

2017 Sage Grouse Initiative Report

Montana



Sage Grouse Initiative

It has been two years since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that Greater sage grouse did not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act.

Since that historic decision, Montana ranchers, agencies, and nonprofits have doubled-down on their conservation actions in an all-hands, all-lands approach to conservation.

Through the power of the Farm Bill, Montana NRCS continues to deliver voluntary conservation that is strategically targeted, providing win-win solutions for both ranching and wildlife.

In FY 2017, Montana NRCS obligated 35 new EQIP contracts, totaling \$5 million. Grazing management continues to be the foundation practice in Montana as we partner with ranchers to improve the health of rangelands to benefit both their bottom line and the habitat wildlife depend on.

EQIP SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE CONTRACTS

■ Contracts ■ Acres ■ Millions



2017 – 35 Contracts, 147,000 acres, \$5 million

2016 – 20 Contracts, 120,000 acres, \$3.9 million

2015 – 5 Contracts, 89,500 acres, \$1.7 million

Mesic Area Restoration

Keeping water on the landscape longer and building drought resiliency is an emerging topic for SGI. Wet “mesic” habitats comprise less than 2 percent of the entire landscape, yet neither people nor wildlife can survive without them. Recognizing the importance of mesic habitats, the Sage Grouse Initiative is working with landowners to extend conservation practices beyond sagebrush uplands to include protection, restoration, and enhancement of wet meadows, riparian areas, and other mesic habitats.



Easements

Sage grouse require large landscapes of healthy native sagebrush habitat for their survival. Working voluntarily with private landowners, NRCS secures conservation easements to protect native grazing lands from cultivation and subdivision. Montana NRCS, landowners, and partners collaborated in 2017 to bring an unprecedented number of applications to the table. NRCS has received approval on more than 90,000 acres of easements in Montana sage grouse habitat totaling around \$22 million.





Partnerships

Achieving conservation at the landscape scale starts with strong partnerships and conversations at the community level.

NRCS in Montana has worked since the inception of SGI in 2010 to build lasting relationships with private landowners, state and federal agencies, livestock producer groups, universities, and non-governmental organizations. These relationships have resulted in conservation success on the ground on both private and public lands.

Conifer Removal

Montana NRCS continued to partner with ranchers in 2017 to address encroaching conifers in the sagebrush ecosystem, cutting trees on 1,800 acres. This threat to sage grouse is often not associated with Montana, but by working with our partners, key areas have been identified around the state where strategic removal of conifers benefit sage grouse. Areas identified for conifer removal are in the early stages of encroachment where the sagebrush understory is still intact and contains vigorous grass and forb communities.



Cropland Seeding

To compliment the efforts already underway that are focused on preventing cultivation through easements, NRCS in Montana dedicated a portion of their SGI allocation in 2017 to seeding existing cropland back to perennial cover.

In the first year this was offered, landowners stepped up and enrolled 4,500 acres. Restoration of these areas helps to stitch habitat back together in key areas across the state.



SWCDM

We are grateful for the continued support from Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana (SWCDM) for the four Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) positions in Montana (Roundup, Malta, Forsyth, Ekalaka). SWCDM has been integral in the coordination of these efforts to build capacity at the field level across the range for sage grouse conservation.

