



## Annual Performance Report

FOR THE

Montana Sage Grouse Initiative Site Specific Agreement

Reporting Period: August 1, 2014 to July 31, 2015

Submitted on: August 31, 2015

Cooperator:

Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana

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Geographic Areas Reported On:

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

1<sup>st</sup> Congressional District

## Program Summary

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The past year has brought new faces and partners to our Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) program. First, we expanded our SGI program to place a full-time range conservationist in Ekalaka in Carter County in spring 2015. There has been increasing activity in this area with conservation planning and SGI-related activities, and we are happy to have Justin Hughes filling the SGI range conservationist position there. Justin is a graduate of Northland College in Ashland, WI and has a background in wildlife biology. He previously worked as a wildlife technician for the USFS, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources where he monitored native bird populations. Along with this new position came a new SGI partner, Montana BLM. BLM is a major land management agency in this area, and we look forward to opening up new avenues to get sage grouse conservation work done across private and public lands. Second, we have a new range conservationist, Heather Nenninger, working out of the Forsyth field office. Heather started in July 2015 and brings with her a lot of biology and range experience. Heather received her Bachelor's degree from the University of Montana in Wildlife Biology and will be finishing her Master's degree from the University of Manitoba - Winnipeg this fall where she studied grassland songbirds. She has also worked as a sage grouse and grassland bird technician in northeast Montana. We are excited to have Justin and Heather on board. We also updated our Memorandum of Understanding with Montana NRCS in spring 2015 to renew our mutual commitment to SGI and support for the range conservationists who carry out this important work.

### ***Program Opportunities for Coming Year***

The Montana legislature passed and Governor Bullock signed into law the Montana Sage Grouse Stewardship Act this past spring. This act will provide up to \$10 million in state funding to go toward activities to improve sage grouse habitat. On the heels of this, SWCDM, the State of Montana, and NRCS entered into a Memorandum of Understanding in July 2015 to streamline and enhance efforts to protect and conserve sage grouse habitat on Montana's private lands (press release attached). The coordination laid out in this MOU will provide a framework for our existing SGI program in the state to work with a new source of funding and partners. We look forward to helping bridge these opportunities throughout the coming year.

Each of the SWAT member's summaries below address the challenges they are facing, including outreach and getting landowners engaged and in the door, and predation concerns. These are common challenges throughout the region, and ones we heard repeatedly at the Montana Capitol this spring. Landowners are the key to sage grouse conservation and in order to continue to reach landowners we must provide an outlet for the insights they have gained through their time day-in, day-out on the landscape. The primary way in which we can do so, that has largely been avoided by other organizations, is through encouraging citizen science and participation through a predator app. The app would enable landowners to join together in painting a picture of the concerns and issues at the forefront of landowners minds and may also be an important tool in driving previously uninterested landowners to SGI resources. We hope to have this app under development in the coming months and will reach out to our partners for feedback and getting it out landowners.

## Valley County, Montana

Prepared by:

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The 2013 and 2014 reports described the sage-grouse habitat and population status in Valley County, the inventory procedures, the scope of the work underway in Valley County and obstacles to completion of the work. As noted in earlier reports, SGI applications here involve over 400,000 acres.

For the period September 2014- August 2015 much of the effort has been focused on preparing and refining conservation plans for the 12 applications. We received one additional application recently so now have 13.

- 1) Producer Code G1: This northern Valley County plan is funded for 2015 (\$420K), and includes 48,000 contracted acres. There are three planned rest-rotation grazing systems, and two livestock pipelines. Operation includes two BLM AMPs that are meeting BLM's standards. There is one lek within the operation and four more within three mile radius.
- 2) Producer Code G2: Inventory and plan for this 72,000 acre operation found riparian and uplands are being well managed and recommends only fence marking and antelope fence modifications. Also in northern Valley County and includes nine leks either within or adjacent. Producer would do the fence marking and BLM will do the antelope modifications. Planning involved close coordination with BLM, includes three BLM AMP allotments with rest-rotation grazing systems and meeting BLM standards. Tracy is planning to complete the Toolkit process to be able to report these acres of planning for this FY.
- 3) Producer Code G3: This 9700 acre operation is also well managed, BLM allotment has deferred rotation system with fall only use on riparian. Private pastures are either spring crested wheatgrass or in a rotation. Did not find any resource concerns on the riparian or uplands except intermingled crested wheatgrass from homestead era and need for fence marking. There is one lek within and two adjacent within 2 miles of this northern Valley County unit. BLM conducted a burn and spray on 320 acres of crested wheatgrass in 2014, a smaller burn/spray/ native seeding is planned on private land. Plan did not rank high enough for funding in 2014 or 2015.
- 4) Producer Code G4: producer withdrew application.
- 5) Producer Code G5: This 60,000 acre operation is funded for 2015 (\$333,880). This operation is in southern Valley County with big sagebrush, differing from the silver sagebrush habitats of the northern Valley County plans. There are nine leks within or adjacent, within 3 miles of the operation. The plan includes two rest rotation grazing systems and one deferred rotation system. BLM holdings are minor in these units, the one large BLM allotment has a deferred rotation system and is deferred till July by use of the private pastures. BLM allotments are meeting BLM standards for rangeland health. In addition to the planned grazing systems, practices planned are range seeding of 640 acres of abandoned cropland, two livestock pipelines, 10.5 miles fence removal, fence marking and one 2 mile crossfence.
- 6) Producer Code G6: Producer is in CSP, did not get funded in 2014 or 2015. Part of this operation at the home place in southern Valley County had a Conservation Plan implemented that addressed sage-grouse in 2009. There are three BLM AMP allotments in northern Valley County that are meeting BLM standards. The proposed plan addresses the Lime-Bear Creek unit of 8500 acres.

Rest-rotation grazing is planned, two miles of fence, fence marking, seeding 192 acres cropland to native, and three livestock pipelines. Because of this producer's enrollment in CSP, the plan did not rank high enough for funding. Tracy is pursuing a 2016 EQIP contract to do the planned projects needed to implement the grazing plan. There are 11 sage-grouse leks within or adjacent to this operation. The producer seeded the 192 acres of cropland to native last fall at his own expense. The plan was developed in close coordination with BLM, as one of the planned pastures in the RR system is BLM.

- 7) Producer Code G7: although this unit is within the northern Valley County core area there is not a lek within 3 miles. Plan completed in 2014, not funded, not funded again in 2015. This northern Valley County plan involves seeding crop to native on 178 acres, the producer completed this seeding last fall. The seed mix, per our recommendation, was funded by FWS Partners. The unit would be grazed in conjunction with the adjacent BLM allotment which is meeting BLM standards and includes a large waterfowl reservoir funded cooperatively by BLM and DU. The only remaining project to be completed to implement the grazing plan is a livestock pond. With the current ranking questions it is doubtful the pond will be funded in 2016.
- 8) Producer Code G8: completed 2014, not funded. As with Producer G6, this producer re-enrolled in CSP and thus did not rank high enough for funding for 2015. The plan involves a cooperative pipeline project and was funded by BLM, FWS Partners, the producer, and NRCS. BLM has their part funded for 2015, Partners have completed their spur. The plan includes conversion of all the farmland (600 acres) to perennial grass. Tracy is pursuing a 2016 EQIP contract to do the planned projects needed to implement the grazing plan. The plan involved much involvement with BLM on the location and design of the pipeline. Design was done by NRCS.
- 9) Producer G9: This 21,000 acre northern Valley County operation is very well managed. The entire operation is within a BLM AMP. The riparian areas are primarily private land and one pasture of the system is mostly private. This pasture was assessed and a plan narrative completed in 2014. No resource concerns were found except need for fence marking. Tracy is planning to complete the Toolkit process to be able to report these acres of planning for this FY.
- 10) Producer G10: Application in 2014, inventory and any needed project design should be completed this fall, includes 180,000 acres, numerous BLM and State units. All in northern Valley County, includes several leks. Will involve much coordination with BLM, Montana DNRC State Lands and TNC, who holds easements on some of the private lands.
- 11) Producer G11: Affiliated with G10 operation, application in 2014, 40,000 acres inventory / project design to be also completed this fall. Also northern Valley County.
- 12) Producer G12: Application 2014, inventory completed, plan prepared. In discussion with operator if he wants to continue. Borders Canadian Grassland Park.
- 13) Producer G13: Application 2015, plan field tour with owner in late August 2015.

#### ***Obstacles and Opportunities for 2015-2016:***

FWS Partners has funded a pipeline spur on one operation and provided the seed for a crop to native seeding. Loren Rupert has been very good to work with and seems to have the budget to make a major contribution. Having Partners involved could greatly increase our capability to implement the plans; however, current ranking questions do not offer any points for having funding partners. Tweaking the ranking process to reward plans that have multiple funding sources would be helpful.

Since the source of fence markers has dried up, (we were getting markers through Bruce Waage that were funded by BLM) our non-contract fence marking has stalled. I have a project in the works that would address fence marking and predator perch protection on all the private land leks in the county that are not

included in the plans we are working on. The Collision Model was used to determine fence marking needed on the 12 leks involved. A total of 16.5 miles of marking was determined to be needed, including BLM and State lands. Six of 10 landowners have agreed to mark the fences on their private land and BLM is planning to mark the BLM fences on these leks. Three of these landowners have done the marking using up the supply of markers we had. If we could again get markers to provide to these cooperators we would complete this project. Markers and spikes are also needed for the operations that we have completed plans for that will not be contracted. A funding source for markers and spikes for predator perch deterrent should be pursued.

I took the NRCS Cultural Resource training offered by Dori Passman; this training will be helpful in developing pipeline alternatives. I have helped with staking of several pipelines and doing the cultural inventories.

Following through with BLM and State Lands on the permitting processes for projects on the deferred plans was a significant effort this past year. As BLM now has completed their RMPs, they may be more active in the planning.

We expect to see more interest in SGI since two major plans were funded this year. With the backlog of unfunded plans we have, we did not actively work to get more applications. We do have one new application and will complete the inventory on it this fall.



Sage-grouse in northern Valley County are sometimes found in grassland, with little silver sagebrush present. NRCS Photo September 2014.





Typical silver sagebrush habitat in northern Valley County; a lek is located in the upper right of the photo. NRCS photo, September 2014.



Rock Creek in northern Valley County, silver sagebrush dominates most stream floodplains in the area. Managing streams in Sustainable Condition is important to support sage-grouse populations as these areas provide key brood-rearing habitat.

## Phillips County

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### ***Narrative Summary***

I worked on several SGI and EQIP applications in the past year. I did inventory and planning on a 50,000 acre ranch within the core area. Their application has been deferred as they try to work out some family issues and see if they can make prescribed grazing work or not.

I worked with one producer who applied for SGI and has three leks on his ranch, outside the core area. He was unable to do prescribed grazing because he grazes in common with 2 other producers and he felt he could not get them on board with additional changes to their grazing (they had recently begun working with BLM to give pastures with leks more rest). He was funded through an EQIP grazing pool which allowed him to plant some cropland back to grass and fence off a crested wheatgrass pasture, allowing for deferral of grazing on his native range.

Another project funded through EQIP in 2015 put livestock water on old CRP fields so they could be grazed, reducing conversion risk. Otherwise the producer planned on converting those acres back to crop. There was a prescribed grazing plan on native range and pasture as part of this contract. This was outside of the core area as well, but within general sage grouse habitat.

A PPWGRP (Prairie Pothole Wetland Grassland Retention Project) I worked on and was funded included planting cropland back to grass and planting field border strips with pollinator habitat. This property is a few miles outside of the core area and frequently has sage grouse on it. The field plantings will benefit sage grouse by reducing the amount of cropland in this area and providing forbs in the field border strips.

We have one SGI applicant whose plan is finished but still has not been able to get his lease extended long enough for the length of the contract. His application is deferred until he has control of land. I have also done some CTA, making maps of collision risk around leks so that a local landowner can mark fences, and working with another landowner on a grazing rotation. I assisted with inventory on 3 other EQIP grazing applications that were contracted this year.

I have tried to do more outreach this year. I have made presentations about the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) to the six county CMR Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group and the local Ranchers Stewardship Alliance. I attend the monthly local conservation district meetings as often as possible and provide them with updates on what I'm doing, and what is going on with sage grouse at the state and national level as well. I have contacted the district conservationists in Blaine County and the Fort Belknap Reservation so that they are aware of Sage Grouse Initiative and my ability to work with them on any SGI applications that come in.

I attend the bi-monthly C.M.R Wildlife Refuge Community Working Group meetings as possible. The focus of these meetings has been sage grouse for the last two meetings (April and

June), so I attended both of those. I joined the working group's sage grouse sub-committee. The sage grouse sub-committee has been working to share information between agencies as well as relay opportunities and information to landowners. Now that the Montana state plan is in place we would like to work on some landscape scale projects and possibly partner with state funding.

I shared a booth with the Phillips Conservation District at the local Agriculture Day at City Hall. I put on a public plant ID day at a local ranch to connect to the public. It had a fairly small turnout, but I hope to get more people to attend next year. I know several people were interested, but unable to attend. I try to attend local events such as the TNC science symposium at the Matador Ranch where I may be able to connect with interested landowners. I gave a webinar for Prairie Conservation Action Plan (PCAP-SK), a Canadian prairie conservation group, in February about sage grouse conservation efforts in the US. Additionally I wrote an article for the Phillips Conservation District and the SGI website about a tour that the Valley County office put on for a Canadian group, Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, Inc (a different group than the one in Phillips County).

I attended the International Sage-Grouse Forum in Salt Lake City, Utah in November 2014 and helped man the SGI booth there. It was a very informative meeting with some interesting talks. I attended MACD's annual convention last November as well. On November 19<sup>th</sup> I was part of the sage grouse panel at the convention which discussed SGI. I think it is helpful to keep the conservation districts informed about SGI since MACD/SWCDM is the partner supporting the SWAT positions in Montana. August 18 and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015 I attended the SGI SWAT training in Minden, Nevada. I also attended some useful trainings on conservation planning and rangeland health assessment.

### ***Opportunities and Challenges***

I think public outreach is one of the big challenges in this area, getting key people into the office and interested. I will continue my outreach efforts going into the next year. Ranchers who are involved with CMR working group, Rancher's Stewardship Alliance, TNC Matador grassbank, etc. seem to be aware of the existence of SGI and are aware I work on that program, but many of them don't know the specifics of the program. I think it's a start that key people in the community are at least aware of SGI, but it is a challenge to then get people in. Some of those key community members are already practicing deferred and rest rotation systems, have fence markers, escape ramps in water tanks, etc. Additionally because most ranchers in south Phillips County (in core area 2) have extensive BLM within their ranch they have less interest in the predictability aspect of the SGI plan. They think it will have less benefit because of the BLM land within all or most of their pastures.

In the coming year I will hopefully get conservation planner status and job approval authority with NRCS when my plans are reviewed in October. I plan on attending the MACD convention again this year so that I can connect with and inform conservation district supervisors. I will work on the SGI applications we have on hand as well as the PPWGRP program as time allows, which is focused on keeping grasslands and wetlands intact.





Photo 1. A ranch in Phillips County where I performed lek counts for MT FWP.  
Credit: K. Molloy



Photo 2. An SGI applicant, with inventory completed. Credit: K. Molloy.



Photo 3. Lek with cattle grazing in background. Credit: K. Molloy

## Rosebud County

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July 2015-August 2015

### ***Narrative Summary***

I only started in July of this year, and most of my time since then has been dedicated to informal training. Much of my training has revolved around rangeland health: what is it, how do I determine it, and how do I set goals to improve it. This rangeland health training has consisted of a mix of reviewing information from various sources and a few weeks of field training.

Besides training in rangeland health, my focus has been learning about NRCS and SGI protocols and reviewing my office's current SGI contracts in preparation for future contracts. My first contract is likely to involve revising a previous contract for a landowner whose ranch burned last fall. The landowner is very open to new ideas, so I am hopeful that I will be able to try grazing plans, other than short-duration rotational grazing, that will improve heterogeneity in vegetation structure throughout his pastures.

I've learned that improvement of water distribution is perhaps the largest incentive for ranchers to join SGI in my area, and I have thankfully had the opportunity to go out with the Range Conservationist and Engineer Technician from my office when they plan and inspect water pipelines, storage tanks, and troughs. Due to historically poor water distribution, many riparian areas have been damaged.

### ***Future Plans***

I have recently started inventorying a ranch for its SGI contract; inventory and mapping of the ranch will consume the majority of my time for the next 1-2 months. During this time and into the winter months, I hope to talk with the landowner previously mentioned and establish grazing plans for next spring, along with potential riparian area improvement projects. In the spring, I plan to monitor potentially undocumented lek sites and take note of other species of concern (long-billed curlew, chestnut-collared longspur, Sprague's pipit, etc.) that are breeding on SGI ranches. I will also continue my training; I am already committed to attend two official trainings in September.

### ***Problems in Area***

One of the largest roadblocks I have come across is getting locals, whether ranchers or not, to talk about sage-grouse conservation without immediately jumping to the conclusion that we just need to kill more predators. I am trying to combat this mentality by talking about why predators are such a problem now (symptom of habitat fragmentation and anthropogenic influences), why we can't kill everything (international treaties, ineffectiveness of predator control, cost), and what we can focus on instead (removing perches and carcasses, improving vegetation cover, reclaim unused roads). I have had some very small successes, but I'm sure this will continue to be an uphill battle.





One of the many steps of inventory – clipping. This one was very easy to do; good news for me, bad news for the range. Photo credit Heather Nenninger.



A riparian area (potential brood habitat) that is in decent shape, but is degrading. Photo by Heather Nenninger.

## Rosebud County (continued)

Prepared by:

Brad Sauer, Range Conservationist, Rosebud County

November 2014-June 2015

Brad Sauer was employed as the SGI range conservationist in Forsyth, MT from November 2014-June 2015. Brad left this position to pursue his own ranching endeavors. The following summarizes Brad's activities during his employment.

**Public outreach:** Brad participated in a lot of SGI public outreach. He gave presentations to over 350 people and travelled over a thousand miles.

**Ranch planning:** Brad worked extensively on one ranch plan of over 16,000 acres which had previously been approved, but between approval and implementation a wildfire occurred which burned half the ranch and damaged or destroyed a number of watering facilities and fences. From Brad's perspective, the wildfire presented both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge was developing a temporary grazing plan which addressed the needs of plants, animals, and humans for the coming year while facing a potential drought. Opportunities that emerged were the re-planning and modification of the contract in which repairing and rebuilding fences and water developments improvements could be made. These improvements would consist of moving fences to facilitate better range management and improved watering facilities. Many of the fences that burned date back to the homestead days or earlier and were located on section lines and not necessarily in the best location for good grazing management. Fences will be moved to take advantage of established water sources and topography. In several cases moving the fence a short distance will enable several pastures to be watered from one source. Other changes in fence lines will give more rest opportunities for pastures closest to the ranch headquarters. Pastures closer to facilities generally receive heavier use on most ranches because of logistics: calving, branding, and shipping activities require a certain amount of convenience. Another factor in the modification of the grazing plan and infrastructure are the different land management agencies requirements for inventory and analysis when change is required. Basically though it just takes time and good communication between all parties.



## Carter County

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On June 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> I attended the SGI New Employee Orientation in Bozeman. This was a great opportunity to get a knowledge base on SGI and my role within SGI. My official start date in the Ekalaka Field Office was July 6<sup>th</sup>.

I have stayed very busy with local and area NRCS staff. Most of my time has been spent in the field with staff gaining experience in range monitoring, pipeline layouts, fence marking and construction reviews, NRI, and grazing system design. This field experience has provided valuable local/expert knowledge that has helped me adjust to the local flora and fauna. I have also met with areal BLM and MT Fish Wildlife & Parks biologists, I think there are some great opportunities to collaborate with these entities in Carter County.

I have been asked to give an SGI Report at each monthly meeting with updates as to what I have been up to and what is happening with SGI nationally. I attended the July 7<sup>th</sup> Carter County Conservation District meeting where I was introduced and gave a short talk about who I am and what I am in Carter County to do. I also attended the August 4<sup>th</sup> meeting. Along with my report this month I gave a short presentation I created, Sage Grouse VS. Sharp-tailed Grouse. I was asked to present on the topic because many producers were flushing birds while haying or working on the ranch and didn't know which bird they were seeing.

In addition to traveling to the SGI Workshop in Minden, Nevada August 18<sup>th</sup>&19<sup>th</sup> I have begun range inventory on 2 EQIP-SGI contracts, as well as Wildlife Habitat Evaluations, this will be my main priority for the remaining part of field season. I will also continue marking fences on multiple contracts.

### ***Challenges in Carter County***

A major challenge with producers in our area is that they believe we should be controlling avian and mammalian predators. It is generally thought by many producers that predators are limiting grouse populations not habitat loss or fragmentation. However, producers are still willing to work with the NRCS even though we do not remove predators.

### ***Upcoming Projects for 15-16***

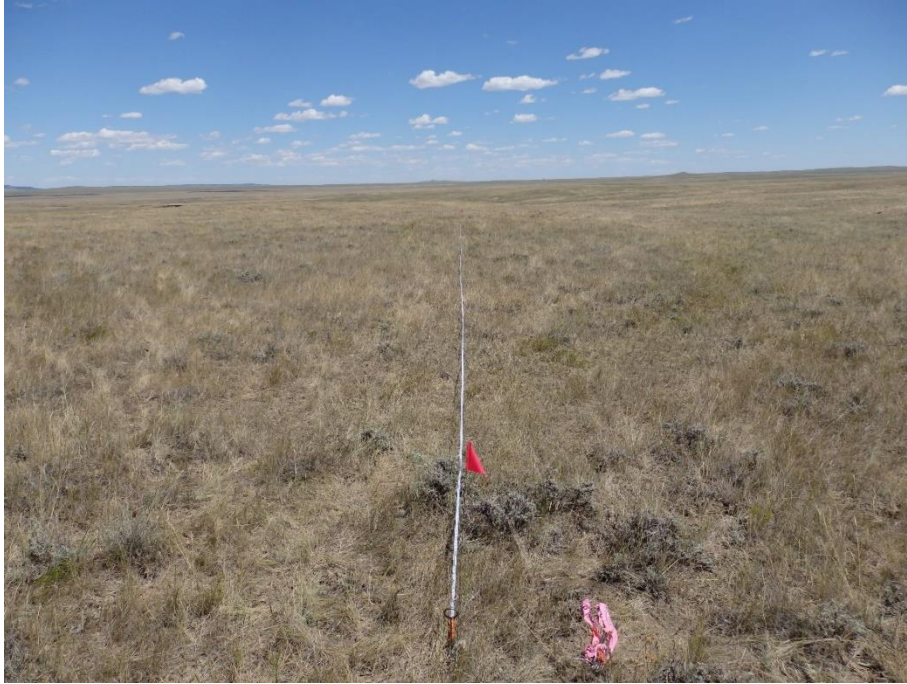
I will continue working on range inventory and monitoring on already existing contracts. I will also be assessing the riparian/ brood rearing habitats on these ranches to determine quality. There is a lot of interest in SGI contracts in Carter County, I anticipate a lot of time will be spent discussing the program with landowners. We are currently in the process of working on 6 possible SGI contracts. I am going to start working with the BLM and USFS on some juniper removal projects on federal lands bordering some

of our current contracts. These projects aren't very large but will help to establish working relationships between NRCS and other entities. There also is said to be interest in the easement program. I will be making contact with landowners to verify and possibly move forward with them on the program.

I will continue to keep our local conservation districts updated on SGI locally and nationally. Public involvement is very crucial in building bonds within the community. I am working on getting 4-H and FFA groups together for a fence marking project this fall. This is in the early stages yet but it will be a great opportunity to get young people involved in Carter County. I will also be attending a Toolkit Training & Cultural Resource training put on by NRCS in September.



Sage grouse traveling to a wet meadow from a roosting area in Carter County. Photo by Justin Hughes



Range monitoring in southern Carter County. Photo by Justin Hughes.



Excellent sage habitat that surrounds a lek (lek is in middle of photo). Photo by Justin Hughes.





Sage grouse take shelter behind a roll of recently removed woven wire to avoid the midday heat. Photo by Justin Hughes.