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**Partners & Landowners Key To Conservation:
Jason Weller, Chief Of Natural Resources Conservation Service Speaks At
North American Wildlife Conference**

OMAHA, NE --- Jason Weller, chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, praised partnerships and voluntary efforts of private landowners that are critical to conservation successes across the country. Weller spoke late this afternoon at the North American Wildlife & Natural Resources Conference, addressing a reception hosted by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a nonprofit group that works to preserve the traditions of hunting and fishing.

Weller specifically pointed to the Sage Grouse Initiative as the best model today for wildlife conservation of at-risk species. Partnerships, collective actions toward a common goal, and voluntary private lands conservation have added up to historic results in just five years, he said.

The Initiative and its partners have invested \$424.5 million and conserved 4.4 million acres, with 1,129 participating ranches in 11 western states.

Weller said that you could literally see the conservation achieved from outer space, emphasizing 4.2 million acres is twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. That's why his agency has also committed a new infusion of \$198 million in 2015 that with partner contributions will bring the total investment to \$751 million.

The NRCS launched the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010 in response to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service announcement that sage grouse were warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act, but precluded for immediate listing because of other higher priority species. The Service gave a five-year window to see if enough conservation could be accomplished across 11 western states to avert the need for a listing.

The Sage Grouse Initiative has a strong track record of success, based on a wealth of partnerships, the use of science to target the right places to work to make the greatest difference, and through the exemplary cooperation of private

landowners –stewards of 40 percent of sage grouse range, including prime summer habitats with water.

The investments have focused attention on the largest populations of sage grouse, by targeting 75 percent of investments inside the Priority Areas for Conservation –designated by the Service as most important for recovery of the sage grouse.

Specific achievements include an 18-fold increase of conservation easements by willing landowners under the Initiative. Of the more than 450,000 acres of working ranch lands protected from development, 80 percent fall where sage grouse live. The birds and the ranchers depend on vast, intact tracts to make a living.

Conifer removal has reclaimed more than 405,000 acres of former sagebrush-steppe, assuring the sage grouse will have the room they need for their marvelous courtship dances in spring, for nesting, and rearing of chicks.

For an up-close view of how SGI works Weller told the story of Jay Tanner and family in NW Utah. Their family has ranched in NW Utah for more than seven generations, dating to the 1870s.

In the five years since the Tanners teamed up with the Sage Grouse Initiative, they've removed 9,000 acres of invading junipers, tweaked their grazing management to help sage grouse nest and raise their young with highest success. In addition, they've invited Utah Stat University graduate students to their property to study grouse populations. Grouse counts are up 20 percent in the County, thanks to the efforts of the Tanners and other ranchers.

Weller stressed that with the additional resources, the Tanner story can be multiplied in many more sage grouse strongholds, predicting an estimated eight million acres of sage grouse habitat conserved by 2018.

A day earlier, Tim Griffiths, Sage Grouse Initiative national coordinator for the NRCS, shared the big picture success story to hundreds of conference attendees. He focused on both specific achievements and the significance of the Initiative as a win-win model for conservation in North America.

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