FEB 11 2015

Mr. Daniel Ashe
Director
Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear ~~Mr.~~ Dan Ashe:

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is pleased to provide the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) our 2015 comprehensive evaluation of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) and its contributions to threat reduction and enhanced ecosystem function for sage-grouse on private lands.

After FWS' candidate designation of the sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act in 2010, NRCS launched SGI to reduce threats facing sage-grouse and ranching through voluntary and collaborative partnerships with ranchers and conservation partners. Five years later, SGI matured into a primary catalyst for sage-steppe conservation. SGI focuses on the shared vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching, providing win-win solutions for agricultural producers, sage-grouse, and 350 other obligate species of the sagebrush ecosystem.

Our intent with this report is for NRCS and its partners to demonstrate the ecological conservation value of these accomplishments in your upcoming 2015 listing determination. In particular, we prepared this evaluation to answer FWS' two fundamental questions:

What has changed since 2010 when FWS designated greater sage-grouse as a Candidate for listing?

With what certainty will conservation efforts continue into the future?

With 1,129 participating ranches in 11 Western States, SGI and its partners have already jointly invested $424.5 million and conserved 4.4 million acres, an area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park.

Our NRCS commitment of $200 million, starting in 2015, provides partners with unprecedented certainty that substantial and valuable conservation will continue well into the future. This additional commitment, combined with estimated partner match will invest a total of an estimated $751 million through SGI in less than a decade. Already underway in 2015, additional resources are enabling SGI to nearly double past achievements, resulting in a projected 8 million acres conserved by 2018.

It is an exciting time for sage-grouse conservation and NRCS is proud to be contributing significant results for the conservation of both sage-grouse and quality grazing lands for agricultural production.

Please direct SGI program questions to Tim Griffiths, National SGI Coordinator, NRCS, 10 East Babcock Street, Federal Building, Room 443, Bozeman, Montana 59715-4704; telephone: (406) 600-3098; email: Tim.Griffiths@mt.usda.gov.

Science questions may be directed to David Naugle, SGI Science Advisor and professor, Wildlife Biology Program, University of Montana, 32 Campus Drive FOR309, Missoula, Montana 59812; telephone: (406) 240-0113; david.naugle@umontana.edu.

Sincerely,

Jason A. Weller
Chief

cc:
Ms. Noreen Walsh, Region 6, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ms. Robyn Thorson, Region 1, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Mr. Ren Lohoefener, Region 8, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service