

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: July 1 – September 30, 2012

Intermountain West Joint Venture

November 1, 2012

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) shows no sign of slowing down and, in fact, made significant gains this past quarter in each of its three focus areas: field delivery, science, and communications. The following reports on these accomplishments from July 1 – September 30, 2012.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field team continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state NRCS staff, funding partners, and the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV). The team's 24 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:** Awareness of the SWAT partnership is growing as partners help tell the SGI story and demonstrate successes. For example, a recent issue of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's (RMEF) *Bugle* magazine contained a major feature on SGI, profiling the work of RMEF SWAT employee Chris Yarbrough in Craig, Colorado. Chris' position is supported by NRCS, RMEF, and IWJV. In Idaho, Pheasants Forever (PF) announced a game-changing collaboration with BLM and other federal, state, and local partners to help implement the *Burley Landscape Sage-Grouse Habitat Restoration Project*. Jeff Reese, PF SWAT employee in Burley, Idaho, worked with local ranchers and partners to help choreograph the unique arrangement that will invest SGI resources to restore habitat with ranchers on public lands. Jeff's position is made possible by funding partners including NRCS, PF, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, IWJV, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

The IWJV maintains a detailed tracking system to document SWAT team progress on a quarterly basis. This tracking system captures the key conservation activities identified in the NRCS-FWS Interagency Agreement for SGI-SWAT. These contributions are rolled-up with other NRCS actions and reported to the FWS during the annual sage grouse status review process to ensure landowner and partner efforts are considered in Endangered Species Act listing decision reviews.

To date, the increased SWAT field capacity has yielded:

- **582,047 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase sage grouse hiding cover during nesting season. Additional grass cover is expected to increase sage grouse populations by 8-10%.
- **78,100 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.

- **48 miles** of “high risk” fence near leks marked or moved. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage-grouse fence collisions by 83%.
- **Monthly Coordination Conference Calls:** 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. This quarter, the team received training on utilizing the recently released Sage Grouse Fence Collision Risk Tool, a product developed with NRCS-CEAP support. SWAT members were trained on how to apply this tool to highly target fence marking efforts in high-risk landscapes to reduce bird-fence strikes. The IWJV also collaborated in producing a *CEAP Insight* that provides a user-friendly guide on the tool for NRCS staff and partners.
- **SWAT Field Team Support:** To help ensure SWAT team success, IWJV provides two support staff that work one-on-one with team members. Jeremy Maestas, NRCS-IWJV SGI Technical Lead, specializes in conservation delivery assistance by providing direct technical support to team members and NRCS staff. He also fosters regular team coordination and helps maintain funding partner relations. Tina Dennison, IWJV Project Coordinator, provides assistance to the team with accomplishment tracking and reporting, as well as, administrative support for team meetings.

SCIENCE CAPACITY

The SGI Science Capacity effort continues to run smoothly, track progress, and yield important scientific results. What’s more, it is growing – adding significantly to current achievements and progress. Mostly notably, in this past quarter, we led contracting efforts on, and have nearly finalized, a critical agreement intended to create a framework for maximizing conservation benefits of SGI investments. This project, entitled “Investing in the Sage Grouse Initiative: A Range-Wide Framework for Maximizing Conservation Benefits by Assessing Trade-offs in Implementation Strategies,” is a true partnership with The Nature Conservancy, which is providing roughly half of the funding for the assessment.

SGI is also initiating two interagency agreements – one with the USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station and the other with the USGS Fort Collins Science Center – which cumulatively will invest nearly \$800,000 toward expanding on our knowledge and understanding of sage grouse genetic connectivity. Implementation of these landscape connectivity projects will inventory the current state of sage grouse genetic connectivity, provide data that will assist in decision support for sage grouse conservation, and generate new and integrated maps showing connectivity among core areas for sage grouse for use by states and federal management agencies. The importance of this work cannot be overstated.

Collectively, the IWJV science agreements are moving us closer to reaching SGI’s goals of building potent, science-based targeting tools and thoroughly evaluating the biological outcomes of SGI implementation. Now, with the addition of the two most recent agreements under development, IWJV science efforts extend across the ten-state sage-grouse range, and cover millions of acres of private sagebrush grasslands and wetlands. The results will play a pivotal role in effectively targeting SGI as needed to realize sage grouse conservation objectives and help ranchers conserve sustainable rangelands. Assessment partners in this work include The University of Montana, University of Idaho, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Utah State University, The Nature Conservancy, Western Association

of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, FWS, U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station, U.S. Geological Survey, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, and others.

- **Investing in the Sage Grouse Initiative: A Range-Wide Framework for Maximizing Conservation Benefits by Assessing Trade-offs in Implementation Strategies (The Nature Conservancy):** Agreement with The Nature Conservancy to evaluate the effectiveness of SGI investments, range wide, by weighing relative costs of various strategies against resulting benefits to sage grouse.
- **Relating Mule Deer Corridors to Sage Grouse Conservation (The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter):** Agreement with The Nature Conservancy – Wyoming Chapter to assess SGI benefits to mule deer and to create spatial tools that guide future conservation actions to maximize benefits to both sage grouse and mule deer.
- **Sagebrush Decision Support Tool (Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies):** Agreement with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to develop a guidance tool for resource managers to utilize when considering whether or not treatment is necessary, and/or justified, in sagebrush habitats for the benefit of Greater Sage Grouse. The guidance document will be used as a framework to evaluate areas of concern relative to ecological conditions, risks associated with treatments, and the current role of these areas relative to seasonal sage grouse habitat needs.
- **Greater Sage Grouse Response to Season-Long and Prescribed Grazing (NRCS Conservation Practice 528) on Paired Ecological Sites (Phase 1 – Year 2) (Utah State University):** Agreement with Utah State University to document Greater Sage Grouse individual and population responses using a BACI design to vegetation changes that may occur under prescribed grazing of paired sites located in Rich County, Utah.
- **Assessing Sage Grouse Response to the Removal of Encroaching Juniper (University of Idaho):** Agreement with the University of Idaho to conduct multi-year assessment on the effects of juniper removal on sage grouse habitat and populations.
- **Assessing the Range Condition of Core Sage Grouse Habitat near Roundup, Montana (Open Range Consulting):** Agreement with Open Range Consulting to perform rangeland habitat mapping and related data analysis services on eight private ranches comprising 500,000 acres in North Central Montana.
- **Evaluating Effects of Rest-Rotation Grazing on Greater Sage Grouse Habitat and Population Dynamics in Central Montana (Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks; The University of Montana):** Agreements with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and The University of Montana to implement a long-term research project evaluating rest-rotation grazing practices on sage grouse population dynamics.
- **Improving Fence Structure in Sage Grouse Core Areas of North Central Montana (The University of Montana):** Agreement with The University of Montana to implement a multi-year research project assessing the impact and success of removing, relocating, and/or marking fences in high risk grassland areas in hopes of reducing sage grouse mortality.

- **Measuring Intra- and Inter-annual Wetland Persistence and Variability During Sage Grouse Brood-rearing Periods over a 30-year Time Span in Oregon, Nevada and California (IWJV/Nevada Department of Wildlife/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife):** This collaborative project among the IWJV, NRCS Science Advisor, Oregon NRCS, Nevada NRCS, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Nevada Department of Wildlife will result in a spatially explicit decision support tool that will help SGI target the most productive sage grouse brood rearing habitat as well as facilitate related outcome-based evaluations. This project will provide tools that will be particularly useful with the utilization of conservation easements in SGI, including the Wetlands Reserve Program. Initial planning tools will be available in fall of 2012.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

SGI Communications is sharing the message of achieving sage grouse conservation through sustainable ranching in a growing number of venues from online to on-the-ground. The SGI website (www.sagegrouseinitiative.com) home page “Learn why” section now more clearly than ever defines the Initiative and its importance, and serves as a key take-home message for all partners and media.

Here’s a round-up of activities for the quarter:



Partners in the Pioneer Mountains Alliance, Deborah Richie, SGI

Idaho’s Pioneer Mountains Sage Grouse Success Story

Deborah Richie, SGI Communications, joined partners in the Pioneer Mountains of Idaho in August to cover a partnership success story that is conserving intact and vast working landscapes for sage grouse and pronghorn. She collaborated closely with NRCS on the field visit, as well as the Pioneer Mountains Alliance. Her feature stories from that trip reached a large regional audience:

- “Saving Sage Grouse: Local Ranchers and Conservationists are Teaming Up,” in **Sun Valley Magazine Blog**, August 23, 2012.
- The **Idaho Nature Conservancy** newsletter (to be published).
- “Unlikely Allies: In Blaine County, Conservationists and Ranchers Join to Protect Wildlife and Rural Business,” in **Idaho Magazine**, October 2012 issue
- Posts and photos on **SGI Facebook** page



Participant in the Pioneer Mountains Alliance tour, Deborah Richie, SGI

SGI Communications in Public Lands Council newsletter

Richie's story on SGI and the efforts of landowners and partners in Oregon and Northern California appeared in the Public Lands Council newsletter in early July; it was also featured on a Facebook post on July 10th.

Partnering for Sage Grouse & Elk

Hannah Ryan's (now the new IWJV Communications Specialist) in-depth article, "*Destinies Intertwined, Saving Sage Grouse (and Helping Elk, Too)*" appeared in the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's September/October 2012 issue of *Bugle* magazine. The article is now available as a hard-copy reprint that will prove instrumental for policymakers, landowners, managers, and a large number of partners.

SGI News on the website: www.sagegrouseinitiative.com

The Sage Grouse Initiative showcases news of relevance to our partners, the media, and landowners. This quarter saw more additions of videos and radio links, adding diversity to our communications. The unveiling of the new IWJV website in September is a new opportunity to share and enhance communication messages on the complementary websites and on Facebook.

The 14 news stories or radio programs featured on the SGI website from July through September continue to show the spread of success stories about SGI SWAT in agricultural publications, as well as to conservation audiences and to the larger public. Here's a sampling of the featured stories that demonstrate the breadth, depth, and success of SGI partnerships:

July

"Sage Grouse Initiative: Ranchers step up to prevent a listing and improve rangeland"
in ***Western Livestock Journal***, July 6, 2012 (authored by Deborah Richie, SGI communications)

*"Sage Grouse: Investing in a Shared Future, **Sierra Club Lay of the Land Blog***, July 19, 2012.

*"NRCS Chief Speaks at Pinedale Sage Grouse Meeting," in **Wyoming Livestock Roundup***, July 31, 2012.

August

*“Montana Conservation Corps: Walking the Range for Seeds, for **SGL website and NRCS Montana**, featuring mini-grants for sage grouse news from the field, August 15, 2012.*

*“Destinies Intertwined: Saving Sage Grouse (and Helping Elk, Too)”, in **Bugle, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation**, posted in August (September/October issue, 2012.*

September

*“USDA and Interior Reach Historic Agreement to Support Voluntary Wildlife Conservation Efforts on Working Agricultural Lands, **USFWS press release**, September 17, 2012. (And posted the Video of Chief NRCS delivering the message).*

*“New Website of Intermountain West Joint Venture, **news release from IWJV**, September 24, 2012.*

“Nevada Sage Grouse Symposium to Feature Landowner Conservation Efforts,” in Nevada Society for Range Management, Sept. 13, 2012.

SGL Facebook Page

As the SGL Facebook Page steadily attracts more likes, people talking about this, and weekly total reaches, it's clear that beautiful, humorous, or story-oriented photographs and videos capture the most attention and are circulated to others. Asking questions and encouraging interaction invites attention as well.

The growing photo albums on the Facebook website provide a gallery of downloadable photos that are available to help partners and staff with their own stories. The other key strategy of the Facebook site is to link posts to the website—to remind people of the ever new and changing news and resources available on the SGL website.

A good measure of how far the SGL Facebook page resonates is that it's reaching close to 100,000 friends of fans. Beyond statistics, the Facebook page links viewers to the SGL website. Facebook serves best for quick and visual posts. We intend to continue to refine and improve based on experience, reviewing data, and sharing social media experiences with partners. As the page continues to develop with more likes and connections to other social media, we anticipate seeing even greater usefulness in meeting our communications goals.

Highlighting SGL Partners—in photos, links and likes on Facebook:

Facebook offers one more way to hold up our partners and the fine work they do on behalf of sage grouse conservation and all the wildlife of the sage-steppe, and the great vast working landscapes of the core area, where more than **544 ranchers are stepping up to participate in SGL**. Photo albums are particularly effective. Two examples of albums featuring partners and compelling photos:

- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation – four photos contributed by RMEF that accompany the Bugle story, “Destinies Intertwined- saving sage grouse and helping elk too.”
- Sagebrush Bird Conservation Network – seven photos of sagebrush songbirds, nests, and nestlings with a link to the site with the photo gallery.

Facebook Statistics

Facebook statistics from the June to September time period showed an **increase in likes from 200 to 300**, with a timeline event posting of the 300 likes on September 28, featuring a photo of children from the Crow tribe in Montana learning about sage grouse at an Earth Day event.

The gender percentage this time favored males slightly over females (in last quarter it was 51.4% female and 46.8% male). The 35-44 age bracket continues to have the most Facebook viewers of the page.

People who Like the Page (Demographics and Location)

- Gender: Females – 47.2 %; Males – 51.2 %
- Age: Females
 - 13-17: 0.7%
 - 18-24: 5%
 - 25-34: 11%
 - 35-44: 11.6%
 - 45-54: 10.3%
 - 55-64: 6.3%
 - 65+: 2.3%
- Age: Males
 - 13-17: 1%
 - 18-24: 4.7%
 - 25-34: 15%
 - 35-44: 15.3%
 - 45-54: 7.3%
 - 55-64: 6.3%
 - 65+: 2%
- Countries: Last quarter: U.S plus Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Pakistan, United Kingdom, China, Afghanistan. This quarter additions: India, Kuwait, Spain, Iraq, Iran, Italy, Bulgaria.
- Cities: 20 in the U.S.
- Languages: English, Spanish, Dutch, Arabic, Italian, Bulgarian



Like Sources: 60 on page, 29 on Timeline, 8 on Mobile, 1 on Ticker, 1 Third-party Apps

Top external referral to FB page: www.sagegrouseinitiative.com

Reach Statistics

This page evaluates all viewers, not only those who have “liked” the page. The gender and age statistics are slightly different than last quarter, with the highest viewers in the 25-34 age group, rather than the 45-54 age (highest for likes).

Peak Viewing

2,111 people between July 28 and August 11.

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. In cooperation with Pheasants Forever (PF), a key partner of the SGI SWAT, the IWJV effectuated 21 science, communications, and SWAT management agreements. In addition, we are nearing completion on an additional four agreements. These projects encumber a total of \$968,997 in SWAT funds and additional associated matching dollars.

The SGI SWAT is made possible by the IWJV's fund distribution mechanisms and ability to efficiently build the administrative and contracting capacity needed for successful implementation. The IWJV devoted significant staff time and resources during the reporting period to assembling the partnerships and developing the agreements needed to achieve SGI objectives. Specifically, we are strengthening SGI by building and maintaining partnerships that result in additional funds contributed to SGI capacity; supporting NRCS staff in coordinating SGI implementation among a diverse array of wildlife conservation partners – including 11 state fish and wildlife agencies and, to date, 15 non-governmental conservation organizations or corporations; and, effectively managing contracts and agreements to facilitate the objectives of the SWAT.

We continue to engage the SGI National Coordinator and Science Advisor on essentially a daily basis to ensure that the implementation of the SGI SWAT is precisely aligned with NRCS objectives. Collectively, we have built a solid foundation for regular communication and coordination that will yield substantial benefits over the life of the SGI SWAT. We implemented our fourth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in August 2012, involving SGI, IWJV, and PF staff; a vast array of administrative and implementation items were discussed and decisions were made by the team.

The IWJV partnership with ConocoPhillips Company (COP) through the SGI SWAT is paying significant dividends for the initiative. We are currently utilizing a portion of COP's \$300,000 donation to the IWJV through a non-governmental conservation partner to directly and specifically support SGI SWAT field capacity and communications. COP's fiscal commitment of SGI through the SWAT is an excellent model for corporate support of SGI through the SWAT partnership, and presents an excellent roadmap for working with other corporate partners.

Beyond the specific scope of the SWAT, the IWJV made additional progress on development of outcome-based evaluations of SGI treatments on migratory birds. The IWJV has secured \$60,000 for this work that will likely leverage an additional \$70,000 of BLM funding and upwards of \$150,000 from other sources for multiple evaluations of the effects of SGI treatments on sagebrush obligate migratory birds such as Brewer's sparrow, sage thrasher, and sage sparrow carried out by reputable independent scientists of academic institutions, agencies, and/or nongovernmental conservation organizations. We anticipate that fieldwork and modeling will begin in the spring of 2013. These projects will be implemented by IWJV science partners entirely with IWJV, FWS, and other science funding support, thereby leveraging NRCS' commitment of SWAT funding to sage grouse science projects. This investment of non-NRCS funds in science-based evaluations is another example of the power of the IWJV partnership in SGI implementation.

NRCS SGI-SWAT AGREEMENT PERFORMANCE METRICS

The 24 partner positions facilitated substantial habitat conservation during the July-Sept 2012 reporting period, as quantified through our detailed accomplishment tracking system administered by the IWJV's SGI Project Coordinator. SWAT field staff continued to become familiar with their landscapes and received additional training; the "boots-on-the-ground" delivered impressive outcomes, as follows (data below encompasses progress to date from this quarter):

- 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 two new beginning farmers or ranchers and two Native American Tribes.
- 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 24 SWAT partner positions have made 1,108 contacts (field visits, etc.) with **544 different agricultural producers**. This level of technical assistance provision is indicative of how the SGI 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-four (34) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Field Delivery Capacity Coordinator FTE, 1.0 Communications Specialist 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 582,047 acres of grazing systems; 78,100 acres of conifer removal; 215,822 feet (40.8 miles) of fence marking or removal; 4,300 acres of wetland restoration; and 1,569 acres of rangeland seeding. Notable accomplishments during this period included 129,768 acres of grazing systems applied (a three-fold increase from the previous two reporting periods combined); an additional 32,112 acres of conifer removal planned (the highest amount of any reporting period to date), and 4,000 acres of wetland restoration planned by SWAT delivery capacity staff in Ely, Nevada!
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$3,598,908 in Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds, \$3,223,998 in Grassland Reserve Program funds, and \$2,093,723 in Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program funds were obligated during the reporting period. This total of over \$9 million in contract obligations nearly matches the amount obligated during the first and second quarters combined!
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$1.60 million toward the 24 partner positions and leveraged an additional \$2.03 million in partner funding for other elements of the SGI SWAT. This includes a challenge contribution of \$80,000 in cash from the

FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Mountain-Prairie Region for Year 4 and 5. Finally, we are in the process of securing commitments from partners for continuation of their SWAT field delivery capacity matching contributions for the out-years.

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.



SWATer Chris Yarbrough holds sage grouse feathers, Hannah J. Ryan, IWJV

Appendix A.

Objectives & Evolution of the SGI SWAT

Launched in 2010, the USAD 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 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 the 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 a subsequent modification 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. Further, 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 the 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 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.

Read exciting articles about the SGI SWAT

“Unlikely Allies: In Blaine County, Conservationists and Ranchers Join to Protect Wildlife and Rural Business,” by Deborah Richie in *Idaho Magazine*, October 2012 issue.

In Blaine County, Conservationists and Ranchers Join to Protect Wildlife and Rural Business

By Deborah Richie



ALLIES


strung off differences and focus on common goals of economic revival tied to safeguarding the Pioneer Mountain region bordering the famed Sawtooth Mountains. Slowing to scan the foothills for pronghorns that must be somewhere, I couldn't help comparing my feeble efforts to the fabled animal in North America. Picking up the pace, I stretched out my stride and envisioned down hooves skimming the sage steppe. Pronghorns can attain speeds of sixty miles per hour and sustain thirty miles per hour over long distances. With their aerobic capacity and elegant physique, they could cover the 26.2 miles of a marathon in forty-five minutes.

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Here in the backdoor of Sun Valley pronghorns are breaking more than a speed record, and part of my assignment is to find out about local efforts to protect one of the longest migration routes for this species. In fall, herds head from the Pioneer Mountains northeast across rump

pled, dry mountains, lush valleys, through Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve, and finally arrive at their winter range in the Little Lost River and Birch Creek areas of the Upper Snake River Plain. Like ultra-marathoners, pronghorns must conquer thine,

barriers, and exhaustion. Survival requires both physical prowess and a continuous pathway that's safe for a round trip. Roads, highways, subdivisions, pipelines, and poorly designed fences can be deadly. Facts about pronghorns whirled in my head as I ran and then refocused on my immediate surroundings, where a pair of red-collared hawks circled above me. I stopped to revel in the show of fanned tails like glowing umbrellas against a cerulean sky. From their superior vantage, the hawks might glimpse the elusive pronghorn and perhaps that iconic bird of western arid lands evoking the scent of sagebrush. The sage grouse, a bird in trouble, appears to be the ambivalent mascot of a pronghorn. The chicken-like bird is known for lumbering flights and awkward forays along the ground. A race between a



SAGE GROUSE—ONE CHOOSY BIRD

In the Pioneer Mountains, biologist Regan Berkley of Idaho Fish and Game tracks forty colored sage grouse, all of which were captured among about five hundred birds as they wintered in the shelter of tall sagebrush. Each spring, the sage grouse scatter to the north, east, and south, as far as thirty-five miles away.

Science is handing over critical information for planning and conserving a declining population. The wintering site was being considered for the relocation of the Friedman Memorial Airport in Halley. The airport is looking for an alternative now, but if biologists hadn't figured out the critical winter use and if the airport had been built, sage grouse would have taken a hit in far-flung spring and summer ranges.

The reason sage grouse move so much is simple. They're picky about habitat and food. In winter, they hunker down in dense sagebrush, poking above the snow and living on an exclusive diet of sagebrush leaves. In spring, generations of birds return to the same leks. Nesting habitats can't be too far from leks and must have a mix of sagebrush, bunchgrass, wildflowers and wet meadows for the chicks to thrive.

<http://sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/unlikely-allies-blaine-county-conservationists-and-ranchers-join-protect-wildlife-and-rural>

“Destinies Intertwined, Saving Sage Grouse (and Helping Elk, Too)” by Hannah J. Ryan appeared in the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation’s September/October 2012 issue of *Bugle* magazine.

Destinies Intertwined

Saving Sage Grouse (and Helping Elk, Too)

by Hannah J. Ryan

What do sage grouse and elk have in common? Forty million acres of crucial habitat and an innovative charge to conserve the best of it.

The weak beam from a flashlight outlines the sagebrush and prickly pines just in front of our stumbling feet. The sun is still so minuscule below the horizon, and Chris Larsoough holds the light to help us step quietly as we follow odd paths and pluck up a prairie knob. Just before we crest the hill, he clicks it off, crouches low and squats at the far bank. Fifty yards to our left a half dozen pronghorns spook and trot off, snorting. Then, from nearby the exact clumps of sagebrush the ewekes had been browsing a white chess billows, glowing in the low morning light. The creature convulses weirdly, emitting that strange plunking noise that is new to the human ear, its species yet sounds to us like a clucking fawn. We've arrived at the edge of a lek, or historic mating site, of the greater sage grouse. Perhaps no other animal is more closely bound to the troubled sea of sage that stretches across the Idaho West. Weighing up my pronghorn, standing a foot tall and spanning almost 3 feet from neck to tail, greater sage grouse are the largest of North America's native grouse by a good measure. Small wonder that Lewis and Clark dubbed them the "cock of the Plains." Unfortunately, since the bonafide days when the good captain explored the home ground



<http://sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/destinies-intertwined-saving-sage-grouse-and-helping-elk-too>