

## **USDA, Montana Enter Public-Private Agreement to Enhance Montana's Sage Grouse Conservation Efforts**

HELENA, Mont., July 20, 2015 –A new agreement signed today by local, state and federal leaders will streamline and coordinate sage grouse conservation efforts on private lands in Montana. USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the state of Montana and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana, Inc. (SWCDMI) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to enhance joint efforts to conserve privately owned working rangelands that provide habitat for sage grouse.

NRCS Chief Jason Weller, Montana Gov. Steve Bullock and SWCDMI President Jeff Wivholm signed the agreement at Montana's capitol.

“Almost two-thirds of Montana's sage grouse habitat is on private lands, which is why voluntary, targeted conservation efforts are so critical,” said NRCS Chief Weller. “Today's agreement builds on the Sage Grouse Initiative partnership, which is living proof that wildlife and agriculture can coexist and thrive in harmony. The steps we're taking to improve habitats and outcomes for sage grouse and other wildlife are good for cattle, good for ranching operations, and good for America's rural economy.”

The agreement provides the necessary framework for cooperation, streamlining protection and enhancement of sage grouse habitat on privately-owned working rangelands. Through the MOU, partners will be able to better explore innovative approaches to sage grouse habitat conservation and management, promote voluntary and incentive-based approaches for delivery, and strategically align their collective resources to alleviate threats facing sage grouse and ranching.

Gov. Bullock's sage grouse plan provides a comprehensive approach for conserving sage grouse in Montana. NRCS will use this plan to invest technical and financial assistance through the [Sage Grouse Initiative](#) (SGI) to strategically implement identified conservation measures on private rangelands. Conservation districts provide dedicated human resources to create SGI conservation plans that ensure maximum benefits for both working rangelands and sage grouse.

While in Montana, Weller also met with ranchers at a roundtable hosted by Partners for Conservation where they told him first-hand about the power of conservation work on private lands.

“SGI is making a difference because private landowners voluntarily work with us to produce results on the ground,” Weller said. “The decisions Western ranchers and other private landowners make every day about what to do on their land will continue to have a critical impact on sage grouse.”

Since 2010, more than 1,100 ranchers have enrolled in the NRCS-led SGI, conserving more than 4.4 million acres of sage grouse habitat across 11 Western states. So far, NRCS has invested \$296.5 million in conservation through SGI. SGI's successes are best captured in its new publication, [“Success on the Range,”](#) which was also unveiled today in Montana. This publication highlights how SGI conserves an at-risk species through voluntary cooperation, incentives and community support.

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