

TRACKING SUCCESS

# SAGE GROUSE

I N I T I A T I V E



2013



When we work together to conserve sage grouse, we're assuring a home on the range for people and wildlife.







# Why Sage Grouse?



Enter the Sage Grouse Initiative, a new paradigm for conserving at-risk wildlife through voluntary cooperation, incentives, and community support. Everyone wins.

**F**ifty male sage grouse dance to the rising sun. Pronghorn race the golden light. Brewer's sparrows trill a dawn aria. Cattle graze nearby. The spicy aroma of sagebrush whirls on a crisp spring wind. Welcome to the world of sage grouse, the canary in the coal mine for wildlife of the sagebrush-steppe and the future of western ranching.

Once numbering some 16 million before settlement, sage grouse have dwindled to as few as 200,000 birds inhabiting half their historic range. Divvying up the range into too small of parcels is the main threat. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will decide in 2015 whether to list the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. The species warrants protection, but others rank higher in priority.

We stand at a pivotal moment. The Sage Grouse Initiative is taking bold, forward-looking steps to prevent a listing, while meeting our nation's food and energy needs. With the right conservation in the right places, we are safeguarding the wildlife and lands at the heart of our western anthem... *"Home on the range where the deer and the antelope play."*



# New Paradigm



**A** new paradigm for conserving at-risk species is sweeping the plains like a spring rain. The Sage Grouse Initiative restores sage grouse, cares for other wildlife sharing the same extensive home range, and helps ranchers pass on their legacy and rural way of life.

## Partnership on a Grand Scale

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) launched the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010, applying the power of the Farm Bill to target lands where habitats are intact and sage grouse numbers are highest. The Initiative covers 56 million acres across 11 western states. While private lands are the primary focus, the Initiative serves as a catalyst for public land enhancements. Today, the Initiative belongs to the many partners shaping history.



The speed of success matches the scale: **700+ ranchers** enrolled; investments of **\$145 million generate \$70 million** in matching contributions; conservation easements reduce sodbusting and subdivision threat on **240,000+ acres**; new grazing systems increase hiding cover for nesting birds on **2+ million acres**; removal of invading conifers restores historic sagebrush on **200,000 acres**, and marking or removing **500+ miles** of high-risk fences prevent bird collisions.

Our Tracking Success report features the top reasons the paradigm works, with conservation practices that illustrate each concept: **Shared Vision, Strategic, Accountability, Leverage, Certainty, and Trust and Credibility.**

*“The Sage Grouse Initiative helps our family stay in ranching. It helps us and it helps the birds.”*

~Bryson Masini, Sweetwater Ranch, Nevada



Top to bottom, left to right: Bryson Masini enjoys the sage grouse on the family ranch southeast of Reno; Penny Bellah, Williams Petroleum, executes plans to produce domestic energy *and* conserve sage grouse; The Sage Grouse Initiative ensures we can carry forward hunting traditions to the next generation.





# Shared Vision

What's good for rangelands is good for grouse. That's the Sage Grouse Initiative brand and why hundreds of partners are teaming up to achieve world-class wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching.





Before juniper removal



After juniper removal



Top: Before and after photos show how tree removal restores the sagebrush-steppe. Bottom: A logger cuts an invasive juniper in Oregon; Lush springs revive after taking out nearby water-using junipers.



# Shared Vision

Conifer Removal Revives Sagebrush & Economy



**A** revving chainsaw breaks the stillness of a hot afternoon in southern Oregon’s Warner Mountains. A juniper falls. The sagebrush gains yet another foothold of it’s historic range. Fires once kept invading conifers from expanding into the treeless country that sage grouse require. Today, loggers are employed to help heal the land.

Cutting invasive trees in Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho and Utah earns support from ranchers and conservationists alike. The Sage Grouse Initiative funds carefully planned conifer removal projects where restoration payback will be greatest. The projects center on private lands, and on public lands where ranchers hold grazing leases.

Sagebrush, grasses, and springs revive soon after the conifers are gone. Sage grouse return. Pronghorn, mule deer, songbirds and livestock benefit. Achieving world-class wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching is the shared vision for every project.



*“Juniper removal works great on sites with an intact sagebrush and grass understory. You can cut the juniper and get an obvious and beneficial range response.”*

*~Rancher John O’Keeffe, Adel, Oregon*

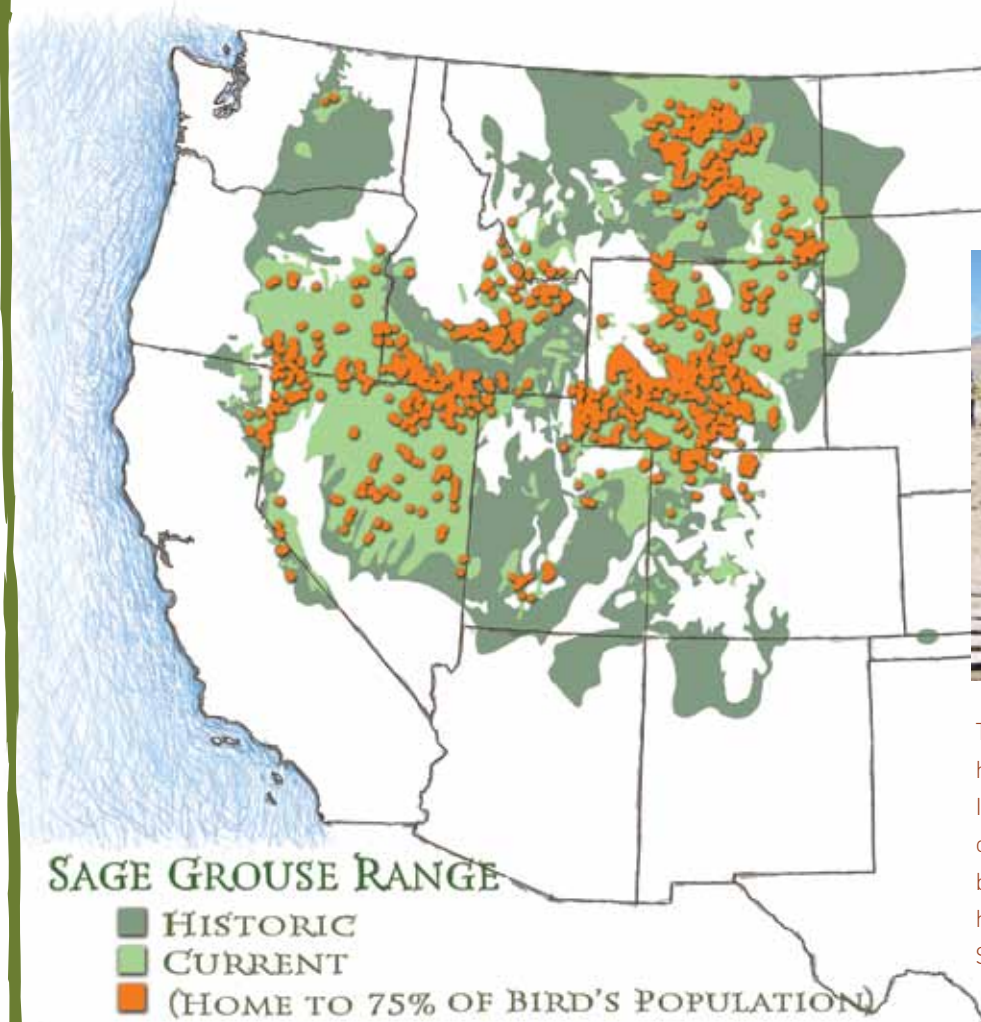


# Strategic

Just as sage grouse males perform where they have the best chance of attracting a mate, so the Sage Grouse Initiative directs resources where conservation returns are highest.







Top: The orange areas on the map highlight the heart of Sage Grouse Initiative projects; A tribal member of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation builds a fence to improve wet meadow habitat in Central Nevada; Bottom: Sage grouse lift-off.



# Strategic

Focus Where Success Will Be Highest



**C**aring for the lands that harbor the most sage grouse multiplies our return on investments. Three quarters of the birds concentrate in one quarter of their range, about 50 million acres. It makes sense to spend your first dollar conserving 500 birds instead of five birds.

## Core Conservation

Concentrating our efforts in the vital core holds high promise for the future of ranching and wildlife. For every conservation practice, we apply strategic tools to ensure our efforts maximize conservation benefit. That's an innovative change from the way projects have been traditionally funded based on opportunity over location.

## Marking the Right Fences

Fences pose a threat to sage grouse habitat on a small portion of their range near leks and wintering areas, so marking only the high-risk fences saves time, money, and thousands of sage grouse lives. In 2012, the Initiative released a science tool showing landowners and managers places where marking fences reduces strike risk to birds.

Fence-marking also has become a popular activity for students, from Future Farmers of America to Boy Scouts, Conservation Corps and tribal groups. Every time our youth help wildlife and ranching, we are assuring conservation efforts of today continue tomorrow. Strategic? You bet.



*"I was out in the field and the sage grouse took off and headed right for that fence, but sure enough, at the last minute they went up and over those markers!"*

~ Rancher Don Phillips, Ely, Nevada



# Accountability

Scientists track sage grouse to evaluate and improve program effectiveness. Measuring how grouse, mule deer, songbirds and other wildlife respond helps managers fine-tune practices for a vibrant sagebrush community.







# Accountability

Science Guides Conservation



**M**ontana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Lorelle Berkeley aims her telemetry antenna toward sagebrush merging with golden grasses from last year's growing season. A meadowlark sings from a fence post. Montana's Snowy Mountains gleam on the horizon. Loud beeps reveal the hidden location of the sage hen nest.

### Measuring Success



Biologists mark and follow chicks to learn if new grazing practices help them thrive.

Berkeley joins a University of Montana science team analyzing rest-rotation grazing systems designed to improve rangeland and sage grouse productivity. The Montana study also examines if the same grazing practices enhance habitat for declining prairie songbirds like Brewer's sparrow.

Rather than simply report acres treated, the Sage Grouse Initiative uses science to measure the biological benefits of habitat improvements to populations. Evaluations include assessing effectiveness of conservation easements in Wyoming, measuring the benefits of invasive conifer removal in Oregon and gauging the value of grazing systems in Utah and Montana. New insights continually improve on the ground results.



Top to bottom, left to right: Rebecca Smith, University of Montana, discovered the longest known sage grouse migration (100 miles one-way) and identified a habitat pathway between Montana and Saskatchewan, Canada; A sage thrasher nest tucks into sagebrush; The Brewer's sparrow also benefits from sagebrush conservation.



*"Society demands accountability in federal expenditures for conservation, and SGI is pioneering the use of science in documenting the biological benefits of Farm Bill investments."*

~Dr. David Naugle, National Science Advisor, Sage Grouse Initiative



# Leverage

How do you match the speed of conservation delivery with that of the fleetest animal in North America? Multiply investments through partner contributions. Replicate success throughout sage grouse strongholds.







Top to bottom, left to right: Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust led a landmark conservation easement project for the Coyte Ranch in North Park; Tess O'Sullivan, Lava Lake Ranch, joins fellow ranchers to safeguard Idaho's Pioneer Mountains; Carole, Jep and Norman Richie signed a conservation easement with Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust.



# Leverage

Conservation Easements Maintain Working Lands



**R**anching is a tough way to make a living. Land rich but cash poor operators often turn to subdividing as a last resort. Leveraging partner dollars into conservation easements offers a bright alternative to maintain ranching as the prevailing land use.

A conservation easement is a voluntary, incentive-based agreement that a ranch will stay together by limiting future development. When it comes to sage grouse, keeping lands whole is critical to the bird's future.

Today, record-breaking numbers of ranchers are signing up for conservation easements in high abundance sage grouse areas. Land trusts, working hand-in-hand with their rural neighbors, develop mutually beneficial agreements. Non-profits, industry, and local, state and federal governments team up to provide funding.

## Wyoming Governor's Plan Steers Development

Subdivision and energy development pose major threats in Wyoming, the state with the most sage grouse. Here, a Governor's implementation team put into practice a model plan to guide development away from core habitats, protecting 83 percent of the birds within 25 percent of Wyoming's land area. After reducing the impacts from energy development, large and intact ranches are protected from subdivision through conservation easements.



*"We have a core area strategy that is going to allow for a robust population of sage grouse, allow us the opportunity to develop our minerals, and have strong agricultural and tourism sectors."*

~Matt Mead, Wyoming governor



# Certainty

Ranchers who keep up conservation practices for sage grouse won't face additional regulations. Certainty removes the fear from the Endangered Species Act.







Top to bottom, left to right: Dennis Mercer, Montana, joins more than 700+ ranchers enrolled in the Sage Grouse Initiative; A grazing plan unfolds in the field; Cattle and displaying sage grouse mingle near Tensleep, Wyoming.



# Certainty

Sustainable Grazing Enriches the Range



*“The certainty agreement of 2012 gives 30 years worth of assurance to producers that they can continue their approved practices. I’ve wanted to see that for a long time. I give the NRCS credit for this historic action.”*

~Doug Busselman, executive vice president, Nevada Farm Bureau

**A**sk any rancher what they fear about the Endangered Species Act. You’ll likely hear one word, regulation. No one wants to be told what to do, especially if restrictions could hurt the bottom line. Grazing to improve habitat for sage grouse is one of 40 approved practices from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that qualify for regulatory certainty.

The Sage Grouse Initiative helps willing ranchers customize grazing plans that will improve nesting, rearing, and wintering habitats for sage grouse. The Initiative then chips in to speed implementation so that the benefits of practices can be more quickly realized.

Rangelands with lush native grasses, wildflowers, sagebrush and wet meadows are likely to put more pounds on livestock too. Just ask Montana rancher Dennis Mercer:

*“Everything is benefiting from it – the green needle, Gardner salt bush and winter fat, and they’re the most important forages we have on this range. With the NRCS guidelines we’ve done, I’d say it’s increased five times from what it was when we started.”*

In Montana and the Dakotas, plowing up native range is the biggest threat. The best kind of certainty for sage grouse is to keep lands in grazing and landowner financial statements in the black.





# Trust and Credibility

Conservation happens on the ground every day. Sage Grouse Initiative biologists and range conservationists work with landowners in rural communities, from Malta, Montana, to Craig, Colorado.







# Trust and Credibility

A Fine Line Between Success and Failure



**T**he Natural Resources Conservation Service has a long history of its staff working in rural communities. When it comes to sage grouse, they understand the importance of tailor-fitting ranch plans to match the financial needs of landowners. Voluntary conservation succeeds through trust and credibility.

## Partners Support 24 Field Positions

In 2011, the NRCS teamed with more than 30 partners to bolster its capabilities by adding 24 biologists and range conservationists. The new positions are located in the NRCS offices closest to where sage grouse are most abundant.

The Intermountain West Joint Venture, a bird habitat partnership group, secures partner matches for Farm Bill dollars and oversees the positions, as well as communication and science efforts. Pheasants Forever manages the financial agreements.

Mentored by NRCS and partner colleagues, the SGI field team's diligence, technical skills, flexibility and credibility have led to a dramatic increase in conservation projects. When nobody takes credit, everybody wins - a trademark of the Sage Grouse Initiative.

**Lasting conservation is built one relationship and project at a time.**



Top to bottom, left to right: Barb Gibbons, NRCS, discusses rotational grazing with a Montana rancher; Map shows locations for our field staff; The Sage Grouse Initiative field team gathers for a 2012 training in Pinedale, Wyoming.



*“What’s key is meeting landowners on their schedule. They are branding and moving cattle, so you might have to get together with them on a Wednesday evening or a Sunday.”*

~Brandi St. Clair, SGI biologist, Lakeview, Oregon



# Flight Path

Follow the Sage Grouse Initiative across 11 western states to discover successes made possible through this innovative partnership.





# State Success Stories

From juniper removal in Oregon and Idaho to rotational grazing in Washington, SGI aims for large-scale conservation.



## 1 Oregon: Applying Science Improves Conservation Delivery

More than 32,000 acres of juniper-invaded sagebrush-steppe in the Lakeview area are becoming treeless once again, and providing habitat for sage grouse. Planning and science inform the sweeping improvements across private and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands. A University of Idaho study monitors habitat effectiveness after juniper removal. Findings continually enhance conservation success in all conifer removal projects.

**Partners:** Landowners, BLM, NRCS, Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, University of Idaho.



## 2 Washington: A Community of Willing Landowners Step Up to Enhance Habitat

Private lands harbor some of the best homes for Washington's birds. In 2012, ranchers enrolled a cluster of 14,400 acres in SGI programs. The rotational grazing systems and other strategies encourage taller grasses to shelter nesting grouse, and better range for livestock.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS, USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

## 3 Idaho: Removing Juniper Invigorates Both Private and Public Lands

To reclaim 50 square miles of prime sage grouse habitat takes cooperation across private and public land boundaries. After two years of planning and cultivating partnerships, clearing the invasive junipers is paying dividends.

**Partners:** Landowners, Pheasants Forever, BLM, NRCS, Idaho Fish and Game, Mule Deer Foundation, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, West Cassia Soil and Water Conservation District, South Magic Valley Sage-Grouse Local Working Group.





Cooperative conservation defines the efforts of partners who team up across the *California and Nevada* border to prevent sage grouse from an endangered species listing.



**4 California: Habitat Improvements Enable Sage Grouse Reintroduction**

A small population of sage grouse centered on Clear Lake National Wildlife Refuge is on the rise, thanks to strategic habitat restoration and an influx of translocated birds. Landowners and agencies are removing junipers to restore habitat once occupied by these large birds.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Lava Beds-Butte Valley Resource Conservation District, University of California Cooperative Extension, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Nevada Department of Wildlife, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

**5 Nevada: Cooperative Conservation Aids Bi-State Sage Grouse**

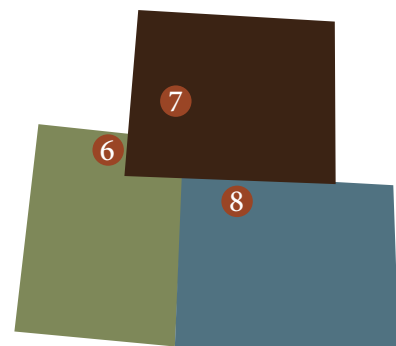
The genetically distinct Bi-State population straddles the Nevada-California border. SGI investments have leveraged millions of partner dollars for conservation easements that help ranching remain viable and conserve lands for sage grouse and other wildlife. A cooperative team of stakeholders carries out the Bi-State Action Plan, intended to proactively conserve the Bi-State sage grouse and prevent an Endangered Species Act listing.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service, Nevada Department of Wildlife, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, BLM, U.S. Geological Survey, University of Nevada Reno, and many others.





Big challenges take big picture thinking and willing partners to carry out the conservation vision. Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado offer fine examples.



**6 Utah: Watershed-scale Grazing Project a Model for Working Together**

More sage grouse dwell in Rich County in the far northeast corner than any other part of Utah. New grazing systems over 150,000 acres are designed to benefit ranching and wildlife alike. The primary goals are to sustain range health, to heal riparian areas, and to improve water quality.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS, BLM, U.S. Forest Service, Utah Department of Agriculture and Food.



**7 Wyoming: Sommers-Grindstone Ranches Protect Future for Ranching, Wildlife, Fishing Access, and Cultural Sites**

An impressive land protection agreement in Sublette County, Wyoming, conserved nearly 19,000 acres of historic agricultural land, critical sage grouse and other wildlife habitat, and iconic view sheds. The Sommers Grindstone Conservation Project is one of the most extensive private lands conservation efforts in Wyoming's history and includes four separate conservation easements and public fishing access on nearly five miles of the Green River. The landmark agreements were made possible by the vision of landowners Albert Sommers, his sister Jonita Sommers and Maggie Miller of Grindstone Cattle Co.

**Partners:** Nineteen partners including landowners, Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust, Pinedale Anticline and Jonah Field mitigation funds, Wyoming Game and Fish Commission, NRCS.



**8 Colorado: Conservation Easement Preserves Wildlife and Ranching Heritage**

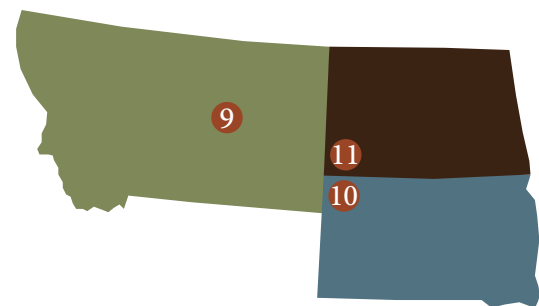
The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) completed protection of the 3,819-acre Elk Head Ranch on June 13, 2012. The historic Elk Head Ranch, northwest of Steamboat Springs is dominated by rolling sagebrush covered hills and riparian areas along the Elkhead Creek, which flows through the property. The ranch falls within a priority habitat area for sage grouse.

**Partners:** Elk Head Ranch landowner, CCALT, NRCS, Routt County (Purchase of Development Rights Program).





Hands-on conservation is in full swing: planting sagebrush in North Dakota, making fence markers in Montana, and applying grazing systems in South Dakota.



**9 Montana: Making Fence markers Provides Work for People With Developmental Disabilities**

Saws are buzzing in the workshop. Thanks to the efforts of COR Enterprises in Billings, some 100,000 fence markers now protect more than 60 miles of previously unmarked fences that once posed risks for sage grouse. Birds see the white vinyl markers snapped onto the top fence wire and avoid collisions. The markers help birds survive, and making them offers dignified employment for people with developmental disabilities.

**Partners:** COR Enterprises, BLM, NRCS.

**10 South Dakota: Innovative Grazing Serves Grouse and Rangeland**

Ranchers work closely with the NRCS to design and apply grazing systems that promote tall grasses and shrubs for nesting grouse. They also time grazing and intensity in the riparian areas to encourage lush plants and insects, nutritious foods for growing chicks. Some pastures are rested for 15 months for maximum plant growth, while others are grazed on a seasonal rotation.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS.



**11 North Dakota: Growing and Planting Sagebrush Restores Habitat**

At the fringe of sage grouse range, sagebrush is in high demand. That's why SGI is helping to fund seed collection from the wild, growing plants in nurseries, and planting sagebrush in grasslands. Since 2010, these efforts have resulted in hand-planting 3000 seedlings in Bowman and Slope Counties. Five hundred plants went to South Dakota and to the BLM. Survival rates so far look positive for habitat restoration.

**Partners:** Landowners, NRCS, North Dakota Game and Fish, BLM.





# A Vision for the Future

*Sage grouse dance to the sunrise, pronghorn race the wind, and ranch families pass on a legacy of land stewardship.*



## Pick up the NEW Pocket Guide to Sagebrush

Discover the diversity of sagebrush plants and communities with a useful field guide. Contact your state NRCS office for a hard copy.

**Partners:** Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, NRCS, BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and others.

## Audubon Sagebrush Traveling Trunk Program Engages Students

Take a trunk packed full of plaster animal tracks, skulls, furs, and hands-on activities that meet state education standards. Add community naturalists engaging teachers and students, from kindergarten through 12. The result? The Sagebrush Trunk teaches and inspires youth in rural Wyoming and nearby states about sagebrush ecosystems. The popular trunks appear at expos and are valuable for fish and wildlife agency education efforts, too. Contact <http://rockies.audubon.org/>.



**Partners:** Audubon Rockies, NRCS, BLM, Private Foundations, Cloud Peak Energy, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, State Education Funding Sources.



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Design: Maja Smith, MajaDesign, Inc.  
Author & Project Coordinator: Deborah Richie, Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) communications specialist  
Editors: Tim Griffiths, NRCS SGI coordinator; Dr. David Naugle, University of Montana professor & SGI science advisor; Jeremy Maestas, NRCS SGI technical lead

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*Achieving conservation through  
sustainable ranching*

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