

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

February 4, 2019

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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 October-December 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,

Dave Smith  
IWJV Coordinator



# Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

## Quarterly Report: October 1 – December 31, 2018

Intermountain West Joint Venture  
February 4, 2019



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 October – December 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:

- **2,862,631 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase overall rangeland health and resiliency through sustainable ranching to benefit sage grouse and other wildlife.
- **332,902 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.
- **288 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:

- Hunter Burkett was selected for the new PF position in Winnemucca, Nevada (one of two positions originally located in Elko, Nevada). Hunter grew up in Nevada and attended the University of Nevada, Reno, where he received a degree in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Hunter has spent time working with Nevada Department of Wildlife on lek surveys and brings a great local knowledge of the area to the position.



Hunter Burkett

### 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.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Annual [Working Lands for Wildlife Workshop – June 19-20, 2019 in Twin Falls, Idaho](#)

Planning for the first ever western Working Lands for Wildlife workshop has begun, and the event is shaping up to be another great venue for partners to meet and showcase the latest in western rangeland conservation. The two-day event is set to highlight conservation efforts, the latest science, and stories from private landowners across the 19 western states. More information on this exciting event will be provided in the next quarterly report.

### SCIENCE & TECHNICAL TRANSFER

On the SGI science front, the fourth quarter of 2018 included the release of two new *Science to Solutions* articles and a low-tech riparian and wet meadow restoration workshop.

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

A new *Science to Solutions* article – [Low-Tech Riparian and Meadow Restoration Keeps Rangelands Greener Longer](#) – was produced in coordination with a study sponsored by SGI and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which evaluated the outcomes of three different low-tech wet habitat restoration projects – simple rock and wood structures, beaver dam analogues (BDAs), and time-controlled grazing management – around the American West. As mentioned in the July-September 2018 quarterly report, the study was 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.

The image shows the cover of a 'Science to Solutions' article from the Sage Grouse Initiative. The title is 'Low-Tech Riparian and Meadow Restoration Keeps Rangelands Greener Longer'. It includes a 'In Brief' section with bullet points, a map of the western U.S., and three circular photos showing restoration projects: Beaver Dam Analogues, Riparian Grazing Management, and Zoey's Rock Structures.



Left: A sequence of BDAs in a series, collectively forming a dam complex. Photo courtesy Anabranch Solutions



## Low-Tech Riparian & Wet Meadow Restoration Workshop – October 16-18 in Susanville, California

A 2.5-day field demonstration workshop was conducted for roughly 30 partners from the Buffalo-Skedaddle Sage Grouse Working Group in northeastern California and northwest Nevada. The workshop was organized and hosted by Tiffany Russell (Point Blue Conservation Science/NRCS), Shawn Conner (BIO-Logic, Inc. in Montrose, Colorado), and Jeremy Maestas (NRCS West National Technology Support Center). Participants included a variety of partners, such as BLM Eagle Lake



Field Office, NRCS, Nevada Department of Wildlife, non-governmental organizations, private landowners, and other state and local agencies. Through the hands-on event, participants gained awareness of low-tech structures for restoring headcuts and incised channels including Zeedyk rock structures and BDAs. This workshop was made possible by the sagebrush conservation partnership between BLM, IWJV, NRCS, and PF to increase technical

transfer and support for application of low-tech mesic habitat restoration. Through this partnership, Shawn Conner was hired to expand capacity for supporting local partnerships interested in Zeedyk techniques and to help them gain the confidence they need to scale up restoration.



## Grazed Rangelands Produce Sage Grouse Chicks' Preferred Food

A *Science to Solutions* article was produced in November to highlight the study – *Ground-Dwelling Arthropod Community Response to Livestock Grazing: Implications for Avian Conservation* (publication pending) – that shows grazed rangelands produce more food sources (e.g., beetles, ants, caterpillars) for sage grouse. These arthropods are a key resource for Greater Sage-grouse and Lesser Prairie-Chickens. Researchers

discovered that specific classes of arthropods preferred by sage grouse were 13% more prevalent on managed pastures. Plus, managed rangeland supported a more diverse assemblage of ground-dwelling arthropods. Read the full *Science to Solutions* article [here](#).

## COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

### Stories & Posts

NEW SCIENCE | [Grazed Rangelands Produce Sage Grouse Chicks' Preferred Food](#) – This post highlights new research showing that grazed rangelands provide increased abundance and diversity of arthropods – key components of sage grouse and lesser prairie-chicken chick's diets. This post and the accompanying [Science to Solutions](#) article summarize this research from Montana State University. **TOP VIEWED POST!**  
**578 views**





[Low-Tech Riparian and Meadow Restoration Keeps Rangelands Greener Longer](#) – This post highlighted the recently published SGI- and BLM-sponsored study that evaluated low-tech riparian meadow restoration techniques. This new science and associated products were featured last quarter, but this post and the accompanying [Science to Solutions article](#) continue to amplify and advance this important work. **TOP VIEWED POST! 1,136 views**

NEW RESOURCE | We continued to focus on and push the [Rangeland Analysis Platform](#) (RAP) – released late September 2018 – through social media and e-newsletter content. We also showcased an “Ask An Expert” interview (see below) on the RAP.

[FARMERS.GOV](#) BLOG | [Grazing Lands Grow More Bugs for Birds to Eat](#) – Written by Dr. Hayes Goosey, Montana State University Rangeland Entomologist and Dr. Dave Naugle, SGI Science Advisor and University of Montana Wildlife Biology Professor, this post explains the new research described above in the NEW SCIENCE section. The post amplifies the study that we featured.

[#FridaysOnTheFarm – For Future Generations of Ranchers and Sage Grouse](#) – This piece tells the story of David Sceirine, a California rancher who entered more than 2,300 acres of his ranch into a conservation easement, in part to protect the Bi-State sage grouse; the post was accompanied by an [NRCS story map](#).



ASK AN EXPERT | [How Can Emerging Technology Help Conserve Rangeland?](#) – In this post, Dr. Matthew Jones, University of Montana Research Scientist, explains how new technologies can play an important role in helping manage and conserve rangelands. Specifically, Dr. Jones shares why and how the [RAP](#) is so powerful and revolutionary. **TOP VIEWED POST! 342 views**

*Left to right: Jim Gifford and Jessica Gwerder (NRCS); rancher David Sceirine; Susanna Danner and Kay Ogden (Eastern Sierra Land Trust)*

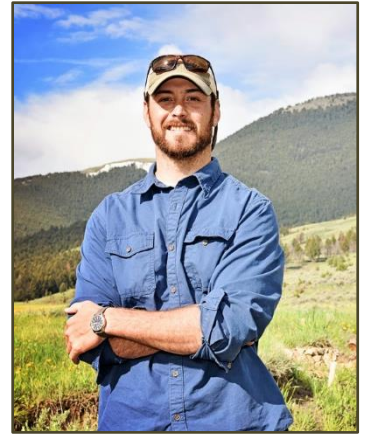
FEATURE | [1,800 Ranchers and Counting!](#) – Tim Griffiths, NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife West Regional Coordinator, is featured in this look back and look ahead post. Written by outgoing SGI Communications Coordinator, Brianna Randall, the post is an interview with Griffiths that also weaves in success stories and metrics from 2018.



RANCHER MULTIMEDIA STORY | [Oregon Ranchers Sustain “Heart of the Desert”](#) – This shares the story of the Fitzgerald Ranch in Oregon and features an NRCS-developed, SGI-focused story map, [Heart of the Desert](#). The story map gives an overview of how the Fitzgeralds manage the “emerald islands” on their sagebrush rangeland. In this part of eastern Oregon, only two percent of the land is

considered “wet meadow”. The Fitzgeralds work hard to maintain these green refuges, which provide important habitat for sage grouse and more than 350 other species.

PARTNERSHIP SPOTLIGHT | [Partnering to Conserve a Sagebrush Landscape](#) – This highlights a [new partnership to conserve sagebrush in Southwest Montana](#) via collaboration by BLM, the IWJV, The Nature Conservancy in Montana, NRCS, FWS, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, and the Beaverhead Watershed Committee, for the hire of a Southwest Montana Conservation Coordinator (Sean Claffey). This partnership is part of the larger collective effort by BLM and the IWJV – [Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands](#) – to catalyze proactive, voluntary, and community-led sagebrush rangeland conservation (on both public and private lands) across the West. The post was accompanied by an [NRCS story map](#).



Sean Claffey

[New Nevada Agreement Paves the Way for Landscape-Scale Conservation](#) – This announces a new Memorandum of Understanding signed by several parties in Nevada that will help private and public land managers pool and access resources

to increase sagebrush landscape restoration and improvements. **TOP VIEWED POST! 450 views**



Sagebrush rangelands in Nevada

SAGE WHIZ QUIZ | [Water in the West](#) – This Sage Whiz Quiz came out on September 28, just at the end of the last quarter. Focused on water resources in sagebrush rangeland, the quiz includes fun facts and connects to the other water- and mesic-focused content that has been developed recently.

**Most Downloaded Resources:**

1. [SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS](#): Low-Tech Riparian and Meadow Restoration Keeps Rangelands Greener Longer (140 downloads)
2. 'Conserve Our Western Roots' [POSTCARD](#) and [POSTER](#) (93 total downloads)
3. [SGI SWAT PARTNER POSITIONS](#): Field staff contact information (52 downloads)
4. [SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS](#): Grazed Rangelands Produce Sage Grouse Chicks' Preferred Food (52 downloads)

**Website Analytics:**

- The [SGI website](#) received ~22,200 total page views over the quarter, an increase of 27% over the last quarter. Paid search drove a scant 300 users, or 2.92% of total page views to the site this quarter. Both the number of users and the number of new users rose this quarter compared to last, each by approximately 25%.
- Time spent on the SGI website averaged 1:28 per session for this quarter. This represents a slight increase of ~3% over last quarter.
- The [SGI Interactive Web App](#) received 1,715 page views this quarter, slightly down from 1,900 last quarter, and had 664 users.

**E-newsletter:**

In September, we switched to a new format and design for the e-newsletter. The switch seems to have improved open and click rates; the rates from each month in the quarter were as follows:

- [October](#): 32% open rate | 50% click through rate
- [November](#): 24 % open rate | 42% click through rate
- [December](#): 21% open rate | 29% click through rate





## Top Social Media Posts:

[INSTAGRAM](#) (October) 275 likes | [sagegrouseinitiative](#)

By working together, we can pass on our western heritage of vast skies, beautiful rangelands, and room to roam for people, livestock, and wildlife. Photo by [@kenmiraclephotography](#) [#wildlifephotography](#) [#wildlife](#) [#birds](#) [#birdsofinstagram](#) [#livestock](#) [#sagebrush](#) [#americanwest](#)

[FACEBOOK](#) (October) | 188 likes, 21 shares, 19 comments, 4,674 views | [Sage Grouse Initiative](#)

EXCITING NEWS! Nevada agreement scales up conservation work in sagebrush country!

[Nevada Department of Wildlife Bureau of Land Management – Nevada Pheasants Forever](#)  
[U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service U.S. Forest Service](#)

[TWITTER](#) (October) | 15 likes, 8 retweets, 5,484 impressions | [SageGrouseInitiative](#) @SageGrouselnit

So far, over 2 million acres of [#sagegrouse](#) habitat has burned in 2018, much of it in mega [#wildfires](#) spurred by invasive grasses: [bit.ly/2Kb7Wuq](http://bit.ly/2Kb7Wuq)

[FACEBOOK](#) (November) | 124 likes, 39 shares, 15 comments, 4,157 views | [Sage Grouse Initiative](#)

Did you know that streams with restored beaver ponds create “emerald refuges” for animals when wildfires scorch across the West? Let the rodent do the work!

[TWITTER](#) (November) | 26 likes, 13 retweets, 6,399 impressions | [SageGrouseInitiative](#) @SageGrouselnit

BREAKING NEWS!! Grazing lands grow bugs that young birds need to survive:

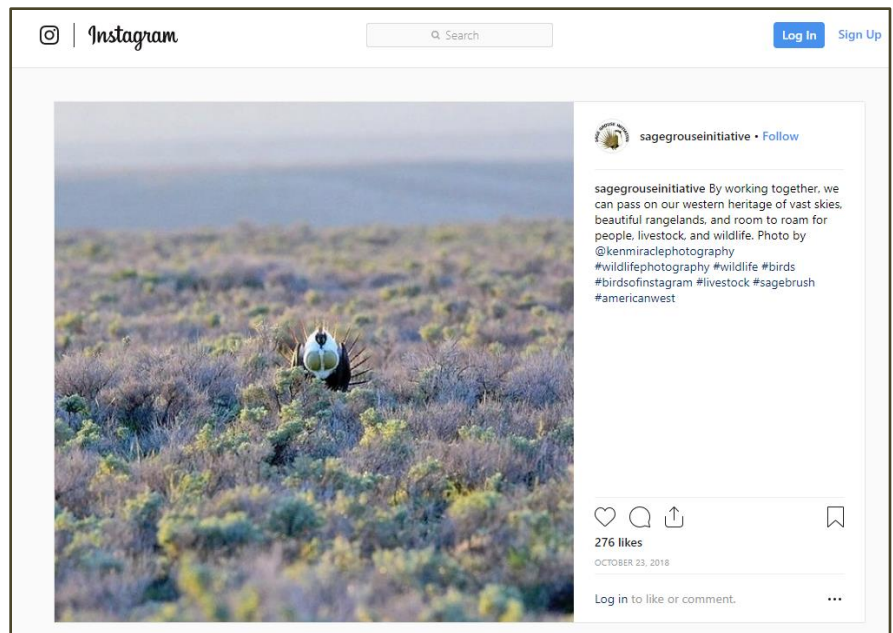
[bit.ly/2Ap3btf](http://bit.ly/2Ap3btf) 🦋🐛🐌 @FarmersGov @MSUBobcats

[FACEBOOK](#) (December) | 65 likes, 18 shares, 2 comments, 1,500 views | [Sage Grouse Initiative](#)

“May your days be merry,” says Sagebrush Santa. “And your rangelands’ future bright!” Happy holidays from the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) 🎄

[TWITTER](#) (December) | 3 Retweets, 11 Likes, 16,772 Impressions | [SageGrouseInitiative](#) @SageGrouselnit

Meet Matt, a research scientist at [@umontana](#) (and his daughter). He explains how emerging technology can help conserve western rangelands: [bit.ly/2AVMWeg](http://bit.ly/2AVMWeg) [@BLMNational](#) [@USDA\\_NRCS](#)



Today, more than 6,000 producers participate. Together we have conserved 9.2 million acres of working landscapes across all 50 states!



## 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.* Five 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 9,803.25 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 2,862,631 acres of grazing systems; 332,902 acres of conifer removal; 1,518,247 feet (288 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 36,571 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 \$2,443,113 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 \$72,853,064!***
- 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.*