

Voluntary Conservation Works for Greater Sage-Grouse

Now in its sixth year, the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) – led by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – has matured into a primary catalyst for sagebrush conservation across the West. This historic conservation partnership helped the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) conclude in September 2015 that the species did not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. SGI's shared vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching provides win-win solutions for ranchers, sage grouse and 350 other wildlife species. With more than 1,100 participating ranches in 11 western states, SGI and its partners have already invested \$424.5 million and conserved 4.4 million acres, an area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. Resulting outcomes of threat reduction include:

Targeting investments. SGI benefits large populations by targeting more than 75 percent of investments inside population strongholds. The remaining quarter maintains connectivity to surrounding habitats.

Decreasing exurban development. Conservation easements have increased 18-fold since 2010, reducing subdivision threat on 450,000 acres. Wyoming Governor's energy policy and subdivision-halting easements together reduce anticipated bird losses by two-thirds.

Reducing cultivation of grazing lands. Farm Bill "Sodsaver" provision cut by half the risk of cultivation of large intact sagebrush grazing lands. Easements in Montana help maintain the longest-known sage grouse migration by reducing cultivation risk by 34 percent.

Restoring habitat quality. Invasive conifers have been removed on 400,000 acres. Two-thirds of the conifer threat has been alleviated on private lands in Oregon. Science shows that cuts maintain grouse populations in otherwise suitable habitat.

Improving rangeland health. SGI has enhanced rangeland health by applying grazing systems, re-vegetating former rangeland with sagebrush and perennial grasses, and controlling invasive weeds on more than 2.4 million acres. Proactively marking or moving high risk fences prevents 2,600 fence collisions annually.

Providing regulatory predictability. SGI provides peace of mind to ranchers. SGI has worked with the FWS to ensure that landowners who maintain NRCS conservation systems remain compliant with Endangered Species Act provisions.

Benefiting other species. SGI conserves the sagebrush ecosystem and its 350 other wildlife species. In Oregon, sagebrush-dependent songbirds climbed 55-81 percent in places where invading juniper trees were removed for sage grouse. In Wyoming, proactive measures for sage grouse also conserved 75 percent of habitats for migratory mule deer.

Continued investment. NRCS has committed \$211 million towards its new sage grouse investment strategy, dubbed SGI 2.0, through 2018. This investment provides partners with unprecedented certainty that conservation on working lands will continue. With partner contributions, SGI will have conserved or protected an estimated 8 million acres by 2018 — an area more than seven times that of the Great Salt Lake.

