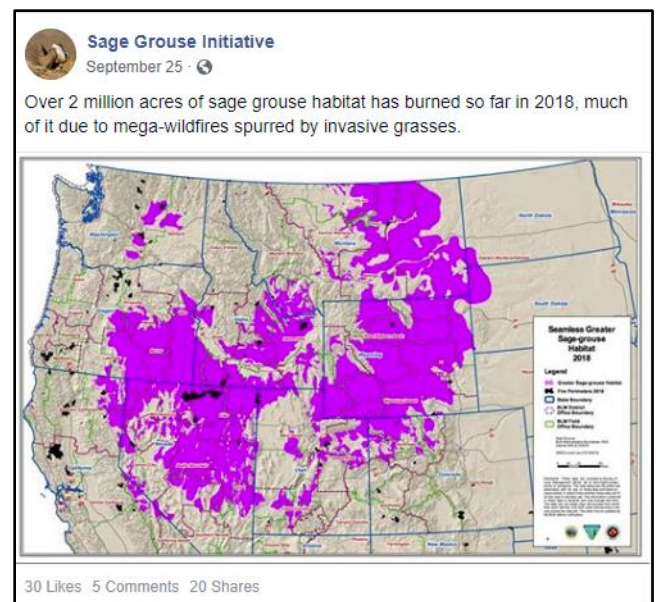
TWITTER (September) | 15 retweets, 28 likes, 4,322 views | [In the arid American West, water is as good as gold. Wet “mesic” habitats – places where water meets land – comprise less than 2% of the entire landscape.](#) [bit.ly/2mU0Dgk](https://bit.ly/2mU0Dgk)

FACEBOOK (September) | 134 reactions, 20 shares, 20 comments, 2,690 views | [Over 2 million acres of sage grouse habitat has burned so far in 2018, much of it due to mega-wildfires spurred by invasive grasses.](#)

FACEBOOK (September) | 108 likes, 22 shares, 18 comments, 2,788 views | BREAKING NEWS: Revolutionary new web app developed by [University of Montana](#) in partnership with USDA and [U.S. Department of the Interior](#) empowers people to monitor grazing lands and improve range health. Check it out for free today!!!

## 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.* Two new Indian Tribes, Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers were contacted by the SWAT field capacity staff 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 9,582.25 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 2,816,766 acres of grazing systems; 329,786 acres of conifer removal; 1,355,312 feet (257 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 33,668 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 \$2,193,763 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 \$70,409,951!***
- 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 in 2011 to strengthen NRCS' capacity to implement SGI. Over seven 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.*