



JUN - 9 2014

Dan Ashe
Director
United States Fish & Wildlife Service
Main Interior
1849 C Street, Northwest, Room 3331
Washington, District of Columbia 20240-0001

Subject: Assurance of Implementation of Bi-State Action Plan for Greater Sage Grouse

Dear Mr. Ashe:

We are pleased to provide to your attention a joint effort to focus and accelerate conservation activities to protect and restore habitat for the Greater Sage Grouse in the Bi-State Area. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has been working with you and other partners for many years to conserve the Bi-State Population straddling the Nevada-California border. We participate in the Bi-State Local Area Working Group (LAWG) alongside Federal, State, Tribal, and private conservation partners and together in 2012, a technical advisory committee completed a comprehensive Bi-State Action Plan (Plan) to remove threats to the species.

The Forest Service and NRCS remain fully committed with the other Bi-State LAWG partners working to conserve the sage grouse population. We strongly support the 2012 Plan as the guiding solution for Bi-State birds and use it to guide our conservation investments. The Plan identifies two top priorities: (1) establishing conservation easements on private lands to ensure critical brood habitats persist and (2) removing encroaching conifers that degrade habitats and increase predation, primarily on public lands. Since 2010, USDA has finalized contracts for about \$27.5 million of on-the-ground projects addressing critical threats identified in the Action Plan for the two top priorities--primarily the establishment of conservation easements, removal of encroached conifer, and restoration of brood habitats. Both the Forest Service and NRCS stand ready and firmly committed to doing more.

The Bi-State Executive Oversight Committee estimates it will cost about \$38 million to fully implement the remaining priority actions identified in the Plan. The Executive Committee's estimate assigns the Forest Service and NRCS with approximately 80 percent of the total conservation investments that are needed. The intent of this letter is to explicitly commit our agencies to full implementation of our respective portions of the Plan. We have developed the attached implementation plans for each Agency that focus conservation on high-priority projects and facilitate rapid implementation.

Of the \$38 million in estimated need, approximately \$13.9 million is the responsibility of the Forest Service. The Forest Service hereby commits to funding all of the restoration work which will result in full implementation of all the Forest Service's related measures in the Plan. All Forest Service projects will be implemented within ten years with high-priority projects completed first (5-7 years). Similarly, NRCS commits to funding \$10 million for conservation easements and another \$2 million to accelerate conifer removal on public lands. This new contribution by NRCS adds to their demonstrated track record having already secured \$24.7 million in conservation easements to secure and protect habitat since 2012. NRCS commits to having all their projects implemented within the next five years.

Importantly, NRCS is designating the range and pasture lands in the Bi-State restoration focus areas as "grasslands of environmental significance" under the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). This special designation will enable NRCS to provide up to 75 percent of a conservation easement purchase cost which will, in turn, improve the likelihood that NRCS can partner with other entities and willing landowners to invest in easements. In addition to easements, NRCS will target \$2 million from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to speed conifer removal on public land. NRCS will coordinate with both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on lands that they administer to accelerate these conifer removal activities. Finally, NRCS is also committed to the continued use of EQIP to help implement other important actions that protect and restore sage grouse, such as brood habitat restoration, implementation of enhanced grazing systems, and fence marking.

While NRCS's commitment of \$12 million to benefit the Bi-State sage grouse habitat is firm, it is important to recognize that our programs are voluntary and it is hard to predict precise parcels or projects that will be enrolled each fiscal year. In the attached NRCS implementation schedule, we detail the NRCS commitment and project funding each year. Securing easements on additional lands identified in the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan may also be realized and increase protections of critical sage-grouse brood rearing habitats.

Some revision to Forest Service and NRCS implementation schedules and corresponding costs may be necessary through adaptive management as new information is obtained. Personnel working for our collective agencies, BLM, the U.S. Geological Survey, and state wildlife agencies will continue to refine habitat mapping and reassess priority treatment areas, using the latest information on the species distribution and use of the habitat. We are committed to refining our implementation accordingly. The USDA and the Department of the Interior agencies participating in the Bi-State LAWG are also entering into a Service First Agreement to maximize interagency cooperation, efficiency and effectiveness in implementing the Action Plan.

In addition to the above targeted actions, we are also committing to ensure that appropriate planning, coordination, and habitat restoration occurs on public lands to benefit the Bi-State sage grouse population. The Forest Service will complete the ongoing planning efforts on the

Humboldt-Toiyabe and Inyo National Forests to provide adequate standards and guidelines and implement the Action Plan for conservation of Bi-State sage grouse habitat on the National Forest System lands.

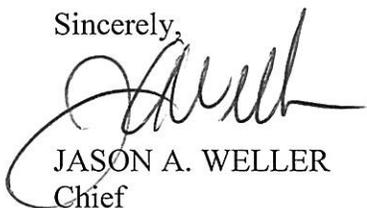
To insure consistency across jurisdictional boundaries the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is working collaboratively with BLM in Nevada, preparing Land and Resource Management Plan amendments specifically focused on conservation and enhancement of important habitat. The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is scheduled for completion by the end of 2014. The FEIS and plan amendments will not only guide Forest Service and BLM management activities, but facilitate any work NRCS conducts with producers who have allotments on public land.

The Inyo National Forest is currently revising its Forest Plan. Bi-state sage-grouse is identified as an at-risk species in the plan revision process. As required by the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219), the revised plan will include direction to provide the ecological conditions necessary to support the persistence of the Bi-State sage grouse in the plan area. Species-specific plan components, including standards or guidelines, will be included in the revised plan as needed to provide the ecological conditions necessary to conserve the species.

The Executive Oversight Committee (EOC) for the Bi-State LAWG has submitted a summary of its conservation accomplishments to date under separate cover to your agency. We hope you will consider the LAWG partners' considerable accomplishments to date as well as this joint Forest Service/NRCS commitment as you proceed with your evaluation. With this letter we wish to clearly indicate our commitment to conservation of the species and its habitat.

We will continue to maintain close relationships with your staff and our partners to deliver focused conservation actions to benefit working lands -- whether they are private or public -- as well as the sage grouse. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



JASON A. WELLER
Chief

Natural Resources Conservation Service



THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief

Forest Service