

Sage Grouse Initiative

Conservation Beyond Boundaries SGI

Bi-State Sage-Grouse: Partnerships Key to Success at the California-Nevada Border

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided in April 2015 that the Bi-State sage-grouse does not require protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because of a historic partnership. Many diverse stakeholders came together to plan, fund and carry out the science-based efforts that are restoring and conserving habitat for this geographically distinct species of sage grouse.

This voluntary conservation partnership is responsible for significantly reducing long-term threats to the Bi-State sage-grouse, a population where biologists estimate that between 1,800 and 7,400 of these ground-dwelling birds inhabit about 4.5 million acres on the California and Nevada border.

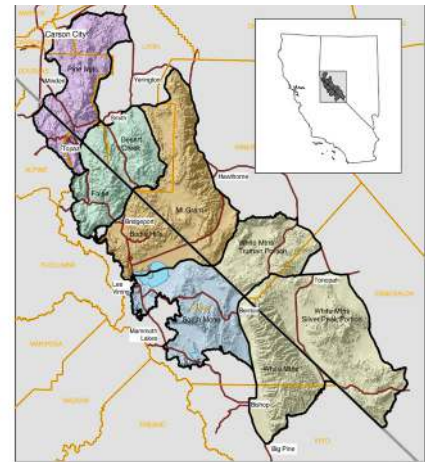
Bi-State Local Area Working Group Accelerates Conservation

The Bi-State Local Area Working Group, formed in 2002, is a forward-thinking group of ranchers, federal and state

government agencies, conservation groups, private citizens and university representatives that has played a critical role in conserving habitat for the Bi-State sage-grouse. In 2012, the group released the Bi-State Action Plan, a scientifically-based document that steers investments and conservation where they are needed most.

The plan's top two conservation actions are to maintain the wet meadow habitats through conservation easements on private lands, and to restore the uplands by selectively removing conifers that have overtaken ecologically and culturally important sagebrush and native grasses.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Forest Service and other conservation partners have committed \$45 million to fully implement the Bi-State Action Plan. This builds on a nearly \$17 million investment NRCS has made in recent years.



Conservation in the Bi-State Area of California and Nevada

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), led by NRCS, joined the unprecedented partnership to accelerate implementation of the Bi-State Action Plan. This model has proven so effective that across the 11 Western states, SGI uses the same approach to proactively conserve the greater sage-grouse. In fact, the Bi-State partnership serves as the new paradigm for effective conservation of at-risk wildlife across the country.



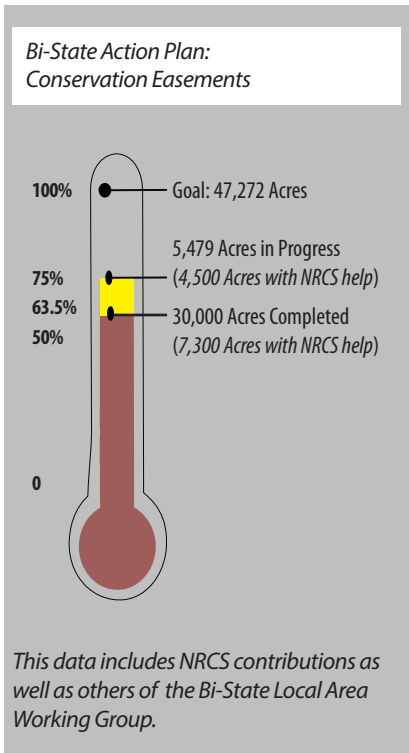
Win Win for the Bird, Ranching & Conserving Water

Conserving and enhancing habitat benefits ranchers and sage grouse alike. Conservation work improves habitat and provides better grazing lands for cattle, and tools like conservation easements help ranchers keep their land intact. Sage grouse conservation efforts also protect critical water resources in this highly arid country where drought and water shortages affect people in rural and urban areas. Restoring the sagebrush ecosystem by removing encroaching conifers enhances forage for livestock and leaves water in native springs and seeps. Conservation easements further maintain limited water resources by permanently linking water with the conserved ranch lands to ensure habitats are available in the future.

Conservation Easements: Protecting Water for Brood Habitat and Connectivity to Public Land

The vast majority of brood habitat required to successfully raise sage grouse chicks is privately owned, although private lands only account for 8 percent of the total Bi-State area. Homesteading patterns resulted in private lands harboring the best or only water sources that support wet meadows and irrigated pastures that sage grouse depend upon in the summer.

Conservation easements are a crucial tool to help ranchers keep their private working lands together under increasing subdivision pressure. Bi-State partners have prioritized easement acquisitions and have already completed conservation easements on 63.5 percent of priority private lands identified in the Bi-State Action Plan.



Before SGI was launched in 2010, NRCS easements in this area were almost nonexistent. To date, landowners working with NRCS have enrolled 7,300 acres of key habitat in perpetual conservation easements with an additional 4,500 acres in progress for a total investment of \$18.6 million. This is in addition to the 4,000 acre Bi-State easement that NRCS helped The Nature Conservancy complete in fall 2013.

Sagebrush Restoration: Selectively Removing Encroaching Conifers Saves Sage Grouse Habitat

NRCS worked with ranchers in Nevada and California to restore 3,830 acres of key sagebrush-steppe through selective removal of encroaching conifers. An additional 1,620 acres are in progress and scheduled to be completed by the end of 2015, bringing the total NRCS investment to \$1.1 million.

NRCS and partners carefully remove only the pinyons and junipers that are encroaching the historic sagebrush steppe and leave the established forests alone. This work restores sage grouse habitat free of conifer trees that deplete water resources. This decreases fire threats, and sage grouse move back into the treeless landscape they need with room to see approaching danger and without tree perch sites for predators.

Fiscal Year 2010-2014 Bi-State Conservation Efforts
NRCS Financial Assistance (FA) and Active and Completed Contracts

Conservation Action	SGI Investment	Conserved Acres
Conservation Easement	\$18.6 million*	11,800
Conifer Removal	\$1.1 million	5,450
Total	\$19.7 million	17,250

*Includes NRCS and associated partner matching funds.

Data source: NRCS Resource Economics, Analysis and Policy Division, April 2015.



Carrying out the Bi-State Action Plan Makes the Difference

June 2014 marked a landmark announcement of Bi-State partners to commit \$45 million and fully carry out the remainder of the Bi-State Action Plan, with clear timelines and a pledge to continue conservation. USDA pledged \$25.5 million (Forest Service contributing more than \$13 million, and NRCS about \$12 million). The Bureau of Land Management provided an additional \$6.5 million to boost recovery. This combined investment marked the single largest Bi-State

sage-grouse restoration commitment in history and will help ensure full implementation of the science-based action plan. Resources are tied to both on-the-ground habitat projects as well as important monitoring to ensure the sage-grouse populations respond as desired.

About the Sage Grouse Initiative

SGI is a partnership of ranchers, state and federal agencies, universities, private citizens, nonprofit groups and businesses that embrace a common vision of wildlife conservation through

sustainable ranching. Launched by NRCS in 2010, SGI applies the power of the Farm Bill to conserve and restore lands where habitat is intact and sage grouse numbers are highest — covering 75.5 million acres across the West. The Bi-State efforts are a key part of this overall conservation effort. SGI is part of a larger NRCS wildlife partnership called Working Lands for Wildlife that uses the same principles for seven species that are declining, candidates for listing or listed under the ESA.



The Masini family in Nevada raise black Angus yearling "stockers" in the irrigated meadows. The meadows are broken up into 28 different pastures to keep the cattle on the move and sustain the grass resource. (NRCS photo)



Feature Story

**Masini Family
Pre rouse on the
Sweetwater Ranch
in Nevada**

South of the Lake Tahoe region in Nevada, the Masini Family raises 2,000 yearlings on an irrigated cattle ranch under the shadow of the Sweetwater Mountains. Their property is an oasis in the desert, surrounded by hundreds of square miles of rangeland.

"It's extremely beautiful country," says Bryan Masini, who runs the ranch with his wife, Sheila, their four children, his mother, Patricia, and his sister, Patti. "We really enjoy seeing the deer, the sage hens, the geese -- it all adds to our quality of life."

The Masini family has taken big strides to protect and preserve sage grouse habitat on more than 4,150 acres of private lands via conservation easements, pinyon and juniper removal, fencing improvements and range management through SGI.

"The property is extremely valuable for sage-grouse," says Tracey Wolfe, range management specialist with NRCS. "Irrigated pastures

provide unique and very important brood-rearing habitat and fall foraging habitat for sage-grouse.

"We see the birds all the time," Masini says. "The first thing we see are the males -- 20-30 of them --in the spring during lekking season, and then we run into the hens and the babies in our irrigated fields during the summer. The chicks grow up pretty fast, and then they head off into the rangelands in the fall."

In 2011 and 2012, Masini's first SGI project removed about 700 acres of pinyon and juniper trees in the western foothills of the Sweetwater Ranch. This opened up large areas for perennial grasses, sagebrush and other shrubs and forbs to grow.

"The grass really came back nicely, and we had some timely rains in late July and August to help with that," Masini says. "We're seeing more deer using that area now, too."

Over the last couple of years, NRCS employees have worked with Masini to add wildlife-friendly fencing on the Sweetwater Ranch to create multiple pastures for yearling "stockers" to graze. From spring to fall, the cattle are rotated through 28 different pastures based on forage conditions and re-growth.

Then, they're shipped to the market.

Beyond specific habitat improvements, the conservation easements that cover the Sweetwater Ranch ensure that the conservation measures will be sustained in perpetuity. The Masini family has signed easements with NRCS, covering more than 4,150 acres.

"The conservation easements will allow us to pass on the ranch to the next generations of Masinis," says Masini. "My grandchildren are 6th generation, and my children are 5th generation, and they're all involved in the operation of the ranch.

easements don't allow for any development, which is fine with us."

"Everything in those easements are good practices for raising our cattle as well as for the sage grouse," Masini says. "Sustainability is where it's at. If we want to run cattle in the West, we have to be thinking about managing for all of the different critters that are out there. And we have found that we can do that while maintaining the business side of our operation."

Revised from original article by Steve Stuebner for Sage-Grouse Initiative.



Thanks to conservation easements, Bryan's son Bryson Masini will be the fifth generation to steward the Sweetwater Ranch. (Sage Grouse Initiative photo).