USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Conservation Beyond Boundaries

# Sage-Grouse Initiative Status Report Fiscal Year 2010–2011

April 2012

## Achieving Wildlife Conservation Through Sustainable Ranching

### Background and Purpose

In March 2010, the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) to provide a holistic approach to conserving sage-grouse and sustaining working ranches in the West. SGI is rooted in the reality that the future of sage-grouse and sustainable ranching are inextricably linked, and that science-based landscape-level conservation delivery is the recipe for success.

This Initiative represents a cooperative effort by NRCS, state fish and wildlife agencies, science institutions, and a host of public and private conservation partners to conserve sagebrush landscapes at a scale that transcends anything attempted to date. In its first two years, SGI is one of the biggest conservation success stories in the West.

NRCS launched SGI on the heels of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) designation of sage-grouse as a "candidate" species for potential listing as "threatened or endangered" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in March 2010. Such a designation would have profound impacts on ranching operations and rural communities in the western U.S., as well as other economic and energy development opportunities in the region.

Under SGI, NRCS is helping to orchestrate a paradigm shift in at-risk species conservation by using voluntary and incentive-based approaches rather than regulatory approaches on agricultural lands. The ultimate goal of the Initiative is to use Farm Bill conservation programs to improve sage-grouse populations, making an ESA listing unnecessary.

Eleven states are participating in the Initiative: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

## SGI is Already Delivering Results:

- Conservation easements were secured on 208,000 acres to maintain large and intact working ranches in some of the highest sage-grouse abundance areas of the West. Easements reduce fragmentation, the overarching reason cited by FWS for potential listing under ESA.
- Ranchers implemented grazing systems on 1.3 million acres, increasing hiding cover for nesting birds. Additional grass cover is expected to improve sage-grouse populations by 8 to 10 percent.
- Ranchers removed 105,000 acres of encroaching conifer from otherwise suitable sage-grouse habitat in key nesting, brood-rearing and wintering sites.
- Ranchers marked or moved 350 miles of 'high-risk' fence near sage-grouse breeding sites, preventing 1,550-1,900 fence collisions annually. This equals twice the number of all male sage-grouse counted in the Dakotas, Washington and Canada combined.

## What's Good for the Rancher is Good for the Grouse

Participants in SGI benefit by addressing threats shared by sustainable ranching and healthy sage-grouse habitat.

### Beneficial for both ranchland and sage-grouse habitat

- Large, intact landscapes
- Plant diversity
- Perennial grasses and forbs
- Invasive species management
- Healthy springs/seeps
- Well designed grazing plans

### Negative for both ranchland and sage-grouse habitat

- Subdivisions
- Overgrazing
- Fragmented landscapes
- Water troughs without escape ramps
- Conifer encroachment

## Partnership Success

Partnerships are the cornerstone of SGI. Marshalling and targeting existing NRCS and partner resources is critical to doing more with less and solving complex natural resource issues in these tough economic times.

NRCS collaborated with the FWS on a groundbreaking conference report, providing “certainty” to landowners who enroll in NRCS programs that benefit sage-grouse. Forty conservation practices were amended to ensure they were either benign or beneficial to sage-grouse, including upland habitat management, prescribed grazing and brush management for conifer removal. This means that participating landowners can continue normal operations even if FWS lists sage-grouse as a federally threatened or endangered species.

NRCS relies on reputable, independent scientists to measure the biological response of sage-grouse populations to conservation practices and assess SGI effectiveness in order to adaptively improve program delivery. We work with partners to map range-wide sage-grouse population centers, or ‘core areas,’ to refine SGI delivery, ensuring conservation practices benefit large numbers of birds and maximize our biological return on conservation investments.

NRCS recently increased technical assistance to accelerate SGI delivery and success by combining our resources with those of 35 conservation partners. Using combined resources, partners hired 24 additional range conservationists and biologists, and strategically located them in key SGI landscapes where the lack of sufficient technical assistance previously limited SGI implementation. The new positions are supervised by non-federal partners and housed in USDA Service Centers. Our partners include state fish and wildlife agencies, non-governmental organizations, corporations, conservation districts and the FWS.

Training NRCS employees and our partners on sage-grouse needs, threats and conservation options is a top priority. Leading sage-grouse experts delivered a week-long training session to prepare the 24 new recruits. Nearly 500 NRCS employees and partners, working on SGI across 11 states, received a three-day training session to bolster their knowledge in sage-grouse and rangeland health. Continued training is a crucial part of the Initiative.

## Conservation Funding and Practices Applied

SGI uses a wide array of conservation practices designed to help sage-grouse and the land. Examples include the establishment of conservation easements that prevent the conversion of large and intact working ranches into subdivisions, sustainable grazing systems to improve hiding cover for birds, removing invasive conifers from grasslands to allow birds to recolonize otherwise suitable habitat and marking or moving "high risk" fences near breeding sites to reduce bird collisions.

SGI uses the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to share the cost of practices, and secures conservation easements through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP). Over 400 landowners participate in SGI and NRCS has invested $115 million and generated $58 million in partner match.

### Financial Assistance—Contract Fiscal Year 2011

| State | EQIP | WHIP | WRP | FRPP | GRP | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| California | $4,946,064 | $990,815 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $5,936,879 |
| Colorado | $91,821 | $104,812 | $0 | $2,886,250 | $700,000 | $3,782,883 |
| Idaho | $1,698,196 | $109,313 | $0 | $0 | $9,503,450 | $11,310,959 |
| Montana | $1,917,875 | $5,100 | $0 | $3,500,000 | $0 | $5,422,975 |
| Nevada | $986,989 | $473,516 | $3,196,215 | $0 | $618,170 | $5,274,890 |
| North Dakota | $507,833 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $507,833 |
| Oregon | $2,748,134 | $699,725 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $3,447,859 |
| South Dakota | $646,713 | $110,751 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $757,464 |
| Utah | $1,030,477 | $288,609 | $0 | $0 | $1,426,595 | $2,745,681 |
| Washington | $224,940 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $224,940 |
| Wyoming | $3,917,340 | $375,453 | $0 | $38,000,000 | $10,430,313 | $52,723,106 |
| **Total** | **$18,716,382** | **$3,158,094** | **$3,196,215** | **$44,386,250** | **$22,678,528** | **$92,135,469** |

### Financial Assistance—Contract Fiscal Year 2010

| State | EQIP | WHIP | WRP | FRPP | GRP | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| California | $1,787,245 | $1,497,739 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $3,284,984 |
| Colorado | $687,279 | $81,617 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $768,896 |
| Idaho | $1,089,991 | $64,629 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $1,154,620 |
| Montana | $2,275,679 | $622,399 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $2,898,078 |
| Nevada | $0 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $0 |
| North Dakota | $499,858 | $575,577 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $1,075,435 |
| Oregon | $1,472,466 | $32,984 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $1,505,450 |
| South Dakota | $557,042 | $611,417 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $1,168,459 |
| Utah | $1,061,093 | $20,179 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $1,081,272 |
| Washington | $2,507,912 | $44,674 | $0 | $0 | $0 | $2,552,586 |
| Wyoming | $2,725,336 | $264,990 | $0 | $0 | $2,426,922 | $5,417,248 |
| **Total** | **$14,663,901** | **$3,816,205** | **$0** | **$0** | **$2,426,922** | **$20,907,028** |

Note: The FY 2010 tabular summary for the Sage-Grouse Initiative does not reflect contracts developed in Nevada. Six EQIP contracts were developed for a total obligation of $1,136,303 but were not properly coded in Protracts. In addition, Oregon used EQIP to fund eight EQIP contracts ($451,107) to benefit Sage Grouse.

# Success Stories

## Moving Across Mountains in Nevada

Duane Coombs, manager for Smith Creek Ranch in central Nevada, is a fan of the sage-grouse. “They are really neat birds,” says Coombs. But that’s not why he’s participating in the Sage-Grouse Initiative. “What’s good for the birds is good for the cows,” says Coombs, noting that the invasive pinyon pine and junipers destroying sage-grouse habitat are also negatively impacting grazing lands. These trees can invade sagebrush rangeland, crowd out brush and grass, reduce water infiltration and increase soil erosion. Coombs and his neighbor across the Desatoya Mountain Range are removing pinyon pine and juniper trees to open up habitat for sage-grouse and create a passageway from one side of the mountain range to the other. Removing trees improves habitat for birds and provides forage for livestock by restoring the natural ecosystem. This project will take place on public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. “It’s a great partnership effort, all of us working together to help these birds survive,” says Coombs. “I’m looking forward to the day when they fill the sky like they did in the old West.”

## Conserving the Sagebrush Migration Highway: An International Success Story

Because Canada’s only viable sage-grouse population depends upon habitats in both countries, maintaining the migratory pathway is critical to keeping birds in Canada. USDA Science Advisor Dave Naugle’s research team recently learned about the migration during a sage-grouse radio-tracking study in Grasslands National Park along the U.S.-Saskatchewan border. Sagebrush is the only thing sage-grouse eat in winter. As snow covers the silver sagebrush up north, birds travel 70-120 miles south to areas where large sagebrush protrudes through snow. Severing the migratory pathway by converting native sagebrush rangeland to non-compatible land uses would imperil Saskatchewan’s remaining population. So, NRCS, The Nature Conservancy and a cooperative rancher created a permanent conservation easement that ensures grazing—not development or tillage agriculture—will remain the priority land use on over 32,500 acres. This creative, win-win conservation solution maintains the sagebrush migratory highway by ensuring a vibrant grazing industry.

## Wyoming Future Farmers of America (FFA) Students on the Forefront of Sage-Grouse Conservation

The sage-grouse on Ryan Fieldgrove’s ranch near Buffalo, Wyoming, benefit from the work of the Johnson County High School FFA.  These students constructed and installed 35,000 markers to improve the visibility of fences and reduce accidental collisions by sage-grouse on the land of local producers in the Lake DeSmet Conservation District. Before heading out with backpacks filled with fence markers, the young conservationists learn about the beneficial relationship between working ranches and wildlife as well as how fence markers help conserve sage-grouse.

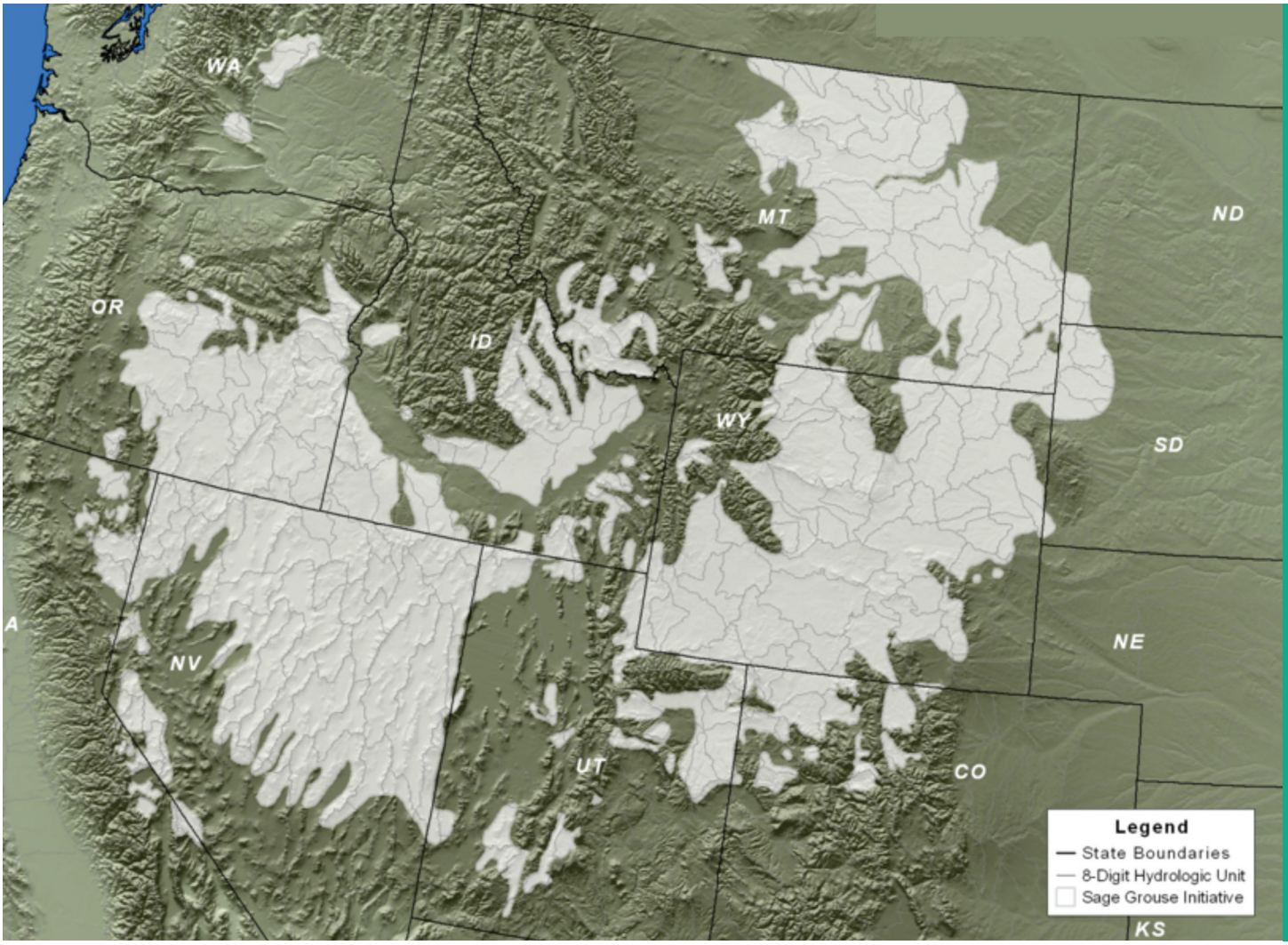
## Native Americans Join SGI to Improve Habitat for Sage-Grouse and Livestock

Eight Native American youth spent their summer in the heart of Nevada working to improve sage-grouse habitat. The young adults, ranging from ages 18 to 26, enrolled in the Bootstraps Program, an ambitious human development and natural resource enhancement program coordinated by Rod Davis of the University of Nevada. “Bootstraps” teaches life skills and job responsibility by combining formal classroom instruction with real work experience, such as removing encroached pinyon pine and juniper trees to improve sage-grouse habitat. Following extensive training, students were paired with landowners participating in SGI to remove encroached pinyon pine and juniper from 1,000 acres of public land and 400 acres of private land. “Many partners have contributed to the success of this project and the Bootstraps Program,” says Davis. NRCS District Conservationist Craig Plummer added, “I’m really pleased that we are a part of this project for several reasons. The landowner wouldn’t be able to restore this habitat without the financial assistance we’re providing. We’re getting conservation on-the-ground and we’re helping young adults at the same time.”

## Reclaiming Productive Rangelands for Future Generations

Gary Bedortha has watched sage-grouse decline on his 20,000-acre eastern Oregon ranch as western juniper encroached into his sagebrush grasslands. “When I was a little kid growing up in this country, some of these draws had more than 100 sage-grouse—you would ride through the draws and the whole ground would move in front of you. At that time, we didn’t have the juniper like we do now,” says Gary. Chris Mundy, NRCS district conservationist adds, “Most of the trees are 80-90 years old which corresponds to alterations in fire regimes that used to keep the trees in check. We want to take it back to where it was.” SGI has enabled Gary to follow an aggressive schedule of juniper removal. On the Bedortha Ranch, 7,000 acres of sagebrush-steppe has already been restored and an additional 3,000 is planned. Gary’s outstanding stewardship ensures that his ranch and its associated wildlife, plant life, soils and waterways will thrive for future generations.

## Sage-Grouse Initiative Map




*Lighter areas on the map depict land within the Sage-Grouse Initiative. Eleven states are participating in the Initiative: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.*

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Resources Assessment Division, Washington, D.C. April 2011. Map ID: 11574. Data from the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative.

**For more information, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov and search "SGI," or contact: Tim Griffiths, Tim.Griffiths@mt.usda.gov (406) 587-6812.**

USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

www.nrcs.usda.gov
USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.