

INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

conserving habitat through partnerships

May 1, 2013

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Joyce & Tim:

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 2013. The report also contains an appendix: Objectives and Evolution of the SGI SWAT.

Please give me a call at (406) 329-3120 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". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dave Smith
IWJV Coordinator

Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team

Quarterly Report: January 1 – March 31, 2013

Intermountain West Joint Venture
May 1, 2013

The Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) continued to make significant gains this past quarter in each of its three focus areas: field delivery, science, and communications. The following reports on these accomplishments from January – March 2013.

FIELD DELIVERY CAPACITY

The SWAT field team continued to expand and accelerate SGI conservation delivery this quarter with support from local and state USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (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:** 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-U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (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 (ESA) listing decision reviews.

To date, the increased SWAT field capacity has yielded:

- **766,629 acres** of rangeland improvement to increase sage grouse hiding cover during nesting season. Additional grass cover is expected to increase sage grouse populations by eight to ten percent.
 - **128,857 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.
 - **74 miles** of "high-risk" fence near leks to be marked or removed. Marking fences is expected to reduce sage grouse fence collisions by 83%.
- **SWAT Field Team Spotlight:** Passionate individuals with a propensity for action are key drivers of SGI success. Here are a few examples of how the SWAT field team is working every day to build broad support for sage grouse conservation and get more done on the ground.

- *Chris Yarbrough (Craig, Colorado) – Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF):* Chris represented the SGI at RMEF's 2013 Elk Camp in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he helped share the SGI partner story with thousands of sportsmen and women. Chris continues to build awareness among broad stakeholders of the significant overlap between critical elk and sage grouse habitat, all with the goal of garnering more support for conserving sagebrush ecosystem they share. *This SWAT position is made possible with the support of NRCS, IWJV, RMEF, and ConocoPhillips Company.*



Chris Yarbrough at RMEF's Elk Camp



Foreground: Encroaching conifer trees have been removed, producing immediate habitat benefits for sage grouse. Background: SGI work continues every day to reclaim more sagebrush steppe. Photo by Joshua Uriarte

- *Joshua Uriarte (Baker City, Oregon) – Baker Valley Soil & Water Conservation District (BVSWCD):* Conifer encroachment is a key threat plaguing sagebrush habitats, especially in the Great Basin. Josh has been hard at work in eastern Oregon helping ranchers reclaim habitat values and improve ranch productivity. Just this quarter, he helped ensure another 11,903 acres of sagebrush steppe will see the light again after trees are removed. *This SWAT position is made possible with the support of NRCS, IWJV, BVSWCD, and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.*

- *Mike Higgins (Arco, Idaho) and Kelli Bartholomew (Ephrata, Washington) – Pheasants Forever (PF):* Mike and Kelli attended the Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever’s National Pheasant Fest & Quail Classic in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They helped run an SGI booth to answer questions about sage grouse and tell the SGI story. The event drew close to 29,000 people. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, visited the booth and thanked PF, NRCS, and other partners for their role in helping build a new paradigm for at-risk species conservation. *These SWAT positions are made possible with the support of NRCS, IWJV, FWS, Idaho Department of Fish and Game (Arco), and ConocoPhillips Company (Ephrata).*



From left: Christian Hagen, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, Jeremy Maestas, Jon Ungerer, Kelli Bartholomew, and Mike Higgins at Pheasant Fest

- **SWAT Position Updates:** SWAT field team talent does not go unrecognized by other employers. As position vacancies arise, the IWJV works with hiring entities and funding partners to re-assess position locations to ensure technical assistance is focused where it’s needed most; positions are quickly refilled (as needed) to minimize disruption to conservation delivery. The following are changes that occurred this quarter:
 - Michael Lucas (Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) – Malta, Montana) accepted a position as the Soil Conservationist with NRCS in the same office. Brandon Sandau (MACD – Winnett, Montana) is re-locating to Malta to fill this vacancy. The Winnett position was moved to Glasgow, Montana, to take advantage of growing SGI opportunities there.
 - John Fahlgren (MACD) was hired for the Glasgow, Montana, position.
 - Tyrel Brown (PF) was hired for the position in Ely, Nevada.

- **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.
- **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

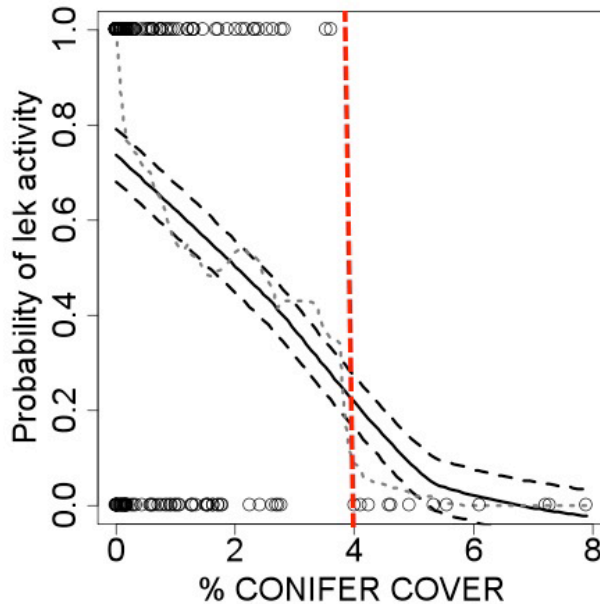
Science Capacity continues to provide the road map for sage grouse conservation under SGI. Research under SGI Science is guiding the strategic application of conservation practices in core areas, evaluating the outcomes of conservation practice implementation, and increasing our knowledge and understanding of sage grouse genetic connectivity. Current research under SGI Science Capacity includes:

- **The U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station** and the **U.S. Geological Survey Fort Collins Science Center** are advancing our understanding of core area connectivity through sage grouse genetics studies.
- **The Nature Conservancy** is conducting a spatial analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of SGI investments, rangewide, by weighing relative costs of various strategies against resulting benefits to sage grouse. **The Nature Conservancy in Wyoming** is assessing SGI benefits to mule deer and creating spatial tools that will guide future conservation actions to maximize benefits to both sage grouse and mule deer.
- **The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies** is developing a guidance tool for resource managers to use when considering whether sagebrush treatment is necessary, and/or justified, to benefit sage grouse.
- **Utah State University** is documenting Greater Sage-Grouse individual and population responses to vegetation changes that occur under prescribed grazing of paired sites located in Rich County, Utah, using a Before-After Control-Impact design.
- **The University of Idaho** is conducting a multi-year assessment on the effects of juniper removal on sage grouse habitat and populations.
- **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks** and **The University of Montana** are implementing a long-term research project, evaluating rest-rotation grazing practice effects on sage grouse population dynamics.
- **Open Range Consulting** has completed rangeland habitat mapping and related data analysis services on eight, private ranches, which comprise 500,000 acres in north central Montana. Data and mapping will help to analyze nesting and chick survival data in the SGI prescribed grazing study in central Montana.
- **The IWJV**, with assistance from several partners, is examining long-term trends in wetland persistence to develop a spatially explicit decision-support tool that will help SGI target the most productive sage grouse brood-rearing habitat and facilitate outcome-based evaluations.

The status of each of the above research projects is varied but all continue to make significant progress, and some interesting findings are beginning to emerge. A SGI science analysis quantifies the impacts to sage grouse from encroaching conifer, the benefits of strategically removing them, and the urgency of escalating our efforts in a narrow window of time. The landscape-level analysis offers a road map to targeting wisely, in order to maximize our conservation return on investment. The authors evaluated 152 leks, or breeding areas, across four million

acres of sage grouse habitat in eastern Oregon, applying sophisticated mapping technology to create timely and applied information for managers. Preliminary findings revealed that after canopy cover exceeded a mere four percent, no leks in this study remained active (Figure 1). That means very low levels of conifers spreading into historic sagebrush steppe results in population level impacts to birds. It also shows how removing that four percent coverage can have an immediate positive result. It's all about proactive conservation.

Figure 1. Conifer Cover and Probability of Lek Activity



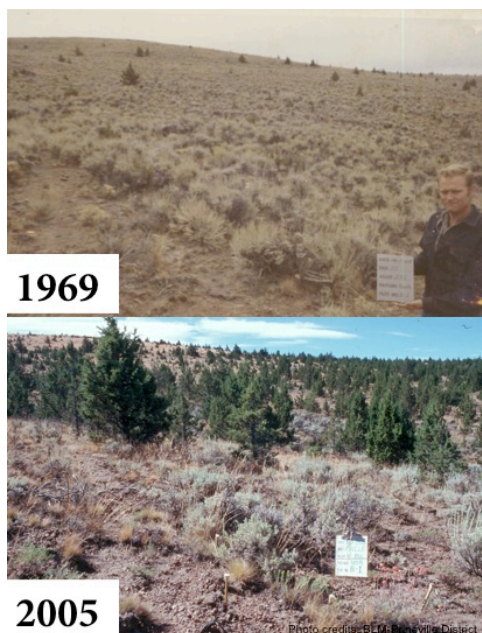
- No leks remained active after 4% conifer cover
- Estimated 875,000 acres within 3 mi of leks in Oregon
- Can we alleviate this threat in Oregon?

Today, unprecedented interest in sage grouse recovery is a catalyst for scaling up conifer removal to maintain the treeless sagebrush the birds require for survival. Science is important to work effectively and efficiently for the best results for the bird and a healthy sagebrush steppe ecosystem.

How big is the problem? And why act now?

Conifer encroachment is spreading into imperiled sagebrush ecosystems in the West. Invasion is most pronounced in the Great Basin, where in the last 150 years the conifers have expanded their range by a staggering 600%. The rate has slowed after peaking in the 1960s, but we must act now before 80% of low-density conifer converts to conifer forest within the next 30 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Conifer Encroachment



Now is the time to fix this problem

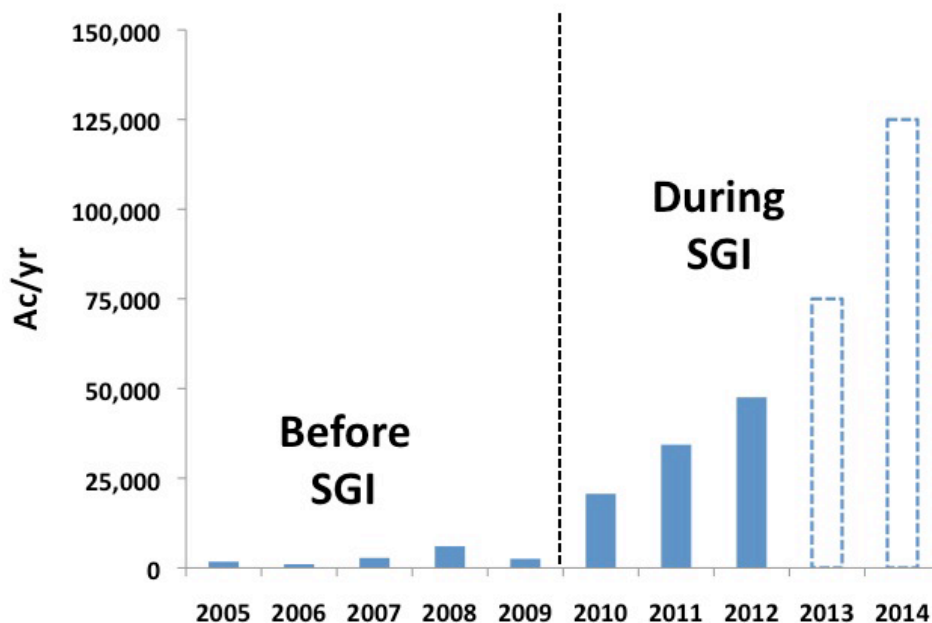
- Amount of Phase III today is 20% of total
- Expected to be 75% of total in next 30-50 years
- 200,000 ac crossing threshold to Phase III per year in Great Basin

(Miller et al. 2008)

Targeted Investments Are Working

Targeted investments to remove conifer are increasing exponentially, and to date, SGI has helped Oregon ranchers cut invaded trees from more than 100,000 acres. Quantifying the benefits and escalating on-the-ground removal paves the way for tangible investments of partners wanting to see a high return for sage grouse recovery efforts. As successes mount through the efforts of the SGI and partners, more ranchers, individuals, groups, and agencies are joining this key conservation effort (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Junipers cut per year, before and after SGI started in Oregon



Proactive Conservation Key to Sage Grouse Recovery

Removing junipers is a proactive approach to maintaining the distribution and abundance of sage grouse. Investing in conifer removal in Oregon and other parts of the Great Basin will help offset inevitable losses from different threats. Wyoming, for example, is home to a little under half of all remaining sage grouse. There, a core area policy has become a national model for saving more than 80% of sage grouse core habitat, while allowing energy development and other uses to go forward outside of the high priority areas for sage grouse. The plan is the subject of the new SGI film, *“Saving Sage-Grouse: The Wyoming Example”*; see the SGI website home page to view the film: www.sagegrouseinitiative.com. While an effective win-win strategy, there will be some losses of birds. What the conifer analysis shows is that investing dollars in strategic conifer removal as soon as possible, with a sustainable commitment, can help offset losses in other key parts of their range.

A Closer Look at the Science Analysis

In addition, lek activity was reviewed and compared to the conifers nearby. A newly developed map captures fine details about the conifers – how big the trees are, the positions of stand clusters relative to the lek, and how much of the landscape the trees covered. Lek activity was chosen because sage grouse nests are in close proximity, with 64% falling within five kilometers of breeding sites. Nest success is vital to population growth. SGI’s analysis found severe impacts to the birds with a very low canopy level of conifers. The configuration of the trees suggests that the more widely dispersed the trees (rather than clustered), the worse the problem. Findings for conifers are similar to analysis for oil and gas development that fragments sage grouse habitat. Where well pads were clustered, a few leks remained active. It is known from the conifer analysis that removing early invading conifer from the most productive landscapes where expansion has recently occurred accelerates our ability to reduce threats.

Strategically Removing Early Invading Conifers is the Best Investment

As the nationwide list of at-risk species grows, along with more threats to intact landscapes, we also face funding shortfalls to address the threats. That makes it more important than ever to target our investments to maximize our returns. Our findings show that the best investment is to target what we call Phase 1 and Phase 2 encroachment –

when juniper trees are just advancing and have not grown tall and established, with impacts to the sagebrush and bunchgrasses that grow below them. Removing these early invading conifers from the areas around active leks can maintain distribution and abundance of birds, the primary goal of the rangewide sage grouse conservation strategy. Most important, removal of early-invading conifer has been shown to maintain shrubs and bunchgrasses, while functionally restoring sagebrush landscapes for 40 to 50 years on many ecological sites. In contrast, the long-time frames required to restore sagebrush and concomitant risk of cheat grass invasion make it difficult to justify investing our first conservation dollar into Phase III (the big older trees) removal. The clear increases to ecosystem health and the sustainability of rangelands following conifer removal points to the importance of a public-private partnership sustained into the future (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Shared Vision

Shared Vision

- *What's good for rangelands, is good for grouse*
- Economics make beautiful public / private partnership
- Encroachment = 60% ↓ in AUMs of forage
- Decreases ranch income stream by a third
- Ranch afford to invest \$5,600 (\$30/ac) annually



The Cost is Small for a Huge Return

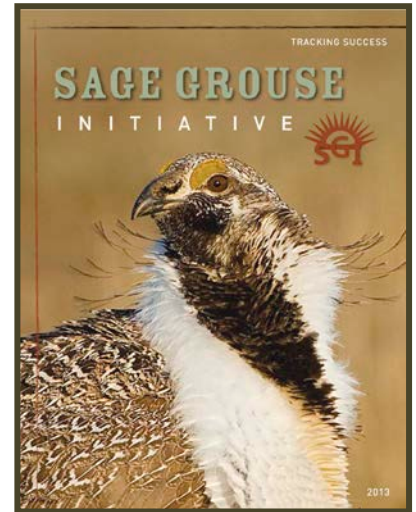
Wholesale conifer removal is already underway in two landscapes where retroactively applying our model identified encroachment as the primary threat to 17 active leks. The cost of conifer removal within five kilometers of these 17 leks is \$5.4 million, and the total cost to treat all Phase I and II encroachment near leks in Oregon is \$87.5 million. This means we could literally solve this problem with a \$7.7 million investment per year for ten years—a comparatively small price compared to that of an ESA listing. SGI is now looking to completely map conifer encroachment across the range of sage grouse, use it to refine targeting tools, and make available to all partners a ten-year investment plan to facilitate and streamline success. Our SGI approach may serve as a model for others attempting to replace top-down regulatory approaches with partner-based and proactive solutions for managing other conservation-reliant species. Contributing authors on an upcoming peer-reviewed paper are from: The Nature Conservancy, NRCS, University of Wyoming, University of Idaho, Michigan Technological University, and Oregon State University.

COMMUNICATIONS CAPACITY

Getting the SGI story covered well and in targeted publications is an important role for communications. That happens in several ways: through NRCS communication outlets; cultivating selected writers and publications; working with partners to make the most of media lists and opportunities; writing press releases and articles; and, assisting the SWAT in their efforts to interview ranchers and write stories for local newspapers and magazines. The NRCS Public Affairs Specialists (PAS) are doing an excellent job distributing stories to newspapers and magazines, as well as working with Deborah Richie (SGI Communications Specialist) and the SWAT. Lori Valadez, Montana NRCS PAS, is the NRCS SGI Communications Liaison and works closely with Deborah on strategy.

2013 Tracking Success Report

In early February, the 2013 SGI Tracking Success Report was produced. The 44-page glossy, magazine-style report highlights six ingredients for success: shared vision, strategic, accountability, leverage, certainty, and trust and credibility. The report serves to define SGI clearly to all stakeholders and to capture the conservation success on the ground in 11 western states. An award-winning designer and top-notch photography were utilized to create a stunning report; in addition, the report is defining a new look for other communications products, including postcards that were distributed at RMEF's 2013 Elk Camp. A press release and email announcing the report went to hundreds of partners, who in turn posted the report on their websites and announced it in their press. Hard copies have been delivered to numerous partners; 11 western state NRCS offices have a supply, as does the SWAT staff. Efforts continue to strategically deliver the report where it will have the greatest impact. Hard copy reports can be obtained by contacting Lori Reed (lori.reed@iwjv.org) or downloaded from the SGI website home page (www.sagegrouseinitiative.com).



SGI Website Update

The process has begun for reconstruction of the current SGI website. Deborah has been interviewing partners and users of the website, studying analytics, and researching other websites to get a clear picture of how the new website can be as effective as possible.

SGI Website Highlights

- **For biologists and landowners** – promotion, posting, and downloading capability for the new *Pocket Guide to Sagebrush*, including a link to a webinar that was held on March 11th; see the links below:
 - <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/brand-new-pocket-guide-sagebrush>
 - <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/webinar-pocket-guide-sagebrush>
- **For educators** – addition of the Idaho video series, *Sage-grouse in the Schools*; see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/sage-grouse-schools-idaho-video-series>.
- **For scientists and managers** – addition of key science publications:
 - *Conserving Montana's Sagebrush Highway: Long Distance Migration in Sage-Grouse*, a master's thesis by Rebecca Smith from The University of Montana; see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/conserving-montana%E2%80%99s-sagebrush-highway-long-distance-migration-sage-grouse>.
 - New mule deer and sage grouse website that features a study aimed at conserving overlapping habitat (an SGI partnership with The Nature Conservancy); see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/new-mule-deer-sage-grouse-website-features-study-aimed-conserving-overlapping-habitat>
- **For general audience** – posting of all SGI SWAT Quarterly Reports (under Resources, Reports and Maps); see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/resources/Reports-and-Maps>.
- **For media** – promotion of an event and article:
 - News release and photo regarding USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack's support for SGI, which he expressed during Pheasants Fest 2013; see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/28885-people-flock-pheasants-fest-2013-secretary-agriculture-tom-vilsack-stops-sgi-booth>.
 - The spring issue of *Range Magazine* features a terrific story on SGI in California, entitled, "Win Win, Keeping the lights on, thanks to juniper," by Dave Sanden, NRCS; see: <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/content/range-magazine-win-win-keeping-lights-thanks-juniper>.

Facebook

The Facebook page (see <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Sage-Grouse-Initiative/408072312539614>) continues its ascent both in "Likes" and in reach. On January 2nd, the weekly total reach was 325; then, on March 28th, the total reach had multiplied to 6,727! Three major pushes over the quarter contributed to doubling "Likes" to 800 by the end of the quarter. The first two pushes resulted from frequent updates during Pheasant Fest 2013 (annual event

for SGI partner, Pheasants Forever) and Elk Camp (annual event for SGI partner, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation). The third push resulted from social media training and research on best ways to drive traffic to the Facebook page (special thanks to the National Forest Foundation for sharing their time and expertise).

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 has now effectuated 45 science, communications, and SWAT management agreements. These projects encumber a total of \$5,116,611 in SWAT funds. The IWJV revised the Field Capacity Accomplishment Reports during this quarter to provide a more comprehensive view of the inner workings of the SWAT.

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 managing 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 both the NRCS SGI Coordinator and NRCS SGI 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 sixth SGI SWAT Coordination Meeting in March of 2013, involving NRCS, 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. The IWJV recently received another \$50,000 contribution from COP to directly support our ongoing coordination of the SGI SWAT. In addition to such contributions, we are currently utilizing a portion of COP's special 2012 SGI SWAT \$300,000 donation to directly and specifically support SGI SWAT field capacity and communications from 2012-2014. The fiscal commitment of COP to 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.

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 workforce worked directly with 12 new Socially Disadvantaged, Limited Resource, or Beginning Producers and six Indian Tribal members.
- 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.* A new reporting process was employed this quarter, designed by the SGI Technical Lead, to simplify and streamline reporting. The 24 SWAT partner positions had made 1,409 contacts (field visits, etc.) with 641 different agricultural producers as of the last quarter's reporting. The SWAT provided an additional 603.5 Technical Assistance days this quarter. 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 (34) FTEs (24.0 Field Delivery Capacity Partner Position FTEs, 1.0 SGI Technical Lead FTE, 1.0 SGI 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 766,629 acres of grazing systems; 128,857 acres of conifer removal; 392,662 feet (74.4 miles) of fence marking or removal; 5,492 acres of wetland restoration; and 3,139 acres of rangeland seeding. Notable accomplishments during this period included **80,577 feet of fence marking applied by Meghann Durbrow and the Bureau of Land Management in Pinedale, Wyoming – more than double the total accomplishments in this category to date**, as well as an additional 1,192 acres of wetland restoration by William Woolston in Powell, Wyoming!
- f) *NRCS program dollars obligated in agreements in the projects area by program.* A total of \$1,513,705 in Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds; \$2,698,200 in Grassland Reserve Program funds; and, \$701,049 in Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program funds were obligated during the reporting period, for a combined total of \$4,912,954 in contract obligations! **This brings the total amount contracted by the SWAT, to date, to an impressive \$27,742,107.**
- g) *Other partner or resource contributions from other agencies or organizations which help implement provisions of the agreements.* We have secured \$1.6 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.

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 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.