

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

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*conserving habitat through partnerships*

August 1, 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 April-June 2019. 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: April 1 – June 30, 2019

Intermountain West Joint Venture  
*August 1, 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 April – June 2019.

### 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:

- **2,909,982 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase overall rangeland health and resiliency through sustainable ranching to benefit sage grouse and other wildlife.
- **333,029 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.
- **318 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. No position changes occurred this quarter.

## 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.

Beginning this quarter, SWAT staff were introduced to the grant writing process, including how to approach and write grants given their specific agreement requirements. The first of a three-part training began in March, and the following two sessions took place this quarter:

- **April:** Seth Gallagher, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Rocky Mountain Region Program Manager, presented to the SWAT on how funders develop requests for proposals and how grant proposals are ranked.
- **May:** For the third and final part of the grant writing training, the SWAT studied four different proposals that were provided by a partner. As a group, they discussed each proposal, including quality, if more information was needed, and what was learned by reviewing the proposals.

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

The [first ever Western Working Lands for Wildlife Workshop](#) was a huge success with more than 200 people attending the two-day event. The workshop highlighted conservation efforts across 19 western states related to range resiliency over the last decade, showcased the latest science, and presented stories from private landowners and other partners. Thanks to the efforts of [Partners for Conservation](#) (PFC), more than 30 landowners from 11 of the western states were in attendance.

Ron Nichols was one of the guest speakers and delivered a great message on self-branding and the power of one. Ron – a former NRCS communications specialist – championed the creation of the soil health movement within NRCS.

***Feedback from participants has been extremely positive. Here are just a few of the comments that we have received:***

*"I can honestly say that in my two decades of being in the conservation field this was the best NRCS conference I've ever attended. The sage grouse and woody encroachment presentations were more timely and influential than you can imagine for policy decisions that affect the southern plains. Cross-pollination is so important, and I'm grateful to have been able to attend.*

*Thank you, and I look forward to crossing paths again soon!"*

*"Just a quick note to let you know how much I enjoyed last week's workshop. It was hands down one of the best workshops I have ever been a part of. Everything about it was excellent, and I am so thankful to have been a part of it. I look forward to the future, and please, do not hesitate to reach out if I can help in any way!"*

*"I'll be thinking about this conference and everything that I saw and learned for a long time. You and all of your associates did a great job!"*



Additionally, PFC featured two pieces highlighting the event in their June newsletter, including the news article, [Western Working Lands for Wildlife Resilient Rangelands Workshop](#), and the note below from PFC Executive Director Steve Jester:



*Hello from the Airport,*

*I'm coming back from the [first Western Working Lands for Wildlife Workshop](#) held this week in Twin Falls, Idaho. Wow! What an inspiring gathering of over 200 landowners along with state, federal, and nonprofit conservation professionals and academics living and working across 19 western states. The attendees gathered to hear both about some of the latest tools and techniques related to ensuring resilient rangelands as well as stories from landowners and their partners who are making their landscapes more sustainable for people and nature.*

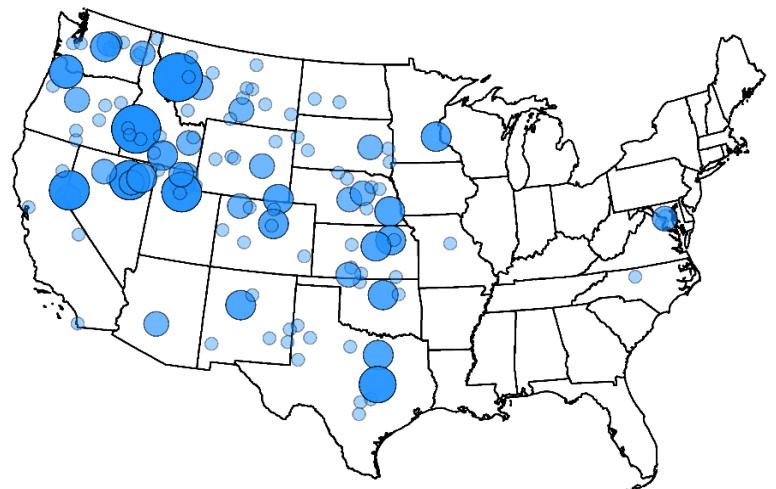


*More about the session can be found elsewhere in the newsletter, but I wanted to relate just a little about one interesting theme that arose during the meeting...the power of one. In many of the success stories shared, the most important factor could be traced back to one conversation, one meeting, one relationship, or one moment in time when one person had the courage and foresight to stand up and make something happen. We didn't hear about many, if any, silver bullets, but we were amazed as we often are about what can be accomplished when a person remains committed to hard work, including the hard work of building and maintaining the partnerships that make things happen.*

*Partners for Conservation is looking forward to working with USDA NRCS, Pheasants Forever, and the other partners on future sessions. If you missed this one, you missed something special. If you can't wait until the next Western Working Lands event, give our own [Private Lands Partners Day](#) a try this fall in Ogden. We are certain you will leave that one as inspired as I felt leaving Twin Falls!*

*Sincerely,  
Steve Jester*

Finally, the map to the right shows the location of all the participants who attended this year's event representing outstanding rangeland conservation efforts from across the West. (Blue dot size represents the number of participants from that area):



## SCIENCE & TECHNICAL TRANSFER

On the SGI science front, the second quarter of 2019 included the release of a restoration design manual, a new *Science to Solutions* article on conifer mapping, and the latest research highlighting the benefits of conifer removal to sage grouse populations.

### [New Manual for Low-Tech Riparian Restoration](#)

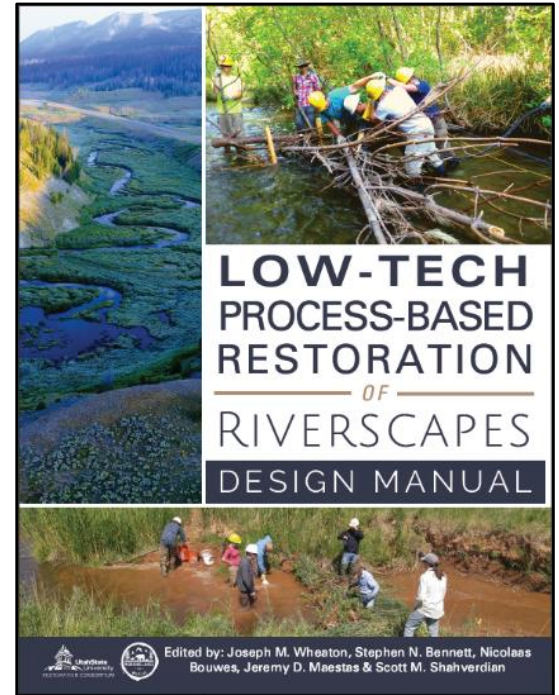
NRCS partnered with PF and [Utah State University's Restoration Consortium](#) to create a new, free design manual – [Low-Tech Process-Based Restoration of Riverscapes](#) – to help more people understand the principles underlying low-tech restoration and how to implement it. Since low-tech restoration projects are usually a fraction of the cost of traditional approaches, resource managers can treat more stream miles using these methods. The manual was informed by input received from resource managers who attended previous workshops held around the West and the lessons learned from applying various low-tech approaches.

### [Big Picture of Woodland Management in Sagebrush Country](#)

A new *Science to Solutions* article – [Big Picture of Woodland Management in Sagebrush Country](#) – was produced in coordination with a new conifer mapping effort. The research – made possible due to the cross-boundary partnership with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and IWJV as part of the cooperative [Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands](#) effort – shows that targeted removal of pinyon-juniper provides almost immediate benefits for songbirds, mule deer, sage grouse, and livestock. The conifer cover comparison maps give a clearer, more comprehensive picture of where conifer reduction is occurring in sagebrush rangelands. The maps also show that woodlands are still expanding into many sagebrush landscapes. Continued partnership efforts are needed to strategically conserve priority shrublands.

### [Sage Grouse Populations Grow When Conifers are Removed](#)


Oregon State University scientist Andrew Olsen has spent the last several years studying how sage grouse populations are responding to sustained conifer removal efforts near the Warner Mountains in south central Oregon. He approached his study from a watershed scale, monitoring a 109,000-acre treatment site and an 82,000-acre control site over an eight-year period with support from NRCS and BLM. Andrew found that sage grouse population growth rates were 12% higher where conifers were cut relative to where no conifers were cut. This is the first study showing that we can increase sage grouse populations through targeted and sustained habitat restoration through conifer removal.



USDA United States Department of Agriculture

**WORKING LANDS**  
FOR THE PUBLIC

**SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS**



**Big Picture of Woodland Management in Sagebrush Country**

- The western U.S. is experiencing many of the same challenges associated with the woodland invasion of grasslands that is happening globally.
- Public-private partnerships may give a glimpse in comprehensive picture of where conifer reduction is occurring in sagebrush rangelands.
- From 2011-2017, the extent of conifer cover in sagebrush country increased by 18%. Public management efforts are responsible for 2/3 of the total increase; the other 1/3 is due to private.
- Public-private partnerships are successfully reducing conifers in highly targeted priority rangelands, such as in northwest Utah.
- The maps also show that woodlands are still expanding into many sagebrush landscapes. Continued partnership efforts are needed to strategically conserve priority shrublands.

**Background**

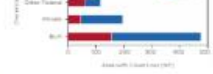
Around the world, trees are taking over productive shrub and grasslands. Every continent except Antarctica is now experiencing the challenges associated with woodland invasion. In North America, one of the most concerning vegetation transitions is the encroachment of pinyon-juniper woodlands into sagebrush rangelands. Expanding conifer trees threaten habitat for sagebrush-dependent wildlife, reduce water availability, increase the risk of high-severity wildfires, and diminish forage for livestock.

In the Great Basin, conifers have expanded their range by up to 600% in places. If no action is taken to reverse the trend, it is estimated that 75% of the lands experiencing conifer invasion will convert into dense woodlands within the next 30-50 years, crowding out native bunchgrasses and sagebrush that wildlife and livestock rely upon.

Luckily, research shows that targeted removal of pinyon-juniper provides almost immediate benefits for songbirds, mule deer, sage grouse, and livestock. Public and private conservation partners have been working together to halt the invasion of trees onto rangelands; however, since conifer treatments span multiple states, counties, and land ownerships, it's been difficult to calculate the full extent of pinyon-juniper removal.

"Partnerships are restoring precious sagebrush ecosystems in priority watersheds, but we're still getting flanked by invading trees across many western rangelands. This new research shows that we need to keep our foot on the gas implementing sagebrush conservation practices like conifer removal to keep rangelands healthy and productive."

Steve Small  
BLM



Bar graph showing conifer reductions by land ownership.

Right: Andrew Olsen tracks a sage grouse hen near her nest in an Oregon study area. Photo courtesy Noppadol Paothong



## COMMUNICATIONS & OUTREACH

### Stories & Posts

NEW SCIENCE | [Big Picture of Woodland Management in Sagebrush Country](#) – This *Science to Solutions* and accompanying post shared new research about the scale and breadth of conifer encroachment across the West. *372 page views*

NEW RESOURCE | [New Manual for Low-Tech Riverscape Restoration](#) – This post highlighted a new manual developed in partnership with Utah State University for low-tech, process-based stream restoration techniques. *TOP VIEWED POST! 1,493 page views*

ASK AN EXPERT | [Conversation with Rangeland Management Specialist of the Year: Rebecca Knapp](#) – In this Ask an Expert, Rebecca Knapp, winner of the Rangeland Management Specialist of the Year from the Society for Range Management, answers questions about her work and offers career advice for young conservation professionals. *461 page views*

[Sage Grouse Populations Grow When Conifers Are Removed](#) – This Ask an Expert features Oregon State University scientist Andrew Olsen discussing new Oregon research that shows sage grouse populations grew by 12% following sustained conifer removal efforts. *TOP VIEWED POST! 1,092 page views*

FEATURE | [Conservation Easements Continue to Protect Idaho's Pioneers-To-Craters Landscape](#) – This post shares good news about continued partnership efforts, in which the NRCS has been involved, to place conservation easements in the Pioneers-to-Craters area in Idaho. *139 page views*

[Western Working Lands for Wildlife Workshop 2019 – Rangeland Resiliency](#) – This post highlights the success of the 2019 Working Lands for Wildlife Workshop in Twin Falls, Idaho, and recaps the two days of meetings and field tours attended by 230 people. *338 page views*

FEATURED RANCHER | [Sustainable Ranching In Utah: A Boon for Wildlife and Livestock](#) – This post, written by Brianna Randall, highlights the conservation efforts of the Ellis family and their Circle Bar Ranch where they have partnered with SGI to improve their range for wildlife and livestock. *147 page views*



*Rebecca Knapp  
Photo courtesy USDA NRCS*



SAGE WHIZ QUIZ | [Elk](#) – This quiz focused on elk, delivering a few fun facts and testing our audience's knowledge about this denizen of the sagebrush sea. *585 page views*

*Left: Sagebrush-steppe range with the Pioneer Mountains in the distance.  
Photo courtesy National Park Service/Craters of the Moon National Monument & Preserve*

## Most Downloaded Resources:

1. [SCIENCE TO SOLUTIONS](#): Big Picture of Woodland Management in Sagebrush Country (82 downloads)
2. Conservation Success – [2018 SGI SCORECARD](#) (75 downloads)
3. 'Conserve Our Western Roots' [POSTCARD](#) and [POSTER](#) (61 downloads)
4. Greater Male Sage Grouse [DISPLAY CALL SOUND](#) (37 downloads)

## Website Analytics:

- The [SGI website](#) received ~23,056 total page views over the quarter, an increase of 13% over the last quarter. Paid search drove 130 site visitors or about 1.1% of total visitors. The total number of visitors rose to 11,365 this quarter, an increase of 26%. The number of new users also rose to 10,684 this quarter, an increase of 27.5%.
- Time spent on the SGI website averaged 2:29, an increase of 7.2% over the last quarter.
- The [SGI Interactive Web App](#) received 1,659 page views this quarter, compared to 2,106 last quarter. There were a similar amount of users (713) as last quarter (709).

## E-newsletter:

Open rates dropped a bit this quarter, but click through rates improved or stayed static; the rates from each month in the quarter were as follows:

- [April](#): 27% open rate | 31% click through rate
- [May](#): 22% open rate | 29% click through rate
- [June](#): 21% open rate | 31% click through rate

## Top Social Media Posts:

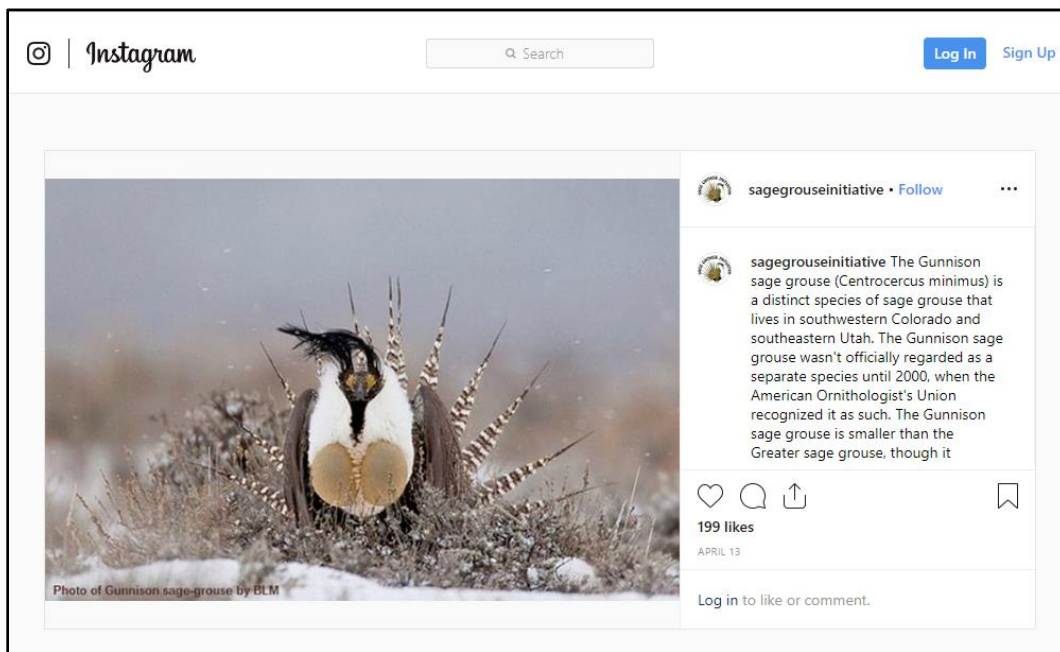
[FACEBOOK](#) (April) | 49 likes, 5 shares, 2,255 views, 67 total reactions, comments and shares | We've been busy! Thanks to our participating ranchers and partners, we've been making great progress on the milestones we set in 2016. Check out our conservation accomplishments in our 2018 SGI Scorecard.

[FACEBOOK](#) (May) | 439 likes, 88 shares, 10,824 views, 651 total reactions, comments and shares | Did you know that pronghorn aren't actually antelope? It's true, their closest living relatives are giraffes and okapi. These fleet-footed creatures rely on large expanses of sagebrush for their survival. They need large open vistas to sight predators and run away – it's their primary survival tactic. Pronghorn are one of the 350+ species that rely on healthy sagebrush landscapes. Photo: Tatiana Gettelman, USGS.



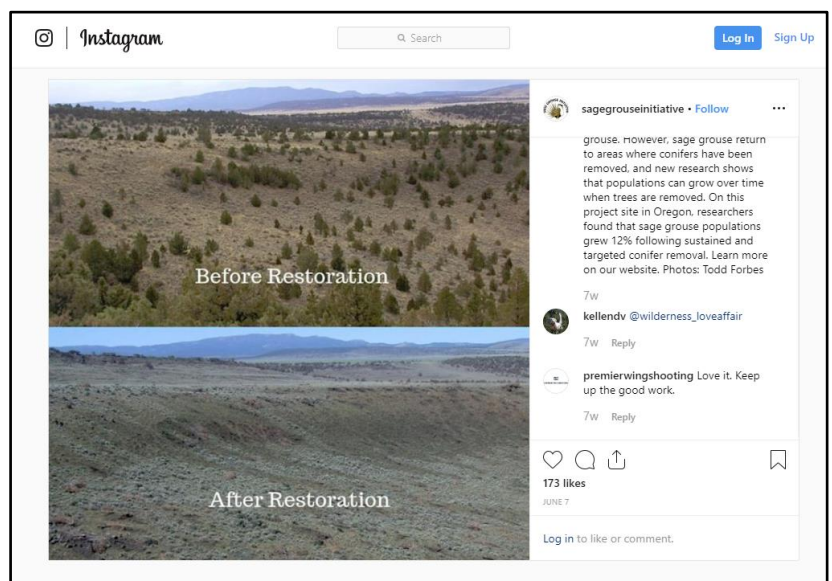
[FACEBOOK](#) (June) | 148 likes, 31 shares, 4,806 views, 207 total reactions, comments and shares | It's June and that means most sage grouse chicks have hatched! Hens spend about a month brooding over their eggs (May to June), but now they have to teach their little ones how to survive and find food. Insects are a key food source for the chicks, and it turns out that grazed rangelands provide more of the bugs chicks need to survive. Learn more about the protein-rich insects chicks need to eat and how grazing produces more of them.

[INSTAGRAM](#) (April) | 199 likes | The Gunnison sage grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) is a distinct species of sage grouse that lives in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The Gunnison sage grouse wasn't officially regarded as a separate species until 2000, when the American Ornithologist's Union recognized it as such. The Gunnison sage grouse is smaller than the Greater sage grouse, though it behaves similarly during courtship (it's displays are considered less elaborate than the Greater sage grouse displays but they are similar). Today, scientists estimate that fewer than 4,000 Gunnison sage grouse exist in the U.S. Photo: BLM [#sagegrouse](#) [#birdsofinstagram](#) [#wildlife](#) [#wildlifefacts](#) [#nature](#)



[INSTAGRAM](#) (May) | 343 likes | Happening right now on sagebrush landscapes across the West! Male sage grouse browsing in sagebrush, courtesy of Tatiana Gettelman, USGS.

[INSTAGRAM](#) (June) | 173 views | When we talk about conifer removal in sagebrush, it can be hard to visualize what the landscape looks like before and after the trees are removed. This image shows what a project in Oregon looks like before and after conifers were removed. Studies show that sage grouse avoid areas where even small numbers of conifers are scattered across the landscape; even one to two trees per acre can push out sage grouse. However, sage grouse return to areas where conifers have been removed, and new research shows that populations can grow over time when trees are removed. On this project site in Oregon, researchers found that sage grouse populations grew 12% following sustained and targeted conifer removal. Learn more on our website. Photos: Todd Forbes





[TWITTER](#) (April) | 19 likes, 7 retweets, 5,541 impressions | Wondering just what SGI has been up to the last couple of years? Wonder no longer... We've got our latest conservation results posted on our site. Check them out. [bit.ly/2uFMcjR](https://bit.ly/2uFMcjR) #conservation #sagegrouse

[TWITTER](#) (May) | 110 likes, 42 retweets, 22,240 impressions | Robotic sage grouse?! Yep, it's a thing. In Wyoming, researchers are using a remote-controlled female sage grouse robot to study lekking behavior in males. Apparently the males don't seem to mind that this female has wheels instead of legs. [bit.ly/30ISkww](https://bit.ly/30ISkww)

[TWITTER](#) (June) | 49 likes, 13 retweets, 9,296 impressions | This before/after shot of a conifer removal project in Oregon shows how different the sagebrush landscape looks after encroaching trees are removed. In this project area, a multi-year study found that sage grouse populations grew 12% after conifer removal. Photos: Todd Forbes

## 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.



*Elk in sagebrush. Photo by Brianna Randall*

## 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.* Six 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 9,940.25 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 2,909,982 acres of grazing systems; 333,029 acres of conifer removal; 1,681,307 feet (318 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,822 acres of wetland restoration; 42,510 acres of rangeland seeding; and 36,008 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$94,720 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 \$73,472,377!***
- 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 2019. PF is committed to working with partners in providing over \$2.68 million in match to the agreement.*