

NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative DRAFT 4-~~3024~~-15

~~The largest and most comprehensive non-regulatory conservation measures are those of the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI).~~ The Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) is a collaborative effort across all 11 States that have sage-grouse populations that works to implement conservation practices which alleviate threats to sage-grouse while improving the sustainability of working ranches (NRCS 2015, entire document).

SGI started in 2010 using programs authorized under the conservation title of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, and continued with the Agricultural Act of 2014 (hereafter, Farm Bill) to help landowners plan and implement conservation practices and Resource Management Systems to maintain and enhance sage-grouse habitat. The Farm Bill programs provide both technical and financial assistance to landowners in the form of conservation planning assistance, payments to offset a portion of the cost associated with applying conservation practices, and easement or rental payments for long-term conservation.

Although participation in Farm Bill programs is voluntary, participants that receive financial assistance enter into binding contracts or easements to ensure that conservation practices are applied according to schedule and in compliance with NRCS standards and specifications. As part of implementation, the SGI includes a monitoring and evaluation component that measures the response of sage-grouse populations and associated vital rates in order to gauge effectiveness and provide an adaptive management framework to SGI delivery.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) (WHIP was combined with EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill), are used to fund and implement habitat improvement practices of SGI. NRCS also works closely with the Farm Service Agency to further sage-grouse conservation through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) are critical to ensure more long-term habitat protection through rental agreements and conservation easements. The GRP, FRPP, and Wetland Reserve Program were combined to create the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) in the 2014 Farm Bill.

The SGI will result in restoration of habitat by either seeding/planting (active restoration) or by implementing grazing practices and fire prevention measures to allow the natural reestablishment of sagebrush to occur (passive restoration) during the term of the individual contracts (between 2 and 10 years). ~~The strategic nature of the SGI also means that the strategically targets lands where the most important sage-grouse core areas occur, will~~ which receive the highest priority for financial and technical assistance. Participating owners are less-not likely to convert sage-grouse habitats to unsuitable habitat, or to subdivide their properties while enrolled in the cost-share contracts offered by NRCS through the SGI.

~~NRCS, in accordance with agency regulation and policy, implements a 9-step conservation planning process, as outlined in the NRCS National Planning Procedures~~

~~Handbook. NRCS provides technical and financial assistance through the Farm Bill and initiatives such as SGI to implement conservation plans that include NRCS' conservation practice standards and specifications. Standards in the National Handbook of Conservation Practices are used and implemented by State NRCS offices, as needed, and may be modified to include additional requirements to meet State or local needs because of wide variations in soils, climate, and topography. Conservation practice standards are routinely reviewed and approved by State Technical Committees to ensure that appropriate criteria are included to cover State-specific interests. State laws and local ordinances or regulations may also dictate more stringent criteria; in no case, however, are the requirements of the national conservation practice standard to be reduced.~~

All conservation plans developed under the SGI have Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) as the umbrella practice. ~~Implementing SGI under 645 is essential because this umbrella practice means that all other SGI practices and~~ are implemented specifically to benefit sage-grouse populations and their habitats. ~~Implementing SGI under 645 eliminates the possibility of using practices that benefit producers (farmers and ranchers) but not sage grouse.~~ The Upland Wildlife Habitat Management practice standard requires a habitat evaluation be conducted and limiting factors be removed or reduced in their order of significance. The purpose of the practice is to treat upland wildlife habitat concerns identified during the conservation planning process to (1) enable movement, or (2) provide shelter, cover, and food in proper amounts, locations and times to sustain sage-grouse during a portion of its life cycle. Specific practice standards are used by NRCS to address the limiting factors to the species and are implemented to achieve that objective. ~~The identification of the species' limiting factors at the individual property owner level is essential to ensure that the goals of the use of the Upland Wildlife Habitat Management practice are being met under the SGI.~~

Conference Report

In 2010, the Service worked in collaboration with the NRCS to develop specific conservation measures for 40 conservation practice standards used in SGI and developed an ESA Section 7 Conference Report (FWS 2010, entire document). ~~The Conference Report was developed consistent with the conference procedures identified in the Consultation Handbook and 50CFR 402.10(c). FWS and NRCS used conference process to identify and resolve potential conflicts and developed approaches to minimize or avoid adverse effects. The resulting Conference Report contains pertinent information to provide a holistic understanding of the Service's analysis of the varying facets of NRCS' SGI and related planning practices and the expected adverse, benign, and beneficial effects likely to result from its implementation across the eleven western states encompassing the range of both species. Incorporate by reference??~~

In the Conference Report, the Service concluded that implementation of the specified conservation measures in SGI would be expected to benefit sage-grouse by maintaining, enhancing, and restoring sage-grouse populations and their habitats as well as by reducing the threats of direct mortality. The SGI conservation measures are designed to maintain and

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enhance habitat and decrease fragmentation which is the greatest threat to sage-grouse. ~~With the strategic nature of the SGI, large expanses of connected private ranchlands will be involved in sage-grouse habitat restoration and management to provide a substantial conservation benefit for the species. The Conference Report also stated that although expected results have not yet been quantified, the SGI is expected to maintain or enhance the larger sage-grouse populations in the targeted core areas. Cumulatively, the Service believes that effective implementation of conservation practice standards and associated conservation measures are anticipated to result in a positive population response by the species through a reduction of habitat fragmentation and improvement of habitat conditions.~~ This positive response is expected as threats are reduced, ~~notably in addressing habitat fragmentation and improvement of habitat conditions across the landscape.~~

Status of Implementation

NRCS and their partners have made significant accomplishments under SGI for the conservation of GRS. ~~Table X summarizes the acres by Management Zone and Population.~~

~~Conservation implementation of SGI prioritizes areas with the highest densities of sage-grouse and has been achieved through accelerated conservation easements, conifer removal, and improvements in range management. With participation in all 11 states, 1,129 ranches have participated in SGI. Table X summarizes the acres of conservation implemented by Management Zone and Population.~~

~~Approximately 425.5 million dollars have been invested through SGI over approximately 4.4 million acres, with 76 percent of investments made inside Priority Conservation Areas (PACs). The Chief of NRCS has committed an additional \$198 million for SGI starting in 2015, through the life of the current Farm Bill (2018). Implementation of SGI has been accomplished through NRCS' Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) since 2011, which increased the field capacity available to work with landowners. Additionally, SGI has a science advisor to help prioritize and guide SGI science.~~

~~Conservation easements are an effective mechanism for keeping sage-grouse habitats intact by removing impacts of ex-urban development and agricultural conversion threats (FWS 2013). Most easements for sage-grouse are located inside PACs (79 percent) and 94 percent provide permanent protection. Conservation easements through SGI totaled 451,884 acres through fiscal year 2013.~~

~~Conifer removal has been implemented as a primary SGI conservation practice, allowing restoration of sage-steppe (Baruch-Mordo et al. 2013, p.). SGI has targeted mechanical removal of conifers in the early phases of woodland succession, reclaiming 405,241 acres of otherwise suitable habitat. Overall, 81 percent of cuts were located in PACs, targeting 84 percent of the removal towards populations most impacted by conifer expansion in the Great Basin.~~

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Rangeland health inside PACs has been improved through SGI practices by applying grazing systems, re-vegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses, and controlling invasive weeds. SGI enacts a Prescribed Grazing approach, which balances forage availability with livestock demand and maintains ecosystem function by adjusting the timing, frequency, and duration of grazing. Grazing systems have been implemented on over 2.4 million acres (75 percent within PACs); seeding projects have occurred on over 48,000 acres (76 percent within PACs); and weed management projects were implemented on over 15,509 acres (83 percent within PACs).

Potential impacts of conversion of sagebrush to agricultural land has been influenced by the new “Sodsaver” provision in the 2014 Farm Bill reduces the federal crop insurance subsidy on cropland recently converted from native sagebrush habitats. This reduction eliminates some benefits producers receive as part of their risk management strategy, making conversion of marginal lands less economically viable (Smith and Goodwin 2013, p.)

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NRCS Regional Conservation Partnerships Program (RCPP)

The Regional Conservation Partnerships Program (RCPP) promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners. NRCS provides assistance to producers through partnership agreements and through program contracts or easement agreements. The NRCS awarded the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts a \$9 Million RCPP proposal in January 2015, which will provide 5 years of funding for on-the-ground staff support as well as project implementation funding in direct support of the Oregon Programmatic CCAAs (described in Section X). This is in addition to NRCS' other funding commitments to the state including SGI funds.

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SGI-CSP?

Acres certified complete or contracted by population, 2010-2014

MZ	Population	Grazing Systems	Easements*	Conifer Removal	Seeding	Fence Marked or Removed
		acres (% in PAC)	acres (% in PAC)	acres (% in PAC)	acres (% in PAC)	miles (% in PAC)
I	Dakotas	329,065 (89)			2,475 (89)	11 (93)
	Northern Montana	4,411 (73)	40,807 (79)			
	Powder River Basin	671,954 (54)	8,720 (60)	181 (0)		10 (98)
	Yellowstone Watershed	338,849 (83)	16,354 (97)		5,122 (15)	91 (95)
	Other	26,000 (49)				< 1 (100)
II	Middle Park	16 (100)	1,288 (100)		11 (100)	
	Jackson Hole		70 (100)			
	Wyoming Basin	327,652 (83)	166,831 (72)	1,099 (94)	4 (100)	5 (100)
	Rich-Morgan-Summit	8,596 (100)	455 (100)	455 (100)		
	Uintah	126,327 (100)		1,748 (100)		8 (100)
	North Park	12,182 (100)	6,057 (100)			< 1 (100)
	Northwest Colorado	48,677 (47)	52,039 (97)	223 (100)	2,512 (100)	10 (87)
	Other	11,000 (84)	8,450 (88)	26 (0)		< 1 (100)
	Strawberry			7 (100)		
III	Sheeprock Mountains	3,959 (100)		1,204 (100)	720 (100)	1 (100)
	Parker Mountain-Emery		93 (100)	509 (100)	226 (100)	< 1 (100)
	Panguitch	1,297 (100)	18 (100)	358 (100)	66 (100)	< 1 (100)
	ibapah		422 (100)			
	Hamlin Valley	7,248 (100)		3,181 (100)	1,917 (100)	1 (100)
	Southern Great Basin	1,188 (33)		5,858 (83)	1,072 (100)	7 (100)
	North Mono Lake	13 (100)	6,085 (100)	2,185 (100)		1 (100)
	Pine Nut		0	963 (100)		
	Other	23,852 (63)	4,573 (100)	4,590 (77)	1,533 (19)	< 1 (100)
IV	Baker	10,295 (100)		5,795 (100)		
	East-Central ID		419 (0)			
	SW Montana	31,179 (100)	4,125 (99)			5 (100)
	Snake, Salmon, Beaverhead	198,284 (100)	64,314 (99)	290 (100)	1,730 (100)	62 (100)
	Belt Mountains	4,204		142 (0)	320 (0)	< 1 (0)
	Weiser	11,593			257 (0)	
	Northern Great Basin	38,053 (87)	2,477 (0)	137,501 (74)	2,445 (40)	27 (83)
	Box Elder	2,992 (100)	16,230 (100)	59,990 (100)	22,861 (100)	1 (100)
	Other	18,330 (33)	10,602 (4)	2,381 (100)	2,127 (73)	< 1 (0)
V	Central OR	4,522 (100)	1,890 (0)	69,291 (85)	20	6 (63)
	Klamath	12 (83)	679 (0)	11,229 (77)	535 (96)	18 (100)
	Warm Springs Valley	3 (100)	902 (100)	15		
	Western Great Basin	64,359 (78)	20,253 (81)	75,685 (76)	496 (97)	54 (56)
	Other	19,410 (27)	5,347 (23)	19,375 (72)	34 (100)	2 (78)
VI	Moses Coulee	60,037 (100)	2,127 (100)		280 (100)	3 (100)
	Crab Creek	9,515 (100)	2,242 (100)			
	Other	13,521 (15)			397 (0)	26 (37)
VII	Other	9,061	8,193	962 (0)	960 (0)	< 1 (0)
Total		2,437,645 (75)	451,884 (79)	405,241 (81)	48,120 (76)	350 (79)

Rangewide totals of 15,509 acres of weed management and 179 acres of wet meadow restoration are not shown.

*Easement numbers include all NRCS easements in occupied range or PACs acquired between FY92 and FY13

[Need table??]

Monitoring the Effectiveness of the NRCS Sage-Grouse Initiative

The SGI addresses relevant threats to sage-grouse populations in the West by assisting producers to improve range condition in core sage-grouse population areas that benefit sage-grouse habitat quality while ensuring the sustainability of working ranches. SGI employs three levels of monitoring to implement and subsequently evaluate success of conservation practices.

A The first level of monitoring is at the ranch-scale conducted by property owners, a second

level of monitoring of vegetation changes and response of sage-grouse populations conducted by independent scientists and a third level of monitoring detects status and trends in agriculture and land use across the U.S using NRCS National Resource Inventory. which allows the individual producer to see first hand the benefits of conservation practices implemented on his/her property. Ranch level monitoring also provides the mechanism for long term conservation by instilling in the producer the benefits of sustainable grazing systems in his operations and to sage grouse conservation.

A second level of monitoring under the SGI is long-term research designed and carried out by reputable, independent scientists following strict scientific protocols that track short and long-term changes in vegetation and the biological response of sage-grouse populations. Outcomes of SGI science will identify factors that limit populations at scales relevant to management and, if necessary, to help guide changes in actions to achieve desired outcomes. The documented results will inform management of ways to improve effectiveness of NRCS programs. Measuring sage-grouse response to NRCS practices is a priority in conserving sage-grouse populations on working ranches in the West.

The scale of SGI level monitoring reflects the scales at which sage-grouse populations use habitat resources year round and transcends that of an individual ranch to encompass multiple and nearby ranches enrolled in the Initiative. The SGI monitoring level matches the spatial scale at which sage-grouse populations use their habitats. Appendix 4 provides additional information on this aspect of the SGI.

The third monitoring scale employs the NRCS National Resource Inventory (NRI), which detects status and trends in agriculture and land use across the United States. Together with the SGI, NRI can apply its measures to quantify 10-30-year improvements in sage-grouse habitats throughout the species range.

Baruch-Mordo, S., J.S. Evans, J.P. Serverson, D.E. Naugle, J.D. Maestas, J.M. Kiesaecker, M.J. Falkowski, C.A. Hagan, and K.P. Reese. 2013. Saving sage-grouse from the trees: A proactive solution to reducing a key threat to candidate species. Biological Conservation 167:233–241.

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