



November 1, 2014

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Joyce & Tim:

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 2014. 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 dark ink, appearing to read "Dave Smith".

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: July 1 – September 30, 2014

Intermountain West Joint Venture
November 1, 2014

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its four focus areas: field delivery, science, communications, and partner development. The following reports on these accomplishments from July – September 2014.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field team continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff, funding partners, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). The team's dedicated and enthusiastic range conservationists, wildlife biologists, and natural resource specialists not only help get conservation on the ground but also spread the shared vision of achieving wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching throughout the West. Below are some of the incredible highlights from the SWAT field team and the IWJV's efforts to support SGI delivery this reporting period.

Conservation Implementation

The IWJV maintains a detailed tracking system to document SWAT team progress on a quarterly basis. These contributions are rolled up with other NRCS actions and reported to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), during the annual sage grouse status review process, to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act listing decision reviews.

Partner Positions Accelerate Conservation—Additional field capacity support provided by SWAT partner positions across the West has essentially enabled NRCS to double the amount of SGI conservation. Partner staff have helped plan or implement:

- **1,853,576 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase sage grouse hiding cover during nesting season. Additional grass cover is expected to increase sage grouse populations by eight to ten percent.
- **231,807 acres** of conifer removal in key nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats. Removing encroaching conifers from sagebrush rangelands eliminates tall structures in otherwise suitable habitat. As birds re-colonize former habitats, increased bird abundance is anticipated.
- **172 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.

Leveraging Farm Bill funds for Wildlife—More boots on the ground means more Farm Bill conservation funding put to work for wildlife. *Every \$1 partners invest results in \$69 put into habitat improvement!*

Partnership Adds Technical Assistance Capacity to Enable Landscape-Scale Sage Grouse Conservation in Northeast Nevada

Elko County, Nevada, encompasses over 17,000 mi² of land in the heart of the Great Basin – an area equating to roughly five Yellowstone National Parks. With virtually all of the county supporting sagebrush, this landscape is a key stronghold for sage grouse in the West. The NRCS District Conservationist in Elko, Jaime Jasmine, sees huge opportunities but has been challenged by the lack of capacity to address demand, "it is difficult to stay ahead of the planning needed to assist ranchers seeking financial assistance, let alone address the technical assistance requests from some of these new non-traditional customers."

The new customers she refers to are corporations who increasingly own massive swaths of Nevada ranchlands but don't necessarily qualify for Farm Bill financial assistance. Several of these large corporate-owned ranches are stepping up to do their part for sage grouse but desire technical planning assistance from NRCS and partners to identify what they can do to help. One of the big, initial hurdles is the sheer scale of rangeland inventories needed to develop a conservation plan.



*Vast sagebrush landscapes in Elko County, Nevada.
Photo by Jeremy Maestas.*

With one SGI SWAT position already located in the Elko NRCS Field Office, Jaime looked to her partners at Pheasants Forever (PF) and the IWJV for ideas. Sam Lawry, PF Western Regional Director, quickly recognized the potential for scaling-up SGI in this vital landscape by saying, “tell us what we can do to help, we’re all in.” One part of the solution was to take advantage of an open PF SWAT position vacancy just down the road in Ely and relocate the position to assist with the Elko County workload. Another component was in establishing a new capacity partnership to secure range inventory contract services to accelerate field data collection.

The new arrangement enables partners to bring in experienced contractors to complete specific tasks in the planning process, complimenting and accelerating efforts of full-time conservation planners. It uses a proven model – already being implemented through PF SWAT agreements in California and Idaho – to address capacity shortfalls for conifer removal on public lands and cultural resource inventories. In this case, PF is serving as the fiscal agent, coupling partner funds and securing contractor services for rangeland inventories.

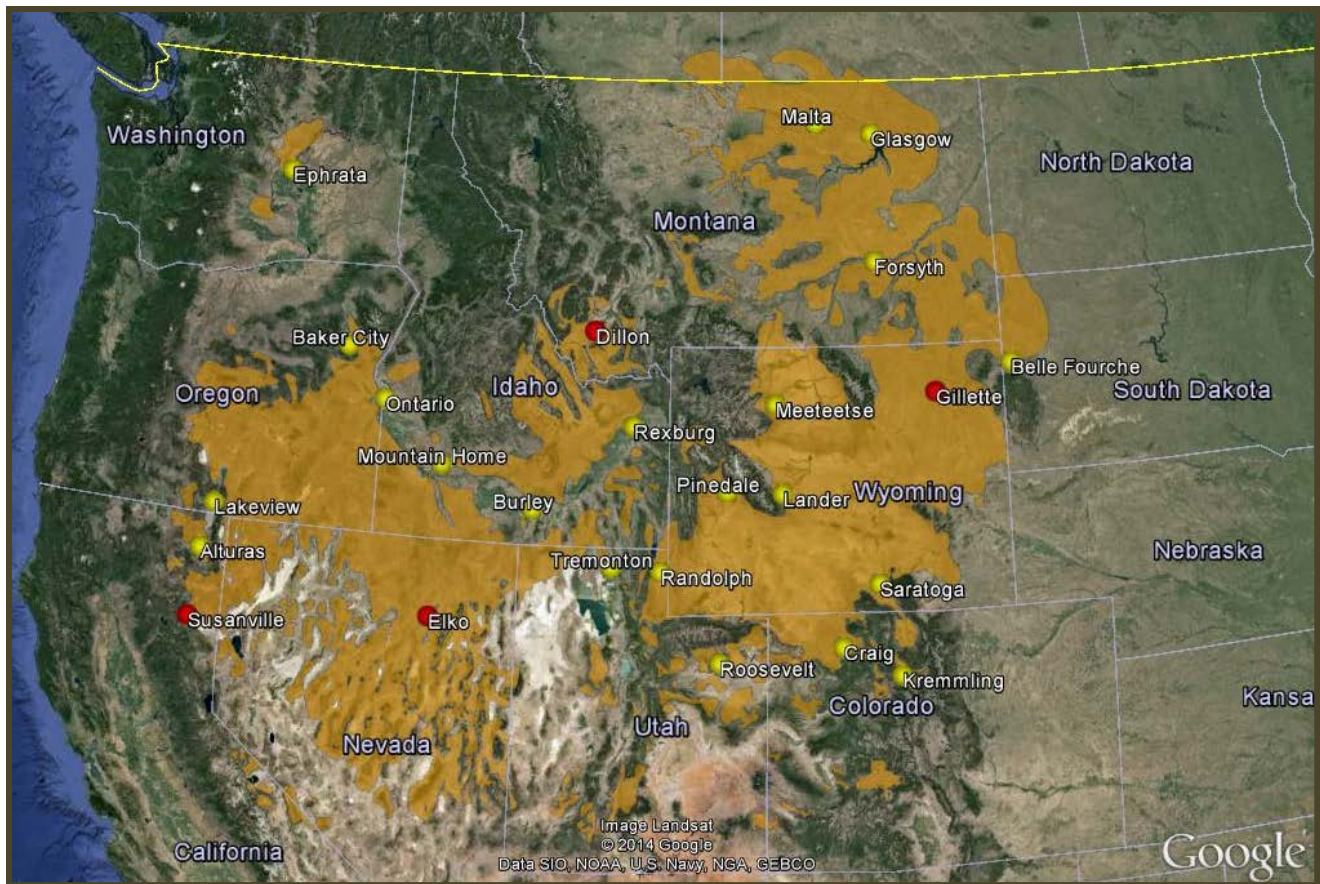
Nevada NRCS State Conservationist, Bruce Petersen, invested half of the funds needed to get going, while the IWJV and FWS Region 8 Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program kicked in the match. Initial inventories will cover about 150,000 acres. Contractors are already underway collecting field data to enable conservation plans to be written by NRCS and partners early next year, in hopes that landowners can begin implementing practices soon thereafter.

SGI SWAT Team Grows Through Investment in Additional Partner Positions

The SGI SWAT field team family has grown with recent investments made in existing partner positions around the range. The IWJV worked with partners in California, Montana, and Wyoming, to bring SGI SWAT support to bear on three partner biologist and range conservationists positions that were already helping get SGI on the ground:

- Tiffany Russell, Point Blue Conservation Science, Partner Biologist – Susanville, California
- Lindsay Schmitt, NRCS, Rangeland Management Specialist – Dillon, Montana
- Brandon Elkins, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, Partner Biologist – Gillette, Wyoming

These individuals are no strangers to SGI and have been regular participants in SGI SWAT events. Providing partial funding support for these positions helps ensure their important contributions can continue and more fully brings them into the close-knit SWAT team.



Current locations of SGI SWAT-sponsored capacity support. Red dots indicate new SWAT partnerships; yellow dots indicate existing SWAT capacity.

SWAT Field Capacity Coordinator Update

Through a unique partnership between the IWJV and NRCS, SGI SWAT Field Capacity Coordinator and Technical Lead, Jeremy Maestas, has been on detail to the IWJV from NRCS for the last two years. During that tenure, Jeremy provided leadership to SGI SWAT staff and partners. He helped further blur the lines between agencies and partners to help achieve the common goal of sagebrush ecosystem conservation. Under the original terms of the Interagency Agreement, that detail ended on September 30th, and Jeremy has now returned to his role as Oregon NRCS State Biologist. The IWJV wishes to express its appreciation to Oregon NRCS and Jeremy Maestas for their strong commitment to ensuring the success of SGI SWAT!

While this marks a transition in leadership for the SWAT Field Capacity program, the great work will continue to charge forward. The IWJV and PF moved quickly to advertise a full-time, permanent SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator in mid-September. This brand new position doubles down on the commitment to the SWAT partnership by not only backfilling the Capacity Coordinator role but further expanding it to provide more support to SWAT staff and partner organizations. Dedicating a full time position to this crucial aspect of SGI expands from the previous half-time commitment, allowing us to capitalize on emerging opportunities to strengthen SWAT and add to the long-term durability of SGI. We are pleased to announce that Seth Gallagher has been hired as the SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator. Seth is one of the Nation's leaders in developing and managing agreements that put "boots on the ground" to deliver Farm Bill conservation programs. We are extremely fortunate to now have his experience, savvy, and commitment channeled into one of the IWJV's highest conservation priorities. Seth will be a great addition to the IWJV team.

As we transition, the staff at the IWJV, as well as PF and NRCS, will continue to be a steady resource for SWAT staff and partners. Tina Dennison, Project Coordinator, and Lori Reed, Operations Specialist, are available for assistance with accomplishment tracking and reporting, planning and logistics, as well as other administrative and operational support. Brian McDonald, Grants and Agreements Specialist, will continue to work closely with SWAT hiring entities, funding partners, and PF in overseeing site-specific funding agreements.

SWAT Team Coordination Calls & Upcoming Workshops

In November, several SWAT team members will be attending the International Sage Grouse Forum in Salt Lake City, Utah. The IWJV is providing travel support to team members to take advantage of this opportunity to exchange information with colleagues and landowners around the West. SWAT employees are also hosting their own self-directed tour and meeting, in conjunction with the forum, to discuss topics specifically related to day-to-day SGI delivery.

The IWJV continues to host monthly conference calls in which SWAT team members receive SGI updates, share accomplishments and experiences, ask questions, and receive continuous technology transfer and training.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

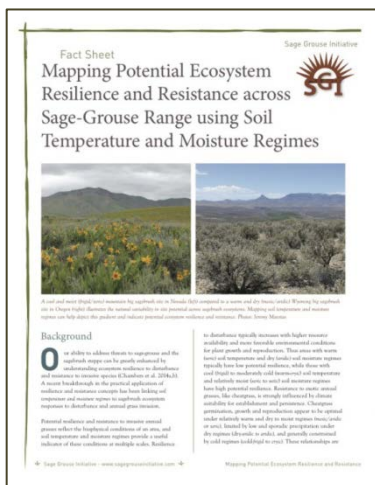
Three noteworthy publications for science hit the press in September 2014. The articles below give the details on a significant report on reducing impacts of invasive annual grasses and altered fire regimes on sage grouse habitat; a study showing that sage grouse conservation efforts in Wyoming overlap with conserving mule deer habitat; and, another breakthrough study revealing the significance of private lands with vital wet areas for sage grouse.

New publication helps land managers strategically reduce wildfire and invasive species threats in sagebrush ecosystem

Wildfire and invasive species pose great challenges to the future of sage grouse and the sagebrush ecosystems of the West. Today, managers have a new approach for prioritizing and targeting efforts to reduce these threats with the publication of a significant report, *Using Resistance and Resilience Concepts to Reduce Impacts of Invasive Annual Grasses and Altered Fire Regimes on the Sagebrush Ecosystem and Greater Sage-Grouse: A Strategic Multi-Scale Approach*. (Published by the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, General Technical Report 326).

The new report resulted from the combined efforts of a working group of wildlife biologists, rangeland and restoration ecologists, fire specialists, soil scientists, and land managers convened by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The publication combines current understanding of sage grouse habitat needs and sagebrush ecosystem dynamics into a framework for applying strategies intended to reduce fire and invasive species threats. The publication provides a transparent, multi-scale approach designed to help land managers prioritize scarce resources when addressing complex ecosystem problems. Already, the work is proving helpful for rangewide applications. The Bureau of Land Management is currently using the publication's strategic approach to guide their efforts as the agency addresses fire and invasives in the Great Basin as part of the Resource Management Plan revision process.



The key breakthrough in the new report is linking soil and temperature moisture regimes to the way sagebrush ecosystems respond to disturbance and annual grass invasions. Simply put, the warmer the temperatures and the drier the soils, the less resilient sagebrush ecosystems are to invasives and fire. The cooler and the wetter the soils, the more resilient and resistant are sagebrush ecosystems to these threats.

A new geospatial data product is now available that compiles available soil survey data across the range of sage grouse. Practitioners can use the product to display soil temperature and moisture regimes as an indicator of potential ecosystem resilience and resistance. A seamless, rangewide layer is available for landscape planning purposes. Additional detailed geodatabases allow for more in-depth analyses at the site scale.

A new fact sheet provides managers with a description of the product, links to downloads, and instructions for application.

Sage Grouse Conservation Also Helps Mule Deer Migration, Study Finds

Measures taken to conserve sage grouse in Wyoming also benefit mule deer migration routes, according to a [new study published in the online journal Ecosphere](#).

The research was conducted by scientists from The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the University of Wyoming (UW), Western Ecosystems Technology Inc., the University of Montana and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

Conservationists long have speculated that protective measures for sage grouse also benefit the more than 350 other species that inhabit sagebrush ecosystems, but this study is the first to quantify the “umbrella” benefits of those actions for migratory mule deer. Those measures include Wyoming’s sage grouse “core area” policy, which limits development in the state’s key grouse habitat, as well as conservation easements, agreements with private landowners to limit development.

“This study underscores the simple idea that keeping sagebrush habitats intact through Wyoming’s core area policy and conservation easements will have additional benefits for mule deer habitat,” says Holly Copeland, a research scientist with TNC in Wyoming and lead author of the paper. “We are excited by our findings but caution that there are gaps in mule deer conservation, especially outside of core areas, where future development may become more concentrated, potentially resulting in impacts to migrating deer.”



Sage grouse conservation measures in Wyoming provide “umbrella” benefits for other sagebrush-dependent species, scientists say. Photo by Scott Copeland.

Both sage grouse and mule deer, two iconic species of the American West, have seen significant population declines in recent years, as a result of drought, energy and residential development, and other habitat fragmentation. Wyoming’s core area policy is a unique and proactive effort to avoid a federal Endangered Species Act listing for the grouse. Montana recently adopted a plan similar to Wyoming’s, and several other states in sage grouse range are exploring adopting similar plans.

The study published today examined Wyoming’s Upper Green River Basin, where there are substantial but declining grouse and mule deer populations. Researchers found that areas identified as core grouse habitat in this region overlap with winter range, stopover areas and migration corridors used by deer – and that grouse core-area provisions are

generally sufficient to limit impacts on deer as well as grouse. Those provisions primarily include restrictions on surface disturbances for activities such as oil and gas drilling.

In addition, land trusts have purchased a significant number of voluntary conservation easements on private lands in the area, limiting development. Statewide, more than \$100 million was invested from 2008 to 2012 for conservation easements with an emphasis on sage grouse conservation.

“The study results are heartening, because they show that benefits of sage grouse conservation by many private and public stakeholders in Wyoming go even further than we first realized,” says Dave Naugle, paper co-author and science advisor for NRCS SGI.

The project was conducted in collaboration with researchers at the [Wyoming Migration Initiative](#). Based at UW, this new program has been mapping and evaluating the threats to big game migration routes throughout Wyoming.

“Much of U.S. Forest Service lands are essentially protected, and beyond that we found current sage grouse conservation policy and easements doubled existing protections for mule deer migration routes,” says Matt Kauffman, director of the Wyoming Migration Initiative under a dual appointment with the USGS and UW’s Department of Zoology and Physiology. “And conservation easements can address site-specific conservation needs of migrating mule deer, representing a critical piece of the conservation puzzle.”

Still, many important mule deer habitats lie outside of grouse core-area boundaries, the paper says. In other parts of Wyoming, the overlap of grouse core areas and mule deer habitat may be smaller, more fragmented or nonexistent.



Mule Deer; photo by Scott Copeland

“Ultimately, conserving deer migration routes requires consideration of corridors critical to mule deer in land-use planning,” Kauffman says. “The lack of formal identification and protection of migration corridors as areas recognized by state and federal agencies – in Wyoming and the West – is a gap in our current wildlife management policy.”

The study was funded by the NRCS-led SGI, Knobloch Family Foundation, the Kaplan Family Foundation, and the Mule Deer Foundation.

Private Lands Vital to Conserving Wet Areas for Sage Grouse Summer Habitat

SGI released the 4th in its series, "Science to Solutions." The purpose of all SGI science is to increase the effectiveness of on-the-ground conservation for sage grouse. The latest in the series is *Private Lands Vital to Conserving Wet Areas for Sage Grouse Summer Habitat*.

The study reveals a strong link between wet sites (essential summer habitat for sage grouse to raise their broods) and sage grouse leks, and in turn, private lands. An impressive 85% of leks (breeding areas) cluster within six miles of wet summer habitats.

These streamsides, wet meadows, and wetlands compose less than two percent of the western landscape, yet more than 80% fall on private lands. The implication for conservation? Successful sage grouse conservation will hinge largely on cooperative conservation with private landowners, ranchers, and farmers to sustain these lush and vital summer habitats.

Credit for the research goes to primary investigator, Patrick Donnelly, IWJV/FWS Spatial Ecologist. Co-authors are Dave Naugle, SGI Science Advisor; Jeremy Maestas, SGI Technical Lead; and, Christian Hagen, Oregon State University.

Donnelly and team studied patterns of sage grouse leks and summer habitats over a 28-year period, from 1984 to 2011, using existing long-term databases, annual lek survey data collected by states, and Landsat satellite imagery. The study area covered more than 32 million acres of current sage grouse range in California, Oregon, and northwestern Nevada. They examined the location and count data for 1,277 active lek sites.

In addition to the four-page, easy to understand *Science to Solutions* publication, a [training video](#) for using the spatial targeting tool for practically applying the findings is featured on the SGI YouTube Channel.

Potential sage grouse summer habitat maps and decision support tools are available for partners to use in California, Oregon, and Nevada. This tool also covers the Bi-State sage grouse population, where it's being used to help target NRCS easement investments along the California/Nevada border. Visit the [SGI Science & Policy page](#) and scroll down to the Decision Support Tools/Mapping/Technical Field Guides section.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

Summary & Highlights

The SGI message of proactive conservation and tangible success on the ground continues to gain traction and resonate throughout various local, regional and national media: Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, SGI website, partner outlets, radio, and YouTube, as well as in major news outlets, from The Associated Press and The McClatchy Company to Environment & Energy (E&E) Publishing's *Greenwire*.

We're reaching out, and the media is coming to us. For example, when the latest *Science to Solutions* article revealed the close connection between private lands and summer wet meadow habitat for sage grouse, an E&E *Greenwire* Report published the following story, which was read at top levels nationally: [Recent Study: 'Strong link' Between Grouse Breeding Grounds, Private Lands](#).

The coverage shows the importance of conveying a scientist's published work (in this case, Patrick Donnelly, IWJV/FWS Spatial Ecologist). His research, with co-authors, reveals that most sage grouse breeding grounds are located within close proximity of wet meadows and other lush springs and streams – and a high proportion of those places are on private lands. This demonstrates that while the public/private land division for sage grouse habitat puts the majority on public land, the private land plays a disproportionately significant role.



Photo by Ken Miracle

The reporter, Phil Taylor, returned to SGI to cover the next piece of public science linked to conservation on the ground: [Wyoming mule deer enjoy fruits of sage grouse protections](#).

The import of this news is tangible evidence that the sage grouse is an umbrella species, and in this case, core conservation strategies for sage grouse in Wyoming overlap significantly with mule deer migration, wintering and stopover areas.

Other highlights of the quarter include *Field & Stream's* release of two videos that saw wide circulation and viewership, featuring SGI:

- 1) [Hero for a Day Video: How Small Pieces of Plastic Can Save Hundreds of Sage Grouse](#).
- 2) [Heroes of Conservation Finalist: Improving Idaho Sage Grouse Habitat](#). Ken Miracle (from Boise, Idaho) was nominated by SGI for his volunteerism and attended a conservation gala in September in Washington, DC, as a finalist for the national Heroes of Conservation awards, presented by *Field & Stream*.

Science to Solutions Series

SGI science and communications are closely linked, founded on the belief that when science is shared, applied and understood, our conservation efforts are strengthened. It adds credibility to the messages of success on the ground. As noted, the pieces inform reporters and improve the accuracy of coverage. The publications are also important to managers, landowners, and partners for carrying out on-the-ground solutions.

The *Science to Solution* series now features four beautifully designed (by Maja Smith) and clearly written (by Christine Paige) publications that are downloadable from the SGI website on the [Science & Policy](#) page. All of the articles have gone through a slight re-design, including the addition of citations.

Managers will also benefit from a more technical, yet still easy to understand, fact sheet that fits with the series.

News Release: [New publication helps land managers strategically reduce wildlife and invasive species threats in sagebrush ecosystem](#)

Fact Sheet: [Mapping Potential Ecosystem Resilience and Resistance across Sage Grouse Range using Soil Temperature and Moisture Regimes](#)

Rancher Success Stories

SGI continues to make progress with publishing and circulating rancher success stories. More than 950 ranchers are enrolled in SGI programs, yet facts and statistics can't deliver the real stories of those individuals and what they do to make a difference. SGI is tying the facts to real life stories in a series featuring a rancher from each of the 11 western states in the sage grouse range. All are involved with SGI, many with the SGI SWAT staff. For this quarter, we have published the following three stories:

August – [Montana: Delaney 44 Ranch – Sage Grouse, Cattle Thrive on Rest-Rotation](#) (featured in the August 5th edition of *Beef Magazine*)

August – [Idaho: Rancher, Tom Page – Big Creek Ranch Applies "All Lands Management" to Benefit Sage Grouse, other Wildlife](#)

September – [Colorado: Rancher, Dawn Nottingham improves sage grouse habitat with juniper control, wildlife-friendly fencing near Dinosaur National Monument](#)



Deb and Mike Delaney on their ranch northwest of Winnett, Montana. Photo by Deborah Richie.

News Story Highlights from the SGI Website

We've added 22 new stories to the SGI website this quarter. The articles are either original content or shared partner stories of significance, with a contextual introduction. Highlights include:

[BLM Fire Program to Focus on Sage Grouse Conservation](#)

[Sage Grouse Champions: Bi-State Local Area Working Group](#)

[Washington Landowner & Agencies Secure Major Grants to Protect and Restore a Sage Grouse Oasis in Douglas County](#)

[SGI in the News](#)

[U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell to tour Sage Grouse Private-Public Partnership Projects in Southern Oregon](#)

[Interior Secretary Jewell Weathers Rain & Winds to See Landscape-Level Conservation Project for Sage Grouse in Oregon](#)

Three articles on fence-marking:

[Eagle Scout Project Tackles Sage Grouse Fence Marking](#)

[Hunting Dog Group Helps Montana Sage Grouse: Unique “Double-Marking” Project to Prevent Fence Collisions](#)

[Fence Markers to Prevent Sage Grouse Collisions: Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Featured Friend

The SGI website home page includes a focus on a SGI partner organization, entitled *Featured Friend*. The current partner is the [Bi-State Local Area Working Group](#).

SGI E-News

The Bi-Monthly SGI E-News continues to delivery several stories within a professional template into the e-mail inboxes of subscribers. The subscriber list is now more than 3,150. E-News from the quarter include:

[July 8, 2014](#)

[July 23, 2014](#)

[July 30, 2014](#)

[August 12, 2014](#)

[August 26, 2014](#)

[September 8, 2014](#)

[September 19, 2014](#)



*From the July 30 SGI E-News: Looking west over old pristine sagebrush and riparian habitat, one gets a glimpse of what the area looked like 200 years ago.
Photo by Ferdi Businger.*

Social Media: Facebook & Twitter

Facebook continues to be a great way to visually communicate SGI and the wonders of sage grouse, ranchers, and the habitat, as well as partner news. The [Facebook page](#) has over 2,200 “Likes,” and the [Twitter page](#) has more than 975 Followers. “Tweets” are a great way to share news, make new contacts, involve new partners, and reach the media. For those who do not subscribe to social media, the SGI website has a [Social Media page](#) (under [News & Resources](#)) that pulls in all Twitter and Facebook posts.



Top: sage grouse eggs in a nest. Right: sage grouse chick. Photos by Brett Walker.

A Facebook post on September 15th that highlighted a science article and showed photos of [sage grouse eggs in a nest](#) and a [sage grouse chick](#) was shared 256 times, had 3,608 Likes and reached 43,072 people!

PARTNER DEVELOPMENT

The IWJV continues to strengthen the partnership for SGI implementation through extensive coordination and collaboration among state and federal agencies, non-profit conservation organizations, and corporations – all facilitated by the leadership of its Management Board. The Partner Development element of the SGI has played a critical role in maintaining strong support for SGI across a diverse group of conservation partners.

In cooperation with Pheasants Forever (PF), a key partner of the SGI, the IWJV has now executed 66 field capacity, science, communications, and management agreements. Together, the IWJV and PF closely manage these agreements to ensure successful implementation and achievement of SGI objectives. These projects encumber a total of \$6,529,926.54 in SWAT funds. This quarter, we finalized modifications to field capacity agreements that will keep the SWAT on the ground through 2015. We also executed new agreements that will broaden our understanding of conservation effects, extend the reach of communications, increase the number of boots on-the-ground under the SGI SWAT banner, and ensure core functions of SGI SWAT continue to operate seamlessly for another year.

The IWJV devotes significant staff time and resources to maintaining existing partnerships as well as to the development of new partnerships. Frequent communications with the NRCS SGI Coordinator, NRCS SGI Science Advisor, and SGI Technical Lead ensures that the implementation of the SGI is precisely aligned with NRCS objectives and has built a solid foundation for regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. We held our tenth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting on July 31-August 1, 2014, involving NRCS, FWS, SGI, IWJV, and PF staff. The focus of this meeting was on SGI durability and the potential commitment of long-term partner support for SGI SWAT. The SGI SWAT Coordination Team will meet again January 21-22, 2015.

SUMMARY

The SGI SWAT is a model for science-based, landscape-scale habitat conservation – and a model for the future. It represents a landmark step forward in helping NRCS – through partnerships with the FWS, state fish and wildlife agencies, and others – address many of the bottlenecks that have long prevented Farm Bill conservation programs from realizing their true potential for wildlife habitat conservation in the West.

NRCS SGI SWAT AGREEMENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

- a) *Efforts for outreach to, and participation of, beginning farmers or ranchers, and Native American Tribes within the project area.* The SWAT field capacity workforce worked directly with five Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers this quarter and two new Indian Tribal members.
- b) *Assistance provided to program participants to help meet local, state, and/or federal regulatory requirements.* The intent of SGI is to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat to negate the need for additional regulations. Participating producers are highly committed to sage grouse conservation, and the SGI provides an excellent vehicle for addressing threats to sage grouse populations at very large scales.
- c) *Numbers of NRCS program participants assisted and/or cooperating in the project effort.* The 26 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 4,869.5 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 Equivalents (FTE) being employed through the SWAT agreement.* Thirty-six (36) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 4.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position 0.5 FTEs, 1.0 SGI Technical Lead FTE, 1.0 SGI Communications Director FTE, 1.0 Communications Support FTE, 3.0 IWJV FTEs, and 4.0 Science Support FTEs) were employed during the reporting period.
- e) *Acres of project area addressed in NRCS program contracts and/or extents of conservation activities implemented in the project area.* The SGI SWAT, to date, resulted in the following accomplishments: conservation planning for 1,821,360 acres of grazing systems; 213,957 acres of conifer removal; 797,841 feet (151 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 10,371 acres of rangeland seeding; and, 24,685 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$4,313,005 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 \$47,324,042!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$4.96 million in partner funding toward all aspects of the SWAT through the first three years and project an additional \$2.03 million in partner funding leveraged in Years 4 and 5. We are in the process of securing commitments from partners for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

Appendix A

Objectives & Evolution of the Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Launched in 2010, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a highly targeted and science-based landscape approach to delivering enough of the right conservation practices in the right places, in order to elicit a positive sage grouse population response to management. SGI uses dedicated Farm Bill conservation program funds at appropriately large scales to alleviate threats that otherwise fragment habitats, the primary reason for the species "candidate" designation under the federal Endangered Species Act. SGI targets Farm Bill resources to high sage grouse abundance centers, or "core areas," to maintain large and intact habitats rather than providing palliative care to small and declining populations.

The SGI Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) was established to strengthen NRCS' capacity to implement SGI. The SWAT builds field capacity and strengthens the science guiding SGI, as well as bolsters communications capacity – all through partnerships that leverage the NRCS SGI funding with significant contributions from other sources. The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV), in close collaboration with NRCS at multiple levels, continued to make significant progress toward the following objectives in launching the SGI SWAT during the reporting period:

- Increase field-level capacity by placing specialized human skill sets at critical geographic "pinch points" to increase SGI benefits.*
- Increase science capacity to better focus SGI implementation, assess biological outcomes, and continually improve program delivery.*
- Improve and enhance outreach and communication strategies to increase partner buy-in and SGI participation from landowners.*
- Expand SGI partnership to further leverage NRCS contributions resulting in increased outcomes and participation.*

This work is facilitated by execution of an Interagency Agreement (IA) between NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and subsequent modifications to the IA. The \$4 million in SWAT funds were obligated in an NRCS-FWS IA, signed June 24, 2011. NRCS provided an additional \$3 million to the SGI SWAT NRCS-FWS IA late in FY 2011, from another funding source, to bring the total NRCS commitment to \$7 million. The "Phase 2" \$3 million was obligated in a modification to the IA, executed on September 13, 2011. NRCS provided an additional \$2.3 million to extend the agreement through December 1, 2016, through a "Phase 3" modification to the IA on September 28, 2012. As with all SWAT projects, the IWJV leveraged NRCS' investment by raising 25% of the funds needed to implement the SGI SWAT from an array of conservation partners, including the FWS, state wildlife and agricultural agencies, conservation districts, non-governmental conservation organizations, and corporations.

The IWJV, through the FWS, subsequently entered into a Cooperative Agreement with Pheasants Forever (PF) to facilitate fiscal administration and partnership-based implementation of SGI SWAT, effective August 9, 2011. PF works closely with the IWJV staff on SWAT implementation and is also playing a key role in building field capacity for SGI, specifically by supervising seven of the 24 positions through agreements they have negotiated with state fish and wildlife agencies and other partners. For the purpose of this and future reports, we consider the overall \$14.7 million effort as the SGI SWAT, even though only \$4 million arose from NRCS' FY 2011 SWAT appropriation.