

SUCCESS ON THE RANGE

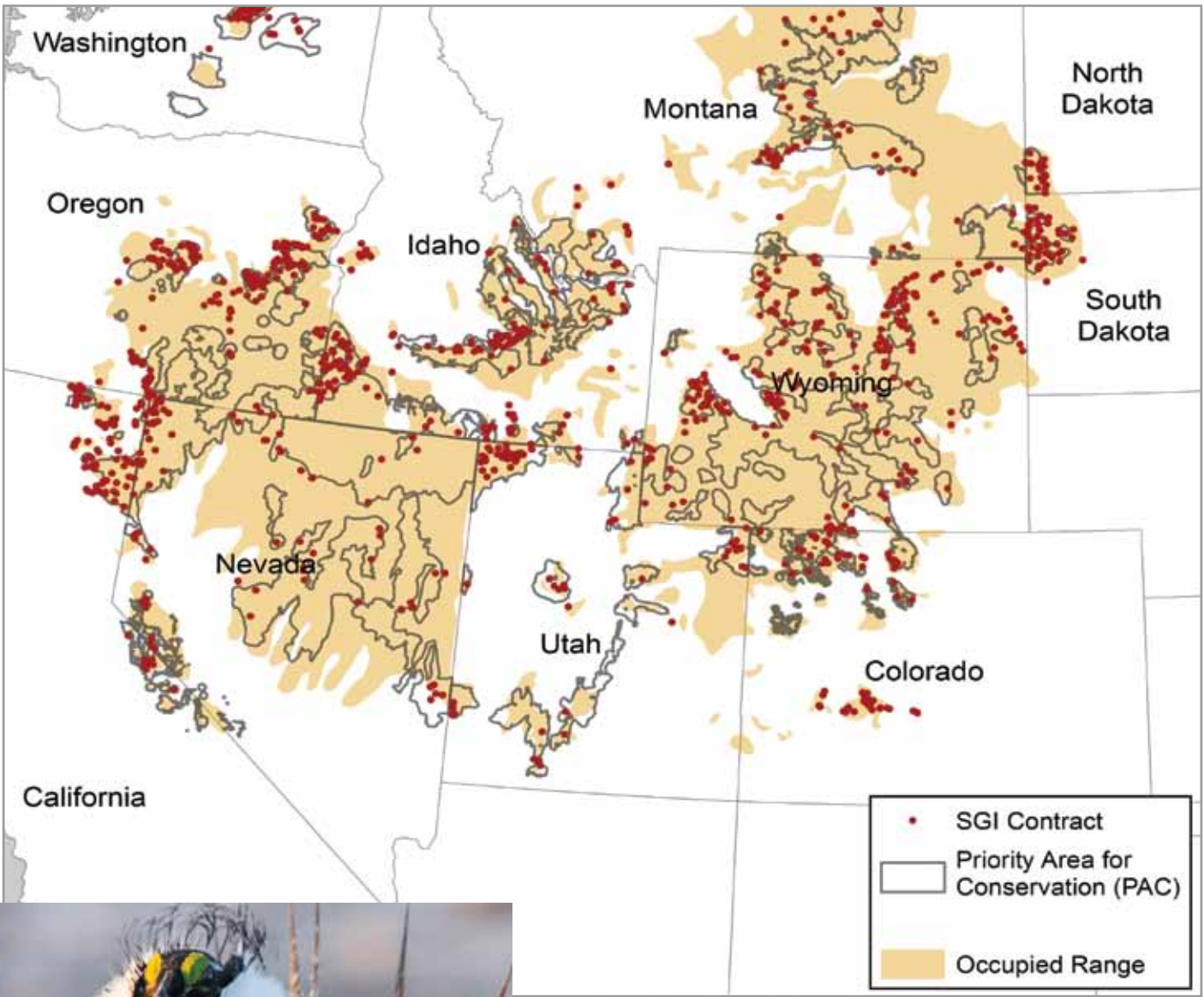
# SAGE GROUSE

I N I T I A T I V E



2015





Sage grouse inhabit 11 western states. Within the occupied range are Priority Areas for Conservation. In these “PACs”, the Sage Grouse Initiative targets more than three-quarters of investments to benefit large populations. The remaining quarter of investments spent in surrounding occupied range expands habitat and increases connectivity.

Sage Grouse Index

- How many sage grouse are estimated today - 200,000 - 500,000
- Decline in distribution - 44 percent
- Decline in population since 1985 - 30 percent
- Number of states with sage grouse - 11 and 2 Canadian Provinces
- Habitat occupied by sage grouse in the West - 165 million acres
- Birds clumped within a quarter of occupied habitat - 75 percent
- Population found in WY, MT, NV and ID - 83 percent
- Amount of grouse habitat in private ownership - 31 percent
- Proportion of habitat for raising young on private land - 80 percent
- Amount of SGI investment through 2015 - \$425 million
- Percentage of SGI projects in Priority Areas - 75 -100 percent
- Projected amount of SGI-conserved habitat by 2018 - 8 million acres
- Number of ranches enrolled in SGI - 1,129

www.sagegrouseinitiative.com

The Big Picture	2
Recipe for Success: A New Conservation Paradigm in Motion	3
Promises Kept: Proven Track Record Since 2010	4
Bi-State Partnership Achievement: Recipe for Success Takes Hold	5
Pledge for the Future: A Commitment Carried Forward	6
Beyond Sage Grouse: Conserving an Ecosystem for Wildlife	7
Right Conservation, Right Place	10
Accelerated Conservation: Easements Increase 18-fold through Sage Grouse Initiative	13
Colorado: Cross Mountain Ranch	14
Idaho: Pioneers Alliance	15
Nevada: Sweetwater Ranch	16
Wyoming: Sommers Ranch and Grindstone Cattle Company	17
Sage-Steppe Restoration	18
Rapid Restoration: Early State Conifer Removal Reclaims Sage-steppe for Wildlife	19
Oregon: Bedortha Ranch	19
Utah: Della Ranch	20
California: Five Dot Ranch	21
Healthy Rangelands	22
Enhancement: Prescribed Grazing Enriches Rangeland Health	23
Montana: Delaney 44 Ranch	23
North Dakota: Rob Brooks Ranch	24
Washington: Allen Miller Ranch	24
Wyoming: Pokorny Ranch	26
South Dakota: Joe Painter Ranch	27
Wildlife-Friendly Grazing	28
Volunteers Help Sage Grouse Survive: Grazing Structures Go Wildlife Friendly	31
Boy Scouts and Hunting Clubs Mark Fences	32
Montana: Field and Stream “Hero for a Day” project	32
Partner Power	34
Partnerships: Field Staff Deliver Conservation Locally	35
Nevada: Elko Team Enables Watershed-scale Conservation	36
Washington: Revitalizing Precious Sage	37
Idaho: Tackling Invasive Conifers Across Mixed Ownership	38
Beyond Statistics	39
Success on the Range is About People and Wildlife	39



# The Big Picture



## Recipe for Success: A New Conservation Paradigm in Motion

**T**he Sage Grouse Initiative partnership proactively conserves sage grouse, cares for other wildlife sharing the same extensive sagebrush country, and helps ranchers pass on their legacy and rural way of life. The new paradigm for at-risk wildlife works through voluntary cooperation, incentives, and community support.

What makes the Sage Grouse Initiative as precise as geometry and as swift in its conservation delivery as a pronghorn running across the vast sagebrush-steppe?

Here are six key ingredients for proactive conservation learned from the Sage Grouse Initiative and applicable for wildlife conservation anywhere:

- 1. Shared vision:** Finding the common link that invites cooperation over conflict. Our shared vision is what's good for the rangelands is good for grouse.
- 2. Strategic:** Direct resources where the biological returns are highest.
- 3. Accountability:** Use science to guide conservation, assuring that practices are achieving desired outcomes with cost-efficiency and effectiveness.
- 4. Leverage:** Multiply investments through partnerships that achieve more conservation.
- 5. Certainty:** Provide peace of mind to participating landowners that they can enact conservation without additional regulations.
- 6. Trust and Credibility:** Take a community, grass-roots approach that's based on the principles of neighborliness. Some call it "kitchen table conservation."

*The Sage Grouse Initiative launched in 2010 and five years later is a primary catalyst for sage-steppe conservation, conserving 4.4 million acres across 11 western states.*





## Promises Kept: Proven Track Record Since 2010

Following its recipe for success, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service launched the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010 as a promise to use Farm Bill resources to conserve sage grouse and the working rangelands on which they depend.

Fast forward five years. The Sage Grouse Initiative has now matured into a primary catalyst for sage-steppe conservation, providing win-win solutions to non-regulatory threats facing ranching and sage grouse.

The *Sage Grouse Initiative Outcomes in Conservation Report of 2015* documents that 1,129 ranches in 11 western states have conserved 6,000 square miles, an area twice that of Yellowstone National Park.

The Sage Grouse Initiative overwhelmingly benefits large populations of sage grouse by targeting 75 percent of investments inside Priority Areas for Conservation or PACS.

Saving sage grouse also benefits 350 other kinds of wildlife and the wide open spaces that define our Western heritage and economies.

Everyone wins when we work across boundaries of private and public lands for a shared vision.



*“I love to show people around the ranch so they get as excited as I do about all the wildlife here sharing the range with our livestock.”*

~Ray Owens, award-winning ranch manager of the SGI-enrolled Bord Gulch Ranch

## Bi-State Partnership Achievement: Recipe for Success Takes Hold

On the California-Nevada state line, a geographically distinct population of sage grouse once faced a precarious future. Today, that’s changed, thanks to the unprecedented partnership effort by the **Bi-State Local Area Working Group**.

Composed of ranchers, agencies, conservation groups, and other stakeholders, the working group models the “recipe for success” in both their plan and actions. They embrace a shared vision, act strategically to invest dollars in high priority areas, and accelerate conservation on the ground. They use science to guide their work and leverage investments. Their commitment to keeping their foot on the accelerator indicates a certainty for continued voluntary conservation.

SGL helps carry out the Bi-State plan with conifer removal to restore the sage, and conservation easements that protect private ranches from subdivision. **Private lands harbor precious water resources that sage grouse use heavily in summer.**

Through SGI, Bi-State landowners have enrolled 7,300 acres of high-priority habitat (with an additional 4,500 acres in progress) in conservation easements that protect critical sage grouse brood rearing habitats and connective corridors.

In April 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its decision to withdraw the proposal to list the Bi-State population of greater sage-grouse as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, citing success of voluntary and proactive conservation.



*Tours like this one on Todd Sceirine’s ranch on the Nevada-California border helped diverse partners find common ground to develop the Bi-State conservation plan for sage grouse.*



*“The conservation easements will allow us to pass on the ranch to the next generations of Masinis...Now we have a tool to preserve our place as a working ranch. The easements don’t allow for any development, which is fine with us.”*

~Bryan Masini, Bi-State rancher





## Pledge for the Future: A Commitment Carried Forward

Results from the Sage Grouse Initiative’s first five years have been so impressive that USDA in 2015 pledged a long-term commitment of annual Farm Bill dollars through 2018, the life of the current Farm Bill. The additional \$200 million is predicted to nearly double the amount of total conservation on the ground.

This new investment provides unprecedented certainty that conservation will continue well into the future. All totaled, this represents an SGI investment of approximately \$750 million, empowering SGI to conserve an estimated 8 million acres through 2018.

*“This growing partnership shows what landowners, NRCS and partners have accomplished together over the last five years, and it plays a key role in transforming SGI into a durable conservation effort.”*

~Jason Weller, Chief NRCS



Chief Jason Weller, left, shakes hands with Dr. Terry Messmer, Utah State University professor and organizer of the 2014 International Sage Grouse Forum in Salt Lake City.

## Beyond Sage Grouse: Conserving an Ecosystem for Wildlife

### Where the Sage Grouse and the Antelope Play

Sage grouse dwell within the big skies over sagebrush and ranching country of the western U.S. and edging into southern Canada. It’s a land rich in wildlife, plants, and culture, but it’s subtle too. To appreciate the beauty takes looking closely at the brilliant purple lupine blooming under the pungent sage or the jackrabbit about to leap.

Biologists call the sage grouse an “umbrella species.” By conserving the varied and big country sage grouse need, many kinds of birds and animals also stand to benefit – from pygmy rabbits and sage sparrows to mule deer, elk and pronghorn. They take shelter “under the umbrella.” More than 350 species of wildlife rely on the vast tracts of open sagebrush rangelands for survival.

Part of the science behind the Sage Grouse Initiative is to keep improving management to make sure that the individual needs of wildlife sharing the sage are met, too.

*Conserving sage grouse habitat saves  
homes for 350 kinds of wildlife species.*



The pygmy rabbit is the smallest rabbit in North America and eats a diet of 99 percent sagebrush.



A pronghorn walks through a lek right past a male, who’s puffing up its chest for the females. Pronghorn, like sage grouse, depend on sagebrush for food and big open country too.



A short-eared owl perches on a Wyoming big sagebrush, waiting for a sagebrush vole, cottontail rabbit, or other prey to show itself.





Wildlife of the sage: Top: elk herd in Idaho's Owyhee sage-steppe. Clockwise below elk: long-billed curlew, horned lark, jackrabbit, Idaho blue-eyed grass, Brewer's sparrow, red-tailed hawk, sage grouse.

## Case Study: Sage Grouse Conservation Benefits Migratory Mule Deer

Measures taken to conserve sage grouse in Wyoming also benefit mule deer migration routes, according to scientists from The Nature Conservancy and others.

Conservationists have long speculated that protective measures for sage grouse also help other wildlife of the sage, 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 that are agreements with private landowners to keep working ranches intact.

Scientists examined the overlap between two migratory populations of mule deer in Wyoming and lands with some level of protection for grouse, finding that sage grouse conservation efforts doubled the protection of deer migration habitat and winter range. Sage Grouse Initiative investments are good for mule deer, since 77 percent of remaining high-priority private lands for mule deer are a priority for sage grouse.





# *Right Conservation, Right Place*

Ranchers in sage country are applying the resources of the Sage Grouse Initiative to conserve the places they care for.







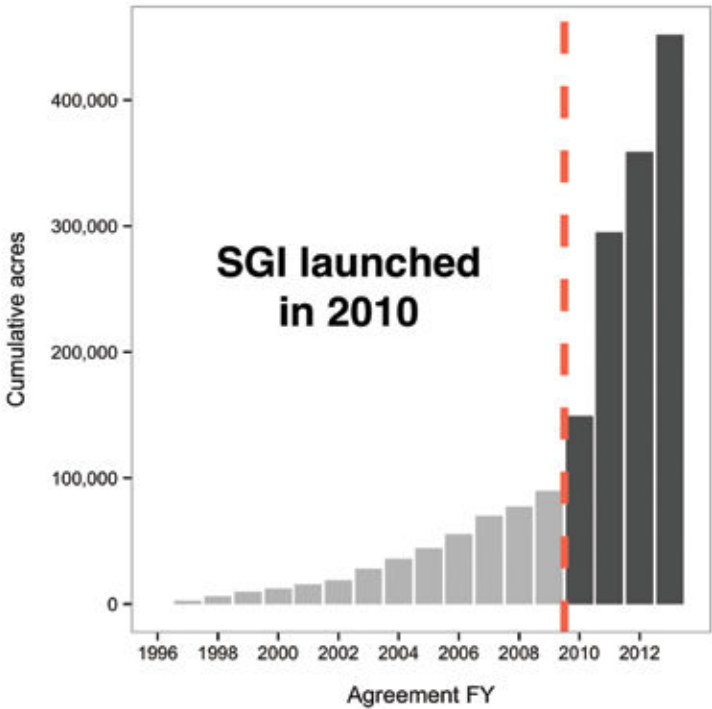
Sinnamon Meadows (near Bridgeport, California) is permanently protected with an agricultural conservation easement held by the **Eastern Sierra Land Trust**. SGI funds helped secure protection in late 2014 for this wildlife-rich habitat that is home to Bi-State sage grouse.



## Accelerated Conservation: Easements Increase 18-fold through Sage Grouse Initiative

**R**anchers and sage grouse bank on unbroken sagebrush-steppe to make a living. Conservation easements are keeping lands together and passing on a wildlife-rich legacy to future generations.

The Sage Grouse Initiative has forever conserved 360,000 acres of intact habitats that face the highest threat of subdivision or plowing up of native grazing lands. In the Great Basin, easements also protect essential habitats on working ranches where new satellite mapping shows that more than 80 percent of the places sage grouse raise their chicks are privately owned. NRCS and partners pool resources making this a team effort to help ranchers pass on their land to the next generation.



Easement acquisition has increased 18-fold during SGI.



# Cross Mountain: New Easement Conserves Quarter Million-Acre Landscape

The Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) completed a conservation easement in fall of 2014 on one of the largest working ranches in Northwest Colorado. The **Cross Mountain Ranch easement** connects three large private family-run ranching operations that have been secured via easements in the past two years.

The latest easement links together mixed ownerships to assure that the woven tapestry of sagebrush-steppe will not unravel—saving a quarter million acres in the heart of sage grouse country that’s an area more than twice the size of Denver.

This important conservation project would not have happened without the foresight and vision of Ron and Kitty Boeddeker, who instilled a deep conservation ethic and love for America’s rich western heritage in their family.

Moffat County supports an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 sage grouse, the biggest population remaining in Colorado. The largest elk populations in Colorado also rely on this breathtaking expanse of sagebrush and bunchgrasses, as do mule deer and pronghorn.



2013 Cross Mountain Tour: Left to right: Rex Tuttle, Chris West (CCALT), Cary Krukowski (landowner family member), Erik Glenn (CCALT).

*“The Cross Mountain easement is more than important financially, it’s about keeping an irreplaceable landscape together for future generations.”*

~Rex Tuttle, Cross Mountain Ranch manager and owner of neighboring ranch with a conservation easement for sage grouse



The Cross Mountain Ranch conservation easement of 2014 protected 16,000 acres of premier sage grouse habitat in NW Colorado near Dinosaur National Monument. SGI paid for half of the easement via NRCS Farm Bill dollars, the Initiative’s single largest investment. Partners also included Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust (lead), The Boedekker family (owners), and Colorado Parks and Wildlife.



The breathtaking ranching country of the Pioneer Mountains to Craters-of-the-Moon ecosystem encompasses important migration routes for pronghorn, mule deer, as well as abundant sage grouse habitat.

## Idaho’s Pioneers Alliance Protects Working Lands for Grouse, Pronghorn and Mule Deer

One of Idaho’s most important havens for sage grouse, pronghorn, and mule deer extends from the Pioneer Mountains (near Sun Valley) to the Craters of the Moon National Monument. Here, the award-winning **Pioneers Alliance**, a coalition of ranchers, residents, conservationists, public land managers, and officials, has teamed up with the Sage Grouse Initiative to keep these working lands together forever.

The conservation easement campaign totals nearly 90,000 acres and is nearing completion (as of 2015) with 25 landowners already enrolled in easements. Conserved private lands connect wildlife habitat to almost 2.4 million acres of public lands.

*“My father homesteaded this land, and we are leaving it in better shape than how we got it.”*

~Ray Baird, (Landowner referring to the conservation easement on his property in the Pioneer Mountains of Idaho)





In the shelter of the Sweetwater Mountains, the Masini family grazes for Bi-State sage grouse in Nevada, working closely with SGI on conservation of their verdant ranch.

### Sweetwater Ranch: Bi-State Conservation Easements Protect Lush Oasis

The **Masinis** watch flocks of sage grouse attracted to their ranch by the lush oasis of irrigated meadows and surrounding sagebrush. These are Bi-State sage grouse, a distinct population on the Nevada-California border. They’ve joined a partnership effort that resulted in proactive success without a need to list the Bi-State birds under the Endangered Species Act, an April 2015 decision.

Through the Sage Grouse Initiative, they’ve protected sage grouse habitat on 4,150 acres via conservation easements and have engaged in restoration projects too. The private lands are highly marketable as ranchettes and subdivisions and could easily be sold for profit. However, the Masinis value ranching and open lands more.

*“Everything in those easements are good practices for raising our cattle as well as sage grouse,” said Bryan Masini. “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 out there.”*



Sage grouse thrive in Sublette County, Wyoming, where conservation easements are protecting this life-filled tapestry of sagebrush uplands linked to lush river bottoms, thanks to many willing landowners.

### Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust: Securing Sage Grouse Haven in Southwest Wyoming

Deep in the heart of some of the best sage grouse habitat, 15 conservation easements are saving 38,312 acres from development in Sublette County. The **Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust** is a key player working with landowners who trust the group to ensure the ranch uses will be compatible with agriculture. The Sage Grouse Initiative and other partners chip in to provide needed dollars.

Neighboring ranchers Al Sommers and Maggie Miller are participants who feel strongly that the wildlife-filled lands they love should be passed on. Their lush sagebrush range laced with streams harbors sage grouse moose, waterfowl, hawks, eagles, songbirds and more.

*“We tailor every conservation easement to meet the rancher’s goals – for enhancing the productivity of their working land and preserving their family’s legacy.”*

~Pam Dewell, Executive Director,  
Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust





# Sage-Steppe Restoration

These dramatic before-and-after juniper removal photos from Oregon's Warner Mountains demonstrate the return of the sage-steppe and homes for sage grouse and other wildlife.



*"Before SGI, we used to be able to look across the landscape and recognize who cut what juniper stands but now we can only see who hasn't."*

~Chris Mundy, NRCS District Conservationist Crook County, Oregon



Rancher Gary Bedortha (left) and Chris Mundy (NRCS) take a close look at native plants prospering in the sagebrush steppe of eastern Oregon, after removing invading junipers.

## Rapid Restoration: Early Stage Conifer Removal Reclaims Sage-steppe for Wildlife

**J**unipers and pinyon pines have expanded their range some 600 percent in western states since the 1800s. About 80 percent of sagebrush sites occupied by conifers are in early phases of invasion.

Scattered young trees may look harmless to a casual observer, but **sage grouse scientists have found that birds abandon otherwise suitable habitat with as little as 4 percent tree cover.**

The great news is that armed with that knowledge, managers are putting efforts where the risks are highest and the gains are greatest. Today, Sage Grouse Initiative projects have reclaimed 405,241 acres of habitat.

### Gigantic Strides Forward in Oregon: Bedortha Ranch a Prime Example

The results in Oregon are dramatic where half the Sage Grouse Initiative conifer cuts are concentrated. Here, conifer projects increased 1,244 percent since the Initiative started in 2010, and have already removed two-thirds of the priority conifer invasion on private lands. Public land managers are working hard to solve the issue, because sage grouse do not recognize boundaries between public and private lands.

**Gary Bedortha's ranch** in central Oregon illustrates restoration on private lands. Through SGI, Bedortha has cut 12,000 acres since 2010. The resulting open sagebrush peppered with wildflowers and native grasses resembles historic conditions.





"I've been thrilled, just very pleased with the response. It's almost unbelievable how the native species are coming back."  
-Rancher Jay Tanner's comment on juniper removal that has also restored water to historic springs.

## Tanner Family: Della Ranch in Northern Utah invites Researchers to Document Results

**Jay Tanner** strongly supports scientific research on the Della Ranch where workers have removed 9,000 acres of juniper so far. Utah State professor Terry Messmer conducts studies there and on nearby public lands.

Sage grouse counts were up 20 percent in Box Elder County in 2014, a result that's likely related to halting the juniper invasion. Tanner's project joins that of many landowners that have cut junipers where it matters most through the Sage Grouse Initiative. The highest concentration of sage grouse in Utah are in this northwest corner.

## Five Dot Ranch in California Links Pasture to Plate and Juniper Removal to Green Energy

**Todd and Loretta Swickard** see bringing back sagebrush country under siege from spreading conifers as part of a much bigger vision. Their natural beef customers throughout the San Francisco area support a ranch dedicated to healthy cattle and plentiful wildlife, with a focus on sage grouse on their ranch near Susanville.

As more consumers seek local and sustainable foods, they can also appreciate that their beef comes from ranches dedicated to conserving sage grouse and other wildlife. While urban audiences may never see a sage grouse in the wild, they can find ways to support conservation through their food choices.

When it came to juniper removal, Five Dot Ranch also connects some unusual dots. They've linked the cutting of junipers to restore historic sagebrush-steppe to providing chips to a co-generation plant that provides local power to the Susanville area.

In 2012, the Honey Lake plant kept the lights on during power outages from wildfires, producing some 30 megawatt-hours of energy, nearly half powered by juniper chips harvested for conservation projects.

In addition, Five Dot Ranch installs wildlife-friendly fencing and rest-rotation systems that allow plants to flourish and sage grouse to use creekside areas without competing with cattle.

"The sage grouse like coming into those riparian areas," said Todd Swickard. "At Horse Lake, a lot of them come into the meadows, and sometimes, their chicks are with them."



The Swickard family ranch near Susanville, California, is part of a "pasture-to-plate" operation. Their juniper removal project also served to provide chips for a nearby co-generation plant.



# Healthy Rangelands



Deb and Mike Delaney are multi-generational ranchers in eastern Montana following SGI grazing plans that are enhancing the range.

*“We’ve always wanted to be good stewards of the land. We’ve never thought of owning the land but of taking care of it and growing grass.”*

~Deb Delaney



Mike Delaney shows his ranch plan to Jon Siddoway and Pete Husby (blue jacket), Montana NRCS.

## Enhancement: Prescribed Grazing Enriches Rangeland Health

**T**he Sage Grouse Initiative works with ranchers to plan and carry out grazing systems that provide for livestock and a healthy ecosystem that supports sagebrush, native bunchgrasses, and wildflowers. Prescribed grazing adjusts the timing, frequency, and duration of grazing in ways that encourage deep-rooted perennial grasses to thrive. This conservation action is often coupled with additional efforts like weed management and re-vegetation to maximize benefits.

### Delaney 44 Ranch: Mutual Benefits for Wildlife and Livestock in Montana

**Deb and Mike Delaney** run an Angus cow-calf operation across wind-ruffled and immense sagebrush country in eastern Montana. After two years in the Sage Grouse Initiative, they’re seeing a difference from the new rest-rotation system. Their cattle can be rounded up more easily and calf weights have gone up.

The Delaneys work closely with Nikki Rife, NRCS district conservationist out of Winnett, to come up with a proactive plan that meets the needs of their operation and maximizes benefits to wildlife.

The ranch harbors many sage grouse, as well as short-eared owls, golden eagles, long-billed curlews, marbled godwits and more. Deb and Mike, along with their son and daughter, take pride in their ranch for the wildlife that share it with them.

Entomologist Hayes Goosey takes samples near Roundup, Montana, a focal area for science research to assess how SGI prescribed grazing affects grouse, as well as insects, songbirds, and more.





Planting Wyoming big sagebrush on Rob Brooks ranch in **North Dakota** restores the mixed grass prairie and makes the land friendly to sage grouse here on the eastern fringe of the bird's range.

## Rob Brooks Ranch: Planting Sagebrush in North Dakota Restores Sage Grouse Habitat

On the fringe of sage grouse habitat in the extreme southwest corner of North Dakota, cattle rancher **Rob Brooks** is part of a collective effort to restore Wyoming big sage to private lands. So far, the results of planting sagebrush are promising and Brooks likes the results for his cattle, too. The sage helps trap snow and provides cover for calves in the spring.

On a fall day, Brooks and a group of hardy enthusiasts planted 600 sage seedlings at four different sites, following a strategy of improving habitat close to existing and historic lek sites. The grouse select for Wyoming big sage for nesting cover near the leks, and

later for brood hiding cover, and then again for winter shelter. The shrubs offer havens for songbirds too. Brooks supported the project after participating in an NRCS-sponsored workshop on improving sage grouse habitat in his part of the state. He remembers hunting grouse when he was a kid and wants to see them return.

"I love being out there, trying to make improvements to our land," Brooks said.

## Eastern Washington Big-Scale Conservation Starts at Rancher Allen Miller's Kitchen Table

When **Allen Miller** hosted his fellow ranchers around his family kitchen table in 2012, he took a leap of faith, trusting that the Sage Grouse Initiative, via the NRCS, would help solve a dilemma in this rugged coulee country not far from Coulee Dam.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was reducing the number of acres that could be set aside and not farmed. For ranchers who are reluctant to plow up land, the Sage Grouse Initiative offered an inviting alternative.

In short order, the NRCS enrolled 11 connected ranches for sage grouse habitat improvements under a time crunch to match the expiring CRP. The 14,400 acres of connected range is significant in a landscape overall dominated by wheat farming. The Sage Grouse Initiative took the place of the former program to keep the lands in grass and shrub cover and to use prescribed grazing tools for the range.



*SGI is a win-win for the bird, the rancher and the environment. I don't know the downside."* ~Allen Miller, SGI-enrolled rancher, Douglas County, Washington





Indian paintbrush heralds spring on the Pokorny ranch.

## Lander, Wyoming: Pokorny Ranch Projects Show Results of Hands-on Planning

**Steve Pokorny** took the first steps when he headed to the local NRCS office and asked how he might improve sage grouse habitat on his land in 2010, soon after the Sage Grouse Initiative started. Today, that’s resulted in 10 miles of solar fencing – a significant investment and only part of the strategy in place that’s sustaining the ranch for wildlife.

“We do like that solar electric fence,” Pokorny said. “We have a lot of deer and antelope in this area, so it is much friendlier for wildlife. And they can be very destructive to the barbed-wire fence. Plus, the solar fence requires a lot less maintenance.”

The solar fence sets up a two-pasture system with a deferred rotation to set up a system of alternating pastures for grazing, allowing more rest and plant growth that offers sage grouse cover.

## South Dakota Rancher Joe Painter Pleased With Results of Rest-Rotation Grazing

**Joe Painter** credits his grandfather for his appreciation of the sage grouse, sharp-tails, pheasants, ducks, wild turkeys and Hungarian partridge that share his windswept cattle ranch outside of the tiny town of Buffalo, in the far northwest corner of South Dakota.

Over the past several years, Painter has improved habitat for sage grouse on more than 13,000 acres with assistance from the Sage Grouse Initiative. He rested 2,000 acres of native range for a year and half in prime nesting and brood-rearing habitats.

“You can already see the advantage,” Painter says. “When you rest a pasture you give it a chance for it to grow back, and there’s more forage available. The roots are recharged, and it’s just a win-win for the birds and the livestock.”

*“My whole life I’ve loved birds, and anything we can do to keep birds on the ranch, I want to do.”*

~Joe Painter



Joe Painter, left, is recognized for his partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. To right is Mitch Faulkner, NRCS rangeland management specialist.



# *Wildlife-Friendly Grazing*



Jade Miller installs white and black fence markers in Montana's Big Hole Valley as part of a volunteer project of the [North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association](#).





Volunteers retrofit livestock water tanks to add escape ramps for sage grouse and other wildlife.



## Volunteers Help Sage Grouse Survive: Grazing Structures Go Wildlife Friendly

**S**ustainable grazing for sage grouse includes tending to the structures that go with ranching –from fences to livestock watering tanks and spring development. In five years, the Sage Grouse Initiative has transformed the type and placement of these structures that facilitate grazing for grouse to make them wildlife-friendly. A key reason? Volunteers are often stepping up to speed up the results.

The people in the field who have **marked 590 miles of fences to make them visible to flying sage grouse** coming in and out of leks share the reward of preventing 2,600 fence collisions. That is more than twice the number of males counted annually on leks in Washington, North and South Dakota, and Canada combined.

In addition, simple adjustments like retrofitting livestock watering tanks to put in an easy escape ramp save grouse and other wildlife from drowning. Developing springs that include ideal seeps and wet meadows for wildlife helps sage grouse chicks survive.



North of Price, Utah, 42 volunteers marked 10 miles of barbed wire fence. Near Randolph in Rich County, Boy Scout Kaden Hart led a day's effort to mark five miles of fence. Sage Grouse Initiative field staff helped with both projects.

*Strategically marking fences reduces the risk of sage grouse collisions by 83 percent.*



Volunteer Sam Johnson of Billings, MT (with his dogs Leah and Casey) spent a day marking fences.



## Utah meets goal of installing 250,000 fence markers

Boy scouts, hunting clubs, landowners and biologists tackled a **large-scale fence marking project** to prevent grouse collisions near leks. In 2014-15 alone, 291 volunteers contributed 2,415 hours to mark 138.5 miles of high-risk fences in 15 Utah counties. An additional 25 miles of fence were underway in 2015.

When Utah’s Sage Grouse Initiative program make 250,000 fence markers available to mark 128 miles of fencing with a single row of markers, that seemed like a daunting number. Not so. Seventy volunteers took the boxes full of white plastic clips and spaced them out on barbed wires in a total of 279 hours.

The astonishing results from volunteers show that the desire to help is strong. The Utah fence-marking push adds momentum to the 11-state, large-scale effort aimed at improving habitat and survivability for sage grouse.

## Field and Stream “Hero for a Day” Film Documents Volunteers Helping Sage Grouse

Dave Bequette couldn’t be happier with the conservation work done on his family ranch south of Laurel, Montana, as part of **Field and Stream** magazine’s **Hero for a Day** film series in 2014.

“We are trying to do everything we can here to benefit the grouse and all the upland birds,” Bequette said.

In one day, 40 volunteers marked three miles of barbed wire fence to prevent sage grouse collisions near leks (breeding grounds). They clipped on white vinyl markers made at COR Enterprises in Billings, a nonprofit industry that provides work for developmentally disabled adults. Others hammered in long nails on wooden fence posts to deter raptors from perching close to the two leks on the ranch.



Hero for a Day: Volunteers participated in a Field and Stream and Sage Grouse Initiative event marking fences, removing old fences, and making and installing escape ramps for livestock tanks. The resulting film reaches a large audience of sportsmen and women.

The Little Bighorn Future Farmers of America from Lodge Grass built and installed eight bird escape ramps in livestock water tanks. The Montana Conservation Corps removed a quarter-mile of partially fallen down fence that posed hazards for wildlife, including mule deer. Other volunteers planted 100 sagebrush in a burned area. The plants were grown at the Special K ranch near Billings that, like COR Enterprises, helps disabled adults.

Sam Johnson saw the article about Hero for a Day in The Billings Gazette and decided it beat building his home deck that day. He’s an avid hunter who brought his two dogs, Leah and Casey, along.

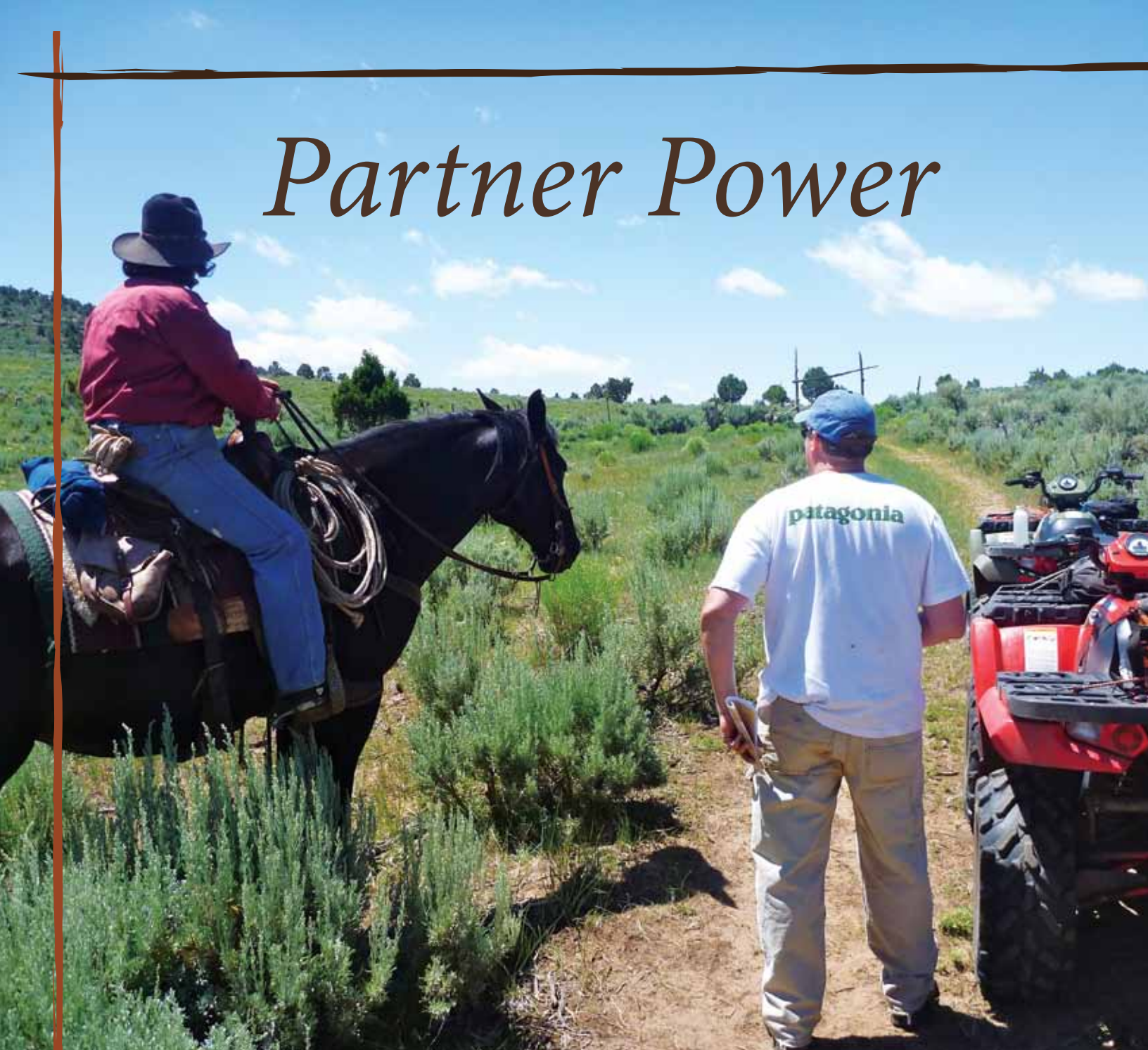
“If we can help the landowners help the birds, it’s in the interest of both sage grouse and hunting,” he said as he snapped another white marker on to the fence.



*“I always want to be outdoors. I like to raise animals and fix fences and do projects like this.” ~Isiah Brown (15-year-old volunteer making escape ramps for wildlife in the field with the Little Bighorn FFA of Lodge Grass, Montana)*



# Partner Power



**Dawn Nottingham** (left), a third-generation rancher in Northwest Colorado enrolled in the Sage Grouse Initiative, works closely with local contractors and SGI/NRCS range conservationists to enhance her range.

*“We’ve had a good little crop of sage chickens (grouse) for years and years. No one realized we had them. I figured it might not be a bad idea to hang onto them and take care of them.” ~Dawn Nottingham*



## Partnerships: Field Staff Deliver Conservation Locally

**W**here sage grouse populations are high, the communities of people tend to be low. It’s in the rural western communities from Forsyth, Montana, to Lakeview, Oregon, where Sage Grouse Initiative range or wildlife conservationists work one-on-one with private landowners.

Kitchen table talks and riding the range together have resulted in a doubling of Sage Grouse Initiative conservation acreage. Each of the 11,149 landowner visits in the past five years in 11 western states accelerates and scales up delivery of conservation on the ground.

The 27 non-federal positions located in NRCS offices are supported by more than 40 paying partners, an innovative model for funding field staff. The Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) oversees what is called the Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team that includes field staff, science, and communications. An additional \$5.4 million from partners leverages NRCS’s investment of \$9.3 million.



Natasha Gruber-Hadden serves in a partner position with the Mule Deer Foundation and nine other groups to deliver SGI conservation out of Roosevelt, Utah.



The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation takes the lead on Chris Yarbrough’s partner position out of Craig, Colorado, seen here chatting with award-winning rancher Gary Visintainer.





The sage-steppe near Elko, Nevada, harbors high populations of sage grouse. Here, range conservationists are helping large landowners plan for long-term habitat improvements.

### Elko, Nevada: Inventory Team Enables Watershed-Scale Conservation

Some might call Elko ground zero for sage grouse in Nevada, with high populations and high stakes for conservation. To inventory and assist large ranches here that do not qualify for Sage Grouse Initiative funding, an innovative contract brought in seasoned range conservationists to provide free technical assistance—inventorying and planning to sustain the range for sage grouse.

The Initiative’s partnership with the state of Nevada, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Pheasants Forever demonstrates again the power of this new paradigm for effective on-the-ground work.

### Revitalizing Precious Sage in Washington

In Douglas County, near Coulee Dam, landowners are teaming up to conserve a large chunk of native sagebrush and former Conservation Reserve Program lands that harbor 70 percent of Washington’s birds. Here, the Sage Grouse Initiative biologist serves in a Pheasants Forever partnership position with additional support from Conoco Phillips, IWJV and NRCS. The biologist helps landowners carry out grazing plans, restore wetlands, and has recently initiated an aerial survey to find new leks.



Clandy Jandreau, NRCS, (left) and Michael Brown, SGI, conduct a range inventory on private land in eastern Washington.



A sage grouse male inflates his air sacs as part of an elaborate spring courtship display.





The BLM recognizes partners of the Burley Landscape Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration Project with the Rangeland Stewardship Award for Collaboration. Partners include Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pheasants Forever, Idaho Department of Fish and Game and 37 permittee allotment holders.

### Award-winning Project in Burley, Idaho, a Showcase for Private and Public Restoration

Look no further than the Burley Landscape Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration Project to see how much gets done when private, state, nonprofit, and federal groups all work together for the same goal. The project earned the 2015 national Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Rangeland Stewardship award.

The Sage Grouse Initiative is a partner in a project that has restored 14,000 acres of vibrant sage grouse habitat via conifer removal as of early 2015. The group is taking action to treat 22,000 more acres in the next 3-5 years.

Biologists counting sage grouse males strutting on leks already are finding that sage grouse are returning to areas once overgrown with juniper.

Here, the Sage Grouse Initiative rangeland conservationist plays a vital role. This shared position serves as a liaison between the contractor cutting trees on public land, the two dozen Initiative-enrolled landowners who are also permittees on BLM acres being treated, and other funding partners. This novel approach serves as a transferable model across the range.

# Beyond Statistics



## Success on the Range is about People and Wildlife

The Sage Grouse Initiative is proud of its partnership comprising 1,129 ranches and hundreds of partners and volunteers to conserve a home on the range for wildlife and people.

While the statistics of achievements add up to impressive numbers, they cannot tell the real story of what it's like in the remote sagebrush country where people strive to find a way to make a living and provide for a wildlife legacy too.

That's why we've featured the wonderful people of the sage engaged in conservation throughout this document. A tip of the hat to everyone working together.







© Sage Grouse Initiative

Design: MajaDesign, Inc.

Author and Project Coordinator: Deborah Richie, Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Communications Director

Editors: Tim Griffiths, NRCS SGI coordinator; Dr. David Naugle, University of Montana Professor and SGI Science Advisor

**Photos:** Cover: NRCS. Inside cover: ©Rick McEwan. P. 1: Jeremy Roberts/Conservation Media [CM]. P. 2: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS]. P. 3: Ken Miracle. P. 4: Tatiana Gettelman [grouse], Deborah Richie [Ray Owens]. P. 5: NRCS. P. 6: Holly Copeland [viewer], Ron Francis, NRCS. P. 7: Ken Miracle, Tom Koerner/USFWS [owl]. P. 8: All Ken Miracle, except rabbit: ©Matt Lavin, sage grouse: ©Rick McEwan. P. 9: Scott Copeland. P. 10-11: Courtesy Pokorny family. P. 12: Stephen Ingram. P. 14: Tour: Deborah Richie, SGI, Landscape: ©John Fielder. P. 15: Jeremy Roberts/Conservation Media [CM]. P. 16: Tracey Wolfe, NRCS. P. 16: Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust. P. 18: Todd Forbes, BLM. P. 19: Steve Stuebner. P. 20: Ron Francis, NRCS. P. 21: NRCS. P. 22: Montana State University. P. 23: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 24: NRCS. P. 25: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 25: Kevin Edinger, NRCS. P. 27: NRCS. P. 28-29 ©Tom Healy. P. 30: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 31: Rae Ann Hart [volunteers], Deborah Richie, SGI [Sam J.]. P. 32-33: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 34: NRCS. P. 35: courtesy Natasha Gruber-Hadden. Yarbrough: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 36: Landscape: Rachelle Peppers, SGI. P. 37: Inventory: Deborah Richie, SGI, Jeremy Roberts, CM [sage grouse]. P. 38: BLM. P. 39: Upper left photo: courtesy of Steineke family. Below: Deborah Richie, SGI. P. 40: Deborah Richie, SGI; Ron Francis, NRCS; Jeremy Roberts [CM], Byrhonda Lyons, NRCS. Inside back cover: USFWS.

*Hats off to all Sage Grouse Initiative-enrolled Ranchers!*





*Achieving conservation through  
sustainable ranching*

Follow the Partnership  
[www.sagegrouseinitiative.com](http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com)  
[Lek us on Facebook](#)

