



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

May 2, 2016

Ron Alvarado
State Conservationist
USDA NRCS
1201 NE Lloyd Boulevard
Suite 900
Portland, OR 97232

Thad Heater
Sage Grouse Initiative National Coordinator
USDA NRCS
1365 Corporate Boulevard
Reno, NV 89502

Ron & Thad:

On behalf of the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) Management Board and staff, I extend our sincere appreciation to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for partnering with the IWJV on the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT).

Please find attached the SGI SWAT NRCS Quarterly Report for January-March 2016. 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 black ink, appearing to read "Dave Smith".

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

- o March (3,948 people reached, 19 shares, 1 comment, 49 likes): [In the arid American West, life follows water. And so do sage grouse.](#)
- o March (3,660 people reached, 16 shares, 4 comments, 89 likes): [Spring is dawning on the sagebrush sea. Time to gear up and go see the spectacular sage grouse mating dance!](#)



- o March (4,127 people reached, 18 shares, 4 comments, 36 likes): [Ranchers in Montana manage their land to sustain grass production, which benefits bovines and birds.](#)



E-News

- 71 new subscribers (4,492 total)
- Three total sent (monthly)
- 33% open rate
- 27% click rate on links
- Most popular edition from the quarter: [Sage Grouse E-News: Meet Our New Coordinator!](#)

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 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 SGI, the IWJV has now executed 88 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 \$7,600,765.03 in SWAT funds. This quarter, we established a new agreement with writer Jesse Bussard, who will help develop *Rancher Success Stories* in Idaho and Nevada. We also initiated a new agreement with Oregon State University, in order to continue the conifer removal study in eastern Oregon.

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 West WLFW Coordinator, NRCS National SGI Coordinator, NRCS SGI National Science Advisor, NRCS Sagebrush Ecosystem Specialist, and SGI Field Capacity & Delivery Coordinator ensures that the implementation of 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. The SGI SWAT Coordination Team met via conference call in both February and March 2016. The focus of these calls has been wrapping up SGI SWAT 1.0 and ensuring a smooth transition to SGI SWAT 2.0. An in-person SGI Coordination Team meeting is scheduled for April 26-27, 2016 in Missoula, Montana.

We are pleased to report that Rocky Mountain Power/Pacific Power (RMP/PP) has provided another \$80,000 to the IWJV to support SGI SWAT, bringing their total SGI SWAT contributions to \$120,000! The new funding will largely support SGI SWAT 2.0 through 2018. Non-federal contributions to SGI SWAT are critical as they provide match to federal funds and are proof of the wide-ranging partnership built by this unique initiative. More importantly, these non-federal funds provide flexibility, allowing SGI SWAT to be nimble and innovative. We are proud to have RMP/PP as a partner and thank them for their continued involvement and support!

SGI CORE STAFF

The SGI Team is happy to announce the recent selection of Thad Heater as SGI's permanent National Coordinator. Thad brings extensive experience and a history of success working to conserve natural resources throughout the West. Thad understands ranching first-hand from his upbringing on a working cattle ranch in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon. His diverse resume includes a decade at the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station, as well as seven years in the private sector and with Nevada Department of Wildlife. Thad joined NRCS in 2009 as a shared biologist, in partnership with FWS and the IWJV, eventually transferring to the state biologist position. He has been the SGI State Lead in Nevada since the initial rollout of SGI in 2010 and has been very active in sage grouse conservation at the state and local level, serving on a variety of technical teams. His work has been instrumental in making SGI and NRCS easement programs a success in Nevada by protecting key sage grouse habitat for the Bi-State and Greater Sage-grouse populations. Thad started in his new role on January 24. (Tim Griffiths will continue to be highly involved in SGI leadership in his position as the NRCS West Working Lands for Wildlife Coordinator.) Welcome, Thad!



Thad Heater

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 staff worked directly with three Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers and one new Indian Tribal member this quarter.
- b) *Assistance provided to program participants to help meet local, state, and/or federal regulatory requirements.* The intent of SGI is to proactively conserve sage grouse habitat to negate the need for additional regulations. Participating producers are highly committed to sage grouse conservation, and 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 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 7,825.25 Technical Assistance days. This level of technical assistance provision is indicative of how the SWAT will ratchet up SGI implementation over the next few years.
- d) *Number of Full-time Equivalent (FTE) being employed through the SWAT agreement.* Thirty-four and three-quarters (34.75) FTEs (25.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 Rangeland Inventory Support FTE, 1.0 SGI Field Capacity and Delivery Coordinator FTE, 0.75 SGI Communications Coordinator 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 2,293,260 acres of grazing systems; 291,613 acres of conifer removal; 1,018,763 feet (193 miles) of fence marking or removal; 8,541 acres of wetland restoration; 16,917 acres of rangeland seeding; and 30,408 acres of conservation easements.
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$430,308 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 \$56,881,748!***
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured or leveraged a total of \$7.4 million in partner contributions to date.

Appendix A

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

Launched in 2010, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a highly targeted and science-based 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 eight of the SWAT 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.