United States Department of Agriculture

February 2016

The Montana Natural Resources Conservation Service Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 Strategy

SAGE GROUSE INITIATIVE

Wildlife Conservation Through Sustainable Ranching

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Conservation Need

*Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophansianus*; sage-grouse) has been the focus of an unprecedented conservation effort across its range since the NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) was launched in Montana in 2010 with a vision of "Wildlife Conservation through Sustainable Ranching."*

In the years to follow, SGI has been the catalyst behind a partnership-based, locally-led effort to conserve the iconic species and the vast landscapes in the 11 states it calls home. At the heart of efforts across the range is collaboration amongst private landowners, state government, federal agencies, industry, non-governmental organizations, and more. The NRCS announced its commitment to this effort in August of 2015 with the roll out of SGI 2.0. This plan commits approximately $211 million to SGI across the 11 states through the life of the 2014 Farm Bill.

On September 22nd, 2015, Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell made the historic announcement that sage-grouse do not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This is a testament to the power of landscape-scale conservation on both private and public lands. However, our commitment to conservation is far from over. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in its 12-month finding report said this about SGI:

"Given the history of success of this program, the level of local and national support, NRCS' application of adaptive management, demonstrated partnerships, and the recent reauthorization and dedicated resources through the 2014 Farm Bill, we expect that SGI will continue to provide valuable on-the-ground conservation to sage-grouse and its habitat into the future."

(USFWS, 2015)

As part of its determination, the USFWS is counting on the NRCS to continue to deliver locally-led, partnership-based conservation in our communities. While this decision is worthy of celebration, the goal has never been to simply avoid a listing. The following document outlines the strategic, science-based approach to conservation Montana NRCS will take in the post-listing era to remove threats to sage-grouse and their habitats and continue working with private landowners and partners to ensure healthy and sustainable ranching operations.

Conservation Framework

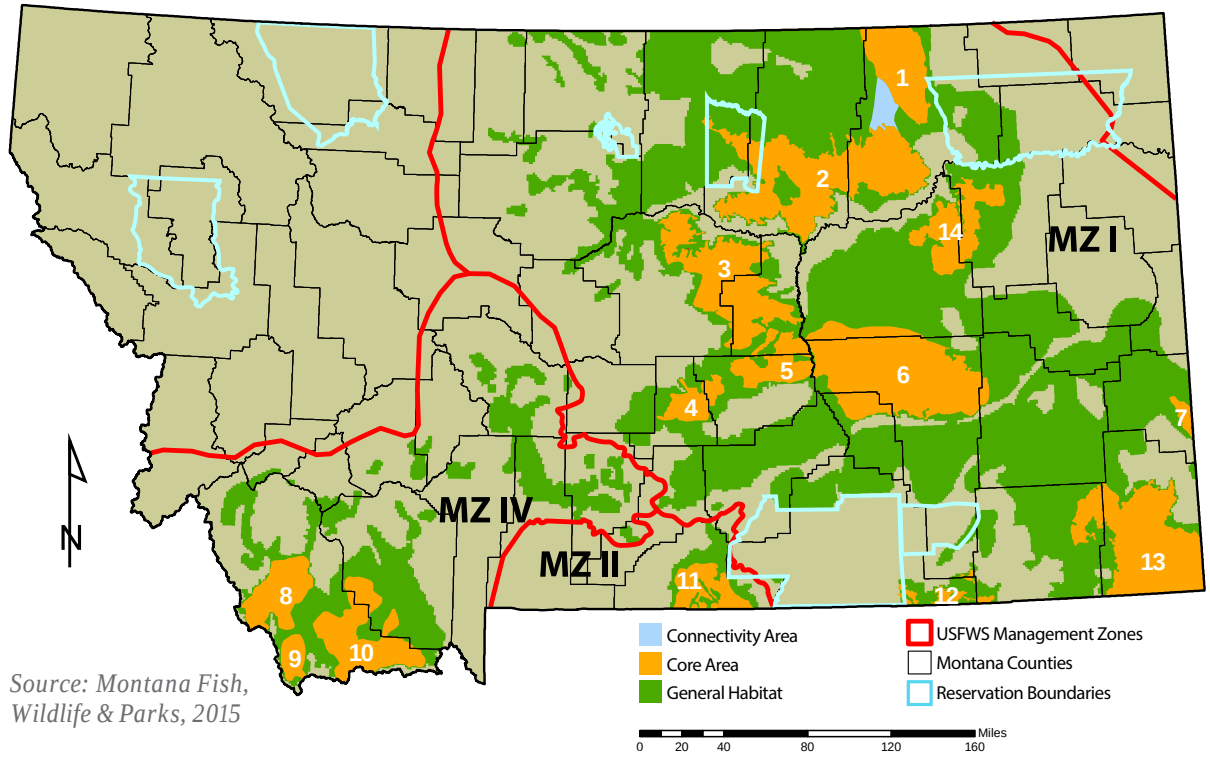
The Sage Grouse Initiative is a diverse partnership led by NRCS that includes ranchers, state and federal agencies, universities, nonprofit groups, and private businesses. The initiative focuses on the shared vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching, providing win-win solutions for producers, sage-grouse and other species. NRCS delivers conservation by utilizing Farm Bill programs to provide both financial and technical assistance to private landowners in the form of conservation planning assistance, incentive payments, and easement payments that remove threats to sage-grouse and improve the sustainability of ranch operations. Since its inception in 2010, the initiative has invested $296.5 million across the range of sage-grouse to restore and conserve sage-grouse habitat on 4.4 million acres. Furthermore, the NRCS investment has leveraged an additional $128 million from partners and landowners, bringing the total investment to $424.5 million.

Montana NRCS collaborated with Agency and Partner Specialists in the spring of 2015 to develop a targeted approach to deliver conservation programs through the remaining life of the Farm Bill (2018) by identifying key areas for sage-grouse conservation and associated actions. Our approach prioritizes Farm Bill funding towards addressing threats to sage-grouse by working collaboratively with private landowners to maintain large and intact working ranches with healthy sustainable rangelands.

Priority Areas for Conservation

There are currently about 33 million acres of suitable sagebrush steppe available to sage-grouse in Montana, representing approximately 19% of the range-wide habitat. About two-thirds of the habitat in Montana is on non-federal land and often occurs in conjunction with state and federal lands. While private lands are the primary focus, the Initiative also serves as a catalyst for public land enhancements. To focus conservation efforts in such a vast landscape, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MTFWP) delineated the habitat into 14 "core areas," totaling 9.6 million acres (see map.) These core areas provide habitat for 75% of all known breeding sage-grouse in Montana and represent landscapes of greatest biological importance to the long-term persistence of sage-grouse. The USFWS referred to core areas as Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) in its Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report (USFWS 2013) and suggests that conservation efforts be targeted in these areas. SGI 2.0 in Montana will continue to strategically focus resources in core areas to benefit sage-grouse populations and habitat and to improve rangeland health and ranching sustainability. SGI 2.0 looks to continue working with private landowners to find win-win solutions for ranchers and sage-grouse.

Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Designations 2016



Source: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 2015

Threats

The USFWS Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report, developed by State experts and USFWS representatives, describes range-wide conservation objectives for sage-grouse and defines the degree to which threats need to be reduced to conserve sage-grouse (USFWS, 2013).

Since the beginning of SGI in 2010, NRCS has partnered with private landowners to reduce the threats facing sage-grouse on private lands across 11 states.

Because the scope and immediacy of threats varies across the range of sage-grouse, this Montana SGI strategy will focus efforts on reducing those threats that are of high priority in Montana. Those threats are

1) Cultivation of Grazing Lands,
2) Exurban Development,
3) Improper Grazing,
4) Non-native Plants,
5) Range Management Infrastructure,
6) Mesic Area Loss and Degradation,
7) Conifer Expansion, and
8) Fence Collisions.

Montana NRCS worked collaboratively with key partners to further refine our focus by breaking these threats down into primary and secondary threats. Primary threats represent the most significant threats to the sagebrush ecosystem in Montana and will receive the bulk of our financial and technical assistance.

Primary Threats

Threat: Cultivation of Grazing Lands

Conservation Need:

New SGI research in the Northern Great Plains of Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas revealed that 70% of the best habitat is privately owned – and the single greatest threat in this region is cultivation of native sagebrush grazing lands (SGI 2015).

Conservation Actions:

Team up with land trusts and other partners to provide funding for conservation easements in key areas to maintain large, intact working landscapes for future generations.

Funding Source:

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Threat: Exurban Development

Conservation Need:

Low density rural home development results in direct habitat loss and fragmentation. Urban and exurban activities also increase the presence of predator subsidies (e.g., trash, landfills, bird feeders) allowing for increased predators associated with humans that may have disproportionate impacts on greater sage-grouse (COT Report, 2013).

Conservation Actions:

Team up with land trusts and other partners to provide funding for conservation easements in key areas to maintain large, intact working landscapes for future generations.

Funding Source:

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

Easements in key areas can help to maintain large, intact working landscapes.

Primary Threats

Threat: Improper Grazing

Conservation Need:

Livestock grazing is the most widespread type of land use across the sagebrush ecosystem (Connelly et al. 2004) and has the potential to positively or negatively affect the quality of sage-grouse habitat. SGI capitalizes on the strong link between conditions required to support sustainable ranching operations and habitat characteristics that support healthy sage-grouse populations.

Conservation Actions:

Collaborate with willing private landowners to plan and implement ranch specific grazing plans that are consistent with local ecological conditions and provide essential tools to meet the habitat needs for sage-grouse while improving the economic sustainability of ranches. Conservation plans may also include facilitating practices such watering facilities, wells, fences, and pipelines that are needed to implement the grazing system.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

NRCS collaborates with willing private landowners to plan and implement ranch-specific grazing plans.

Threat: Non-Native Plants

Conservation Need:

Target areas where cultivation of rangeland has already occurred and focus on restoration to provide continuity between habitats.

Conservation Actions:

Identify opportunities for cropland and pasture plantings to improve vegetative diversity that will enhance habitat across all life stages for sage-grouse.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

Crop fields can be planted back to perennial plants to improve vegetative diversity.

Threat: Range Management Infrastructure

Conservation Need:

Livestock fences, watering facilities, and other structures are necessary components in ranch management. However, they can potentially have adverse impacts on sage-grouse when they are in disrepair or skew predator populations.

Conservation Actions:

Identify and remove wildlife unfriendly fences and structures to enhance sage-grouse survival. Examples include the removal and replacement of degraded woven wire fence with wildlife friendly fence, and the removal of rock piles, outbuildings, dumps, and other human subsidies to reduce avian and mammalian predation on sage grouse.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

Replacing wildlife unfriendly fences and structures can enhance sage-grouse survival.

Secondary Threats:

Threat: Mesic Area Loss and Degradation

Conservation Need:

Wet meadow environments such as riparian areas, wetlands and springs are vital for brood rearing by providing abundant forbs and insects for foraging. New research shows that 85% of leks are within six miles of mesic resources and 80% of these resources are found on private land.

Conservation Actions:

Target protection and restoration of brood rearing habitat through acquisition of conservation easements and on-the-ground restoration to improve the quality of the habitat. Techniques for restoration of sites may include fencing to allow recovery from grazing periods or low-cost grade control structures to address hydrologic impairments.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

Mesic areas are vital for sage-grouse brood rearing.

Threat: Conifer Expansion

Conservation Need:

Conifer encroachment in sage-brush steppe communities adversely affects many native wildlife species, including sage-grouse. A recent study in Oregon by The Nature Conservancy, University of Idaho, and SGI found that no leks were active in areas with greater than 4% conifer cover on the landscape (Baruch-Mordo et al., 2013; SGI 2014).

Conservation Actions:

Conifer encroachment is not a widespread threat in Montana. However, NRCS staff in Montana will work closely with state and federal experts to target those priority landscapes where the removal of conifers will benefit sage-grouse.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

Rocky Mountain juniper encroachment into sagebrush habitat near Virginia City, Montana.

Threat: Fence Collisions

Conservation Need:

Fences are an integral part of ranch management and can help improve sage-grouse habitat by allowing for improved management of the rangeland. However, fences do pose a collision threat for sage-grouse. Research in Idaho revealed average collision rates as high as 1.2 strikes per mile of fence (Stevens, 2011).

Conservation Actions:

Marking fences for visibility is a cost-effective and simple tool that can reduce the risk of collision for sage-grouse. A Fence Collision Risk Tool is available range wide to assist resource managers in targeting those fences that pose the highest risk of collision. This tool not only assists with fence marking decisions, it also helps guide the placement of new fences or the removal of obsolete fences.

Funding Source:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA).

Marking fences for visibility is a simple tool that can reduce the risk of collision for sage-grouse.

Locally Led and Partnership Based

Achieving conservation at the landscape scale starts with strong partnerships and conversations at the community level. NRCS in Montana has worked over the past five years to build relationships with private landowners, state and federal agencies, livestock producer groups, universities, and non-government organizations. These partnerships will continue to be the key to success as we move into implementation of SGI 2.0.

The SGI Strategic Watershed Action Team (SWAT) was developed in 2011 through a partnership with the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) to build capacity at the field level across the range for sage-grouse conservation. In the years to follow, SGI SWAT matured into a model for science-based, landscape-scale habitat conservation through partnerships with the FWS, state fish and wildlife agencies. Montana currently has four SWAT employees located in NRCS Field Offices to help deliver conservation in their local communities. Partners for these key positions include Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana, Inc. (SWCDMI), Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MTFWP), local conservation districts, and other conservation organizations.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed in Montana between the NRCS, the state of Montana, and SWCDMI in July of 2015 to coordinate conservation efforts on private land. 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.

Outreach/Marketing Outcomes:

Landowners:

Ensure that Montana's private landowners are aware of the opportunities to continue sage-grouse conservation work with NRCS and other partners. Share funding and technical assistance announcements with the media, partners, and NRCS employees. Develop a quarterly SGI newsletter to outline MOU accomplishments, highlight SGI successes, and notify landowners of SGI opportunities.

Partners:

Build long-term support for cooperative and voluntary conservation to benefit sage-grouse, other wildlife, and healthy intact rangelands.

National SGI:

Coordinate communication efforts with the National SGI to amplify our messages through proven SGI's proven communication tools.

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