



Final Performance Report

FOR THE

Montana Sage Grouse Initiative Site Specific Agreement

Reporting Period: Nov. 1, 2011 to August 31, 2016

Submitted on:

September 30, 2016

Cooperator:

Montana Association of Conservation Districts and
Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana

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Geographic Areas Reported On:

Valley County, Phillips County, Rosebud County, Carter County, and Petroleum
County

1st Congressional District

SSA 1.0 Program Summary

Montana's Sage Grouse Initiative Strategic Watershed Action Team (SGI SWAT) program was launched in fall 2011 with the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) serving as the hiring entity and program coordinator for the state's SGI SWAT program. In addition to the national SGI Partnership (NRCS, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Intermountain Joint Venture, and Pheasants Forever), MACD partnered with six local organizations to help support these field positions. In 2015, the administration of the program was changed over to MACD's sister organization, Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana (SWCDM) as part of a restructuring process for both organizations.

There were initially three position locations in Montana through this program: Rosebud County/Forsyth Field Office, Petroleum County/Winnett Field Office, and Phillips County/Malta Field Office. In 2013, the Petroleum County position was re-located to Valley County (NRCS Glasgow Field Office). In early 2015, SWCDM worked with the NRCS area conservationist, IWJV, Carter County Conservation District and NRCS Field Office to add an additional position in Ekalaka. As of August 2016, there are four Montana SWAT positions administered by SWCDM: Ekalaka, Forsyth, Glasgow, and Malta.

Summary of Accomplishments – All Locations

The majority of the SGI projects undertaken in Montana are related to prescribed grazing, water developments, fencing and fence marking, habitat improvement, and crop conversion threats. Across all positions, over 100 landowners have been assisted by SWAT employees on SGI and/or other sage-grouse/rangeland improvement activities. This has resulted in sage grouse habitat improvement activities on over 1 million acres of rangeland across six sage grouse core areas in central and eastern Montana.

A breakdown of numbers by each county/SWAT location is as follows. Note: This is not an exhaustive list of all landowners and associated acres worked on, but is a summary of available data regarding SWAT activities in these areas.

Phillips County: Worked with 39 landowners on sage-grouse or related habitat improvement projects and conservation planning.

Valley County: Worked with over 16 landowners on sage grouse-related inventories and/or SGI projects, resulting in SGI applications on over 400,000 acres in sage grouse core areas. A lot of planning was also done in conjunction with BLM and other land management agencies.

Rosebud County: Worked with over 10 landowners on sage-grouse related inventories and conservation planning in northern Rosebud County, resulting in over 500,000 acres and nine SGI contracts in sage grouse core area 6 alone.

Carter County: Worked with 23 landowners on sage-grouse or related habitat improvement projects. Ten SGI EQIP contracts were obligated in 2015/2016 on over 60,000 acres. The majority of these projects were in sage grouse core area.

Petroleum County: Worked with 6 landowners in first year of program, and conducted outreach about SGI to numerous landowners and organizations.

For more information about the work that has been accomplished through the Montana SGI SWAT program over the last 5 years, please visit our website: www.swcdmi.org.

Final Reports by SWAT Location

Phillips County

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Narrative Summary:

The SGI SWAT position in the Malta NRCS office began with Mike Lucas in the fall of 2011. He was followed by Brandon Sandau in 2013. Kelsey Molloy is currently located in Malta and has been in place since March 2014.

Valley County:

All three Malta positions have assisted with SGI applications out of the Glasgow, Valley County office in addition to their work in Phillips County, as needed. Kelsey Molloy assisted the Glasgow office part-time from November 2015 to May 2016 when the position there was not staffed. Producer SG-1 had an SGI contracted funded in 2015 in Valley County. It had its initial inventory done by Mike Lucas. Brandon Sandau assisted with the SG-5 contract which was funded in 2015 and involved stock water developments, removal of old fence, and a grazing plan. Another contract that the Valley Co office funded with help from the Malta office was SG-6. Mike Lucas did the initial inventory on this ranch. John Fahlgren did more inventory and the initial planning. In the winter of 2105-16 I did additional planning and all the mapping and contracting. This project was then funded for FY 2016 and will fund stock water development and implement a grazing rotation in the sage-grouse migration corridor. Additionally, the producer will mark a mile and a half of fence in the core area near a lek. It will have a short pipeline and tanks on the producers property in the core area, to help improve stream habitat and the surrounding area. Brandon also did some inventory for producer SG-8- that is an ongoing project out of the Valley County office involving water development and a wet meadow restoration.

Phillips County:

Mike Lucas completed a WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program) project through the WLFW – sage-grouse fund pool (M14). This fund pool for WHIP helped fund water developments on expired CRP and contracted prescribed grazing, in order to de-incentivize conversion of CRP to cropland. This program

helped avoid additional fragmentation and habitat loss which is the greatest threat to sage-grouse in Management Zone 1. The contract that Mike worked on was 285 acres.

Mike also worked on a Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative contract. This contract funded water development and fencing to support a twice over deferred grazing system. This contract also included 1600 feet of obstruction removal for downed fence.

Brandon was initially working out of the Winnett, Petroleum County office before he transferring to the Malta office. He inventoried four ranches and roughly 35,000 acres in Valley and Phillips County. He worked on seven Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) contracts that aimed at keeping expired or expiring CRP into perennial grass cover by implementing water developments and a grazing rotation for three years.

Brandon also worked on an SGI application (M10) which would have involved water developments and prescribed grazing being implemented. However the office was never able to complete the contract because the producer was unable to get a long enough lease for the property.

I completed two Prairie Pothole Wetland Grassland Retention Program (an EQIP fund pool) contracts (M33, P1) (145 ac and 610 ac respectively). These contracts were funded in 2015 and 2016 and both are in sage-grouse general habitat with known sage-grouse populations nearby. They both involved seeding cropland back to grass with some acres with pollinator plantings done, in order to provide more forbs and insects for sage-grouse during brood-rearing.

I completed an additional EQIP contract in sage grouse general habitat (M30). This contract had two prescribed grazing system and water developments to implement it on expired CRP acres. These acres were likely to be plowed and converted to crop otherwise. I also assisted the Malta NRCS office on inventory and planning on a few other EQIP applications in sage-grouse habitat.

I am currently working with 5 landowners on SGI projects, inventory on these was completed this year. Additionally we have a landowner who had inventory previously completed by Mike Lucas, who I will do some planning with this fall. Some of these landowners are just interested in a conservation plan and so work for them will fall under CTA. I also started working with a producer this year on range monitoring. The Great Falls Area is also working on a special initiative for restoring cropland to grass adjacent to sage-grouse habitat and I am currently working with 4 landowners on restoring about 5000 acres of cropland to permanent vegetation. 3 of these landowners are neighbors and there are several leks nearby so if they all get funded, there is a real potential to drastically improve sage-grouse habitat in that area. I am working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Wildlife Program on some of these seeding projects to provide additional funding to producers and include water/ fencing where needed to make permanent vegetation an economically viable alternative. This fall and winter I will be working on conservation plans for these SGI applications as well as the reseeding projects. Anything that is not finished this year by NRCS deadlines for funding will be carried over into next year.

The biggest threat to sage-grouse in Management Zone I is cropland conversion. Many of the conservation plans out of the Malta office have tried to address this threat, either through reseeding

cropland to grassland thereby reducing fragmentation or by helping develop water and fences on expired CRP lands that would otherwise be at high risk of conversion.

Outreach:

In my time in this position I have tried to engage with the community in various ways. I have attended the bi-monthly CMR National Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group meetings as often as I can, and have presented to its members about the Sage Grouse Initiative. I usually attend the local conservation district monthly meetings and keep them informed of sage-grouse related news. I have given presentations on wildlife and grazing, and grazing management to a local high school class, a prairie ecology class from Clemson University, as well as a Ladies Day on the Range event, to name a few. I presented a webinar about sage grouse conservation in the United States in February 2015 for a Canadian conservation group. I also attend the annual Ag Day event in Malta and share a booth there with the Phillips Conservation District.

I have been part of a group that has monthly conference calls to discuss how to encourage range and wildlife monitoring in Montana. I have put a few articles in our local newspaper about the Sage Grouse Initiative as well as ones that have been featured in the conservation district newsletter and the SGI website. I have also attended other range-related workshops over the last few years, which have served the dual purpose of both learning opportunities and networking with other agencies and interested producers.

Reflection:

According to our local district administrator having this position in the office resulted in increased collaboration with the local conservation district. I attend their meetings, write articles for them, and generally try to coordinate with them on things like assisting with workshops.

I would say the single most important step I was able to take was working on and funding projects that provided water and fencing infrastructure to lands that were otherwise at risk of conversion. By making the lands available for grazing there is much less economic incentive for them to be converted to crop in the future.

The biggest lesson I learned was that it takes time to find projects and get things done. It probably took a good year to get trained on NRCS programs and processes, start making connections with landowners and build relationships and trust. And it took about another year before I had people interested in working with me specifically on Sage Grouse Initiative. So I learned to expect setbacks and be patient with projects. I also learned to adjust my concept of success- there are different tools to get things done, even if it is CTA or a producer is involved with a different NRCS program and they do something that benefits wildlife habitat or gets them thinking about range health than that is a success to me. Even though some of the projects I worked on were through the regular EQIP funding pool, they still helped improve or keep intact sage-grouse habitat.



Sage brush country, Northern Montana. Photo by Kelsey Molloy.

Valley County

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June-Sept 2016

Narrative Summary

I started work at the end of May this year. The first month of my work was spent attending Conservation Planning Training from June 6th-10th and Cultural Resources Training from June 21st-23rd in Bozeman, I also spent some time familiarizing myself with Valley County and meeting some of the local producers. I attended the annual SGI SWAT Convention and New Employee Orientation in Lewistown, MT from June 27th-30th and was able to meet the people involved in SGI from around the country.

I have met with the local Montana FWP staff, the BLM area staff, and Marisa Sather; who is the local FWS Partners biologist. I attended the local conservation district meeting on July 12th to introduce myself and to meet the board and have been going to the monthly meetings since then. I also have

attended the CMR Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group meetings to learn about some of the local issues the area faces and to meet the various people involved.

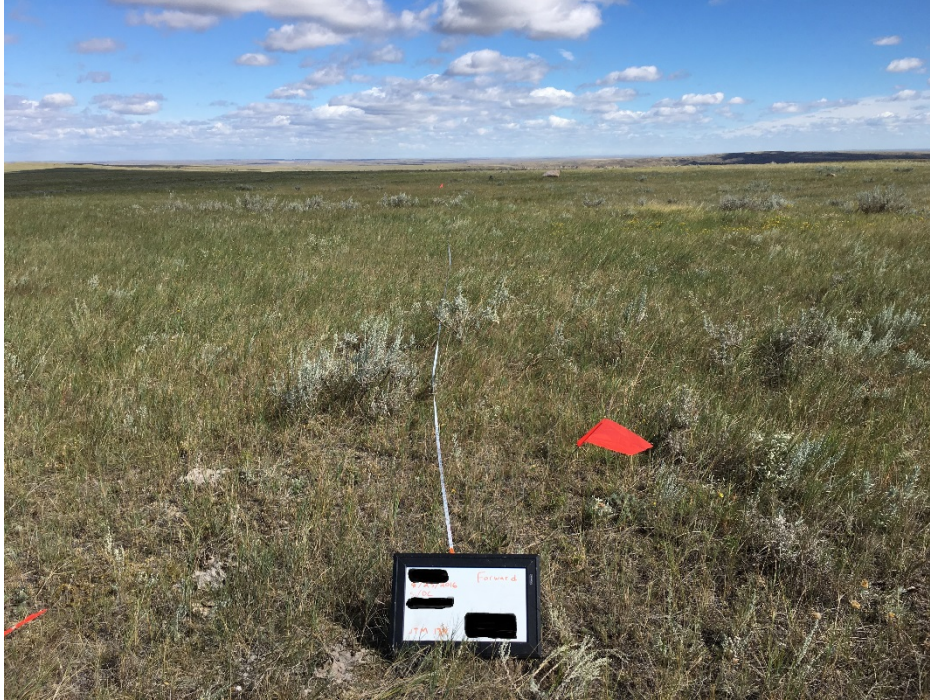
I started with inventory by spending a few days with Kelsey Molloy, who holds the SGI SWAT position in Malta to learn how she does inventory work and to gain more knowledge about the local plants. Since then, I have been working on three different operations since I started. Two are new applications for this year and one is a large operation that has been partially inventoried in previous years and that I am finishing up. The first two I have finished inventory on and will begin planning this fall. The first operation is around 2000 acres and provides some good habitat. We are discussing installing a livestock watering system in two old CRP pastures and an upland site so that the producer can use the CRP fields as separate pastures and to better distribute the animals in the uplands. The next operation is around 10,000 acres in the migratory corridor. It is a mosaic of BLM, State, and private lands. This one is in the migratory corridor and we are looking at an improved grazing system with a small pipeline extension into one pasture in order to get more even utilization. The large application (over 200,000 acres) was started two years ago and I have been working to finish up the inventory.

The utilization of improved grazing practices in Valley County will help to provide better wildlife habitat and biodiversity within the rangelands. These plans are also designed to help improve the riparian systems function and to help improve grouse habitat for nesting and cover. On many of the operations we have contracted fencing and livestock water pipelines so that we can better achieve sustainable ranching, which is a good thing for wildlife and producers. Additionally, we have helped to secure conservation easements in Valley County which will guarantee preservation of the landscape into the future. These practices mentioned help to alleviate many of the threats within Valley County. We do not have major issues with conifer encroachment or invasive species that are commonly faced in other sage grouse habitats.

In Valley County, it would be hard for me to speak to all of the unanticipated results of the SGI project given the short amount of time that I have been here. However, one unanticipated result recently discussed in the area was expanding the conversation on mesic areas and their importance as a part of ecosystem function and the sage grouse life cycle.

I would say that the single most important step taken in Valley County is the work completed to preserve and improve sage grouse habitat in the migratory corridor of Valley County, between core areas 1 and 2. This corridor is a relatively small area, but it is a critical piece of the landscape to ensure that sage grouse have a contiguous habitat to move between their summer range in North Valley County and the winter range in southern Valley County

A few things learned that I would pass on to other conservation partners is the importance of developing lasting relationships to achieve conservation goals. A quote that I heard relating to the discussion on conservation is that “people were given two ears and one mouth because they should listen twice as much as they talk”. The ability to hold a discussion on conservation depends on being willing to listen to other perspectives and talking through ideas, in spite of differences in opinion.



SGI application inventory in North Valley County

Credit: Luke McCarty



Sage Grouse moving from a mesic area that is about 200 feet east on a SGI application in Valley County

Credit: Luke McCarty



A fossilized oyster shell found out in North Valley County, the area used to be a seabed

Credit: Luke McCarty

Rosebud County

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Narrative Summary

Since my start date in July 2015, most of my time has gone to developing a 130,000+ acre conservation plan, of which around 40,000 acres were contracted through SGI. Although this plan alone will conserve large tracts of intact sage-grouse habitat, it also borders another large (over 40,000 acres) SGI contract, further linking well-managed sage-grouse habitat. These two ranches, along with an additional seven ranches in the area that have SGI contracts, make up the majority of Core Area 6. Along with conserving large tracts of land, there is evidence that these contracts are having direct impacts on sage-grouse populations, as nearly all of the large (>30 males) leks observed this spring were on SGI contracted acres (Source: MTFWP GIS layer).

The conservation plan for this ranch required over three months of prep and inventory in late 2015, and was completed in April 2016. Throughout the planning process, I was able to go through every

step multiple times because of the size of the plan, which was helpful in learning the nine “Conservation Planning” steps that are used by NRCS. The work on this plan also helped me to become informed on topics ranging from geology and soils to stock-water pipeline engineering, none of which I had previous experience in. More recently, I am working on inventorying two new ranches that were brought to my attention late this summer and hope to have them completed this fall.

Additionally, I have been conducting monitoring on existing SGI contracts, and, in particular, going out with the landowners and teaching them the monitoring techniques NRCS uses. With one landowner in particular, it was quite satisfying to see their young children fully participating in the monitoring process, even if they weren’t quite sure what it all meant. In all, I spent time monitoring at four ranches this summer, three of which participated in rangeland monitoring.

An unexpected project that came out of this inventory work was looking at ways to restore important mesic areas in arid rangelands. While conducting inventory on the above project, the Forsyth range conservationist and myself noticed how much active headcutting was occurring in the majority of ephemeral streams and headwaters throughout the ranch. The headcutting is causing wet meadow and riparian habitat to diminish or be lost altogether. NRCS wildlife biologists have identified these habitats as the limiting factor for sage-grouse population growth in my area, so it is vital that they are conserved. Most of the headcutting is likely due to season-long summer use, and should improve with a prescribed grazing rotation. However, because of the importance of mesic areas, I decided to work with the Rosebud Conservation District to obtain a 223 grant to look at several inexpensive and simple ways of healing headcuts. Hopefully, the results of this project will not only lead to better habitat for sage-grouse, but also better forage for cattle, making it more likely that these methods will be implemented by ranchers in the future. Due to my work on this project, I was able to meet and build relationships with landowners outside of SGI as well as with agency stakeholders such as DNRC and Montana FWP. These relationships have allowed me to have access to sites and information that I would not otherwise have access too. This served as a good learning opportunity for conservation work in general: there are many ways to go about conservation work, and it’s not always in the way you first intended.

Carter County

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Accomplishments in 2015-2016

The Ekalaka NRCS office rarely has an hour of the business day that there isn’t producers present and working with the staff. This past year the Ekalaka office has obligated 10 contracts totaling \$2,645,931.79 in SGI EQIP monies to be used on 60,304.9 acres in Carter County. Most of this money

was spent in Core Area 13 however, there were producers outside the core area that ranked high enough to receive funding. The group of producers is very diverse which is quite exciting, they include annual croppers, beef producers, sheep producers, organic producers, Limited Resource Farmers/Ranchers, and Beginning Farmers/Ranchers. The practices and enhancements in this group of contracts is very exciting as well, not only from a sage grouse perspective but also from a soil health aspect. While much of the contracted monies is obligated for water development and grazing management infrastructure enhancement there is also a large chunk of obligated monies that will be used for re-seeding 935 acres of crop fields back to permanent vegetation. This is especially important to sage-grouse in that area of the county because these crop fields are situated in/near Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks (MT FWP) identified Important Winter Habitat in the Little Missouri River/Cottonwood Creek Watershed.

The Ekalaka Office recently placed an order along with a neighboring conservation district for sage grouse fence markers. The Ekalaka field office alone ordered over 75,000 markers that will be used to mark nearly 50 miles of fence over the next 4-5 years. There was also many additional miles of fence in which producers ordered or made fence markers on their own.

Shown at right is a large crop field that is part of the 935 acres of cropland to be seeded back to permanent vegetation near sage-grouse wintering grounds in southern Carter County. (Photo by: Lauren Manninen)



Spreading the word of conservation

It is very apparent that neighbors are spreading the good word of conservation through the SGI program up and down the watersheds found in Carter County. Many of this year's obligated contracts are adjacent to existing SGI contracts, creating great contiguous conservation efforts. On average we receive 1-2 new applications a month for SGI EQIP and the new applicants almost always neighbor one of our existing or past contracts. Recently a project that was started last year through SGI has been completed in southern Carter County. This included greater than 5 miles of cross fence construction and even more marking of existing fences. There was a deep well drilled and over 16 miles of pipeline installed that will help put a grazing plan in place next year. This conservation plan encompasses a township and a large group of producers that operate together. After seeing what the program has done for the group, many of these producers have approached us about conservation planning on their home places with

potential to apply for SGI EQIP. This project has been highly visible from a main highway and has spread a very positive word about ranch management and conservation across SE Montana.



A male sage-grouse feeds in the evening amongst the beautiful backdrop of Carter County on a ranch currently enrolled in SGI EQIP. (Photo by: Justin Hughes)

Looking Forward

Carter County has a multitude of conservation plans in development and many applications on file for the next round of EQIP funding. There have been some very interesting watershed planning applications brought forth. Currently there is a group of 4 producers in the SE corner of the county that are interested in conservation planning and SGI EQIP. The producers are working toward a pooling agreement in which they would be able to drill a couple of deep wells. Then they could all pipeline off of the wells to provide adequate livestock water. These producers currently water from shallow wells with poor quality, creeks and ponds. These 4 operations collectively encompass over 50,000 acres, and they are working to get one more neighbor on board with their plan. These ranches encompass The Indian Creek/Owl Creek watersheds in their entirety. This is a very exciting application to be a part of because the producers are all neighbors and on the same page of bettering their operations to improve range and wildlife habitat conditions. This is also a very important project because of its location in SE Carter County where it would border South Dakota as well as Wyoming sage steppe habitats. This is critical as grouse and other wildlife in this part of the state frequently cross state lines while migrating and completing their life cycles.

Recently we have been approached by another group of producers in the Boxelder Creek Headwaters watershed about a similar plan for a deep water development that would be shared amongst 3-4 neighbors. We are working to get conservation plans in place with these landowners and potentially pursue a pooling agreement for a shared water source. The Boxelder Creek runs from SW Carter County through NE Carter County, it is a major creek that has many landowners throughout its course in the county, many of which work with NRCS.



**A young sage-grouse feeds into a hayfield near riparian habitat.
(Photo by: Justin Hughes)**



Fence markers placed on fence that passes near important brood rearing habitat as well as MT FWP identified Critical Winter Habitat. (Photo by: Justin Hughes)

Current Workload

Currently about 8 new applications have been inventoried and are in the planning process with many more requesting planning as time goes on. This past year has been a very bad drought in SE Montana and producers are realizing the need for water developments and cross fence in order to have better control of their grazing management. Many producers are seeing the difference in their place and their neighbors who have worked with NRCS and are inquiring as to what they can do to make their place look as good as their neighbors in this drought. With all the good talk about SGI and grazing management in the county and the release of SGI 2.0, Carter County has shown no signs of slowing down in its effort to conserve not only ranching and western lifestyle, but also the vast grasslands and sage steppe ecosystem that sprawl across SE Montana.