

Periodic Performance Report

FOR THE

State of Montana

August 7, 2014

August 1, 2013 to July 31, 2014

Montana Association of Conservation Districts

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From the start of the year, things have been very busy with the Sage-Grouse Initiative. The fall and winter months of 2013 consisted of organizing ranch inventory data, setting up meetings with SGI applicants, talking with local partners about SGI and the future of the program, and juggling 2 plans for possible 2014 funding. One of them had been deferred last year and we were able to resume planning, while the other was with a new producer who showed a high interest in sage-grouse as well as sustaining agriculture. These ranches not only reside in core area 6, but are also side-by-side each other. One of the plans is very unique and has taken quite a bit of thought to compile. Instead of using fences for grazing, the producer wants to use herding along with a rest rotation option to try and achieve his goals for the ranch and sage-grouse. This spring has been the hardest yet, with the 2014 Farm Bill, updates to software and trying to meet deadlines. None the less, it was a great learning experience and an eye opener for what it takes to complete plans from start to finish. From extensive map making, structuring a prescribed grazing rotation to fit a producer's needs and ours, and being an engineer on pipeline designs, to weekly calls and meeting with my producers, regular field visits, and plenty of coffee. When I have been able to set the planning aside, I have enjoyed early mornings surveying leks and certifying practices from previous SGI contracts. The rest of this year has included important trainings, starting a new ranch inventory, and taking part in a Montana SGI success story that truly represents everything the program was intended to do.



Sage-grouse Habitat Appraisal. Photo taken by Scott Anderson

The activities mentioned above have helped the NRCS gain interest in SGI by educating the public on the benefits to landowners and to wildlife. With the determination of the bird closing in, it was incredible for me to see and hear just how many producers have been paying attention to news articles

and our website for information. This was made obvious at a Winter Grazing Seminar in January where it was standing room only and many of the ranchers and farmers there had done plenty of studying up on SGI. The NRCS has also looked towards our hands on experience as a way to improve on their practices and focus their efforts in areas where SGI is breaking new ground and has the greatest chance for a positive outcome.

For the coming year, there are opportunities to expand interest in SGI. Technical assistance is beginning to pick up and producers who didn't have much interest before are starting to change their minds. Efforts to publish articles in magazines and gain air time for radio and TV shows continues to improve public awareness and draws attention for outsiders. I also believe keeping close ties with our current producers and working hard to benefit them gives the program greater rapport among local ranchers. As for projects, the coming year will be busy with implementation of structures and doing trial grazing rotations before the actual prescribed grazing goes into effect. Monitoring has been taking place in some areas and the data will be important for showing positive movements with our practices.



Loamy Ecological Site with 5-10% sagebrush cover. Photo taken by Scott Anderson

There are some challenges that we'll face with current contracts and future ones. Time is always the biggest factor. With the number of applications coming in, not just from Rosebud County, the Forsyth office is going to find it hard to make sure that enough time is delegated to every producer and still have enough time to take on new ones. Another challenge will come from the determined status of the bird. If listed, the effect to public land will be great and may make planning more in-depth and implementation harder. The status of the bird may also increase interest in SGI and the number of applicants wanting to have assurance. If this is true, then workload and time may overwhelm planners with NRCS.

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The 2013 report described the sage-grouse status in Valley County and the ongoing work with nine cooperating ranches for the period ending August 28. As described in that report, inventory was underway and planned for completion on nine ranches. The field work had been divided between Brandon Sandau, the Malta Field Office SGI employee, and I. The field procedures included assessment of sustainability of riparian habitats, determination of sagebrush cover and production, height and density of sagebrush and herbaceous cover, annual forage production, Site Index, stocking rate, forb abundance, and summary evaluation of sage-grouse habitat.

Inventory of all threats in a three mile radius of the leks associated with the cooperating ranches was also underway, Bruce Waage inventorying the leks in northern Valley County and Harold Wentland, volunteer retired MDFW&Ps biologist inventorying the leks in southern Valley County. The leks involved in the inventory are those that are either on the private lands of the cooperating ranches or include their private lands within the 3 mile radius.

During September, field work was completed on eight of the nine ranches and the lek inventory was completed, as well. One ranch plan had been deferred till 2014.

The period October 2013 – May 2014 was spent preparing the conservation plans, including the environmental assessments (CPA-52s), Job Sheets, Conservation Plan Narratives, compiling AUM data, sage-grouse habitat data, riparian assessments, wildlife habitat assessments, researching well logs, getting Well Reports, designing seeding plans, doing preliminary designs for water pipelines, grazing rotation schedules, maps, Feed and Forage Balance, identifying fence marking needs, etc, etc. Brandon took a job with Montana DNRC, State Trust Lands Division, and we thank him for all the good work he did on the plans assigned to him. With the open winter we had, I was able to visit one of Brandon's ranches that had field work remaining to do and complete that. In addition to providing guidance and training to me on all the aspects of the planning, Tracy Cumber, District Conservationist, and Mike Lackner, Soil Conservationist performed the Toolkit parts of the planning documents.

Two of the ranches I worked on are very well-managed and no resource concerns were identified. I drafted plan narratives for these two and met with the operators, but have not finalized these plans, as most of the effort was spent on the plans that would be going to contract.

One rancher Brandon prepared a plan for backed out, but has since asked to restart and I am working with this ranch toward a 2015 contract.

The requirement that was put in place in April to have any BLM-involved projects completely through the BLM permitting process before including in a contract caused two plans to be deferred. These plans are ready to go once BLM completes the permitting process.

Three plans were finalized and ranked for 2014 funding, but did not rank high enough to be funded in 2014.

Three large ranches have signed up for this year and field work is underway on these ranches. One of these operations partially borders the Canadian Grassland Park. On the other operations, conservation easements are in place on some of the lands involved; TNC will be cooperator.

FWS has offered money for projects on our plans; Loren Rupert, FWS Private Lands Biologist has been very good to work with. One of the deferred plans has a FWS funded pipeline spur. We will look to involve FWS in this season's plans, and to possibly enhance ranking of the deferred plans with FWS funding involvement.

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.

I took the Livestock Pipeline training offered by Area Engineer Levi Doll, this training has been very helpful in developing pipeline alternatives. I helped with staking of two pipelines (@ 15 miles) and doing the cultural inventories.

Following through with BLM and State Lands on the permitting processes for projects on the deferred plans is significant effort this field season. This work is underway and I have worked with local and Area office engineering staff in design and staking of pipelines to facilitate BLM and State Land cultural clearances /EA.

Kelsey Molloy, new Malta SGI hire, is a skilled birder; she has completed grassland bird surveys on the 3 plans that went to ranking and one of the plans I am working on this summer. Documentation of the bird species using the rangeland is a valuable index of the habitat quality.

Challenges for 2014-15

The 2013 report discussed the reservations local ranchers have, the general mistrust of government, the looming prospect of a large National Monument, the threat posed by Wild Bison plans, the frustrations with MDFW&Ps management of sage-grouse, etc. With all the unknowns facing them, our cooperators see the SGI program as an opportunity to position their operations most favorably should the sage-grouse get listed.

The cooperators and the staff here were disappointed to have the ranking process result in none of our plans being funded. It would have increased interest in the program to have at least one major plan funded.

If we are able to implement of all the plans we have prepared and in progress, it would be a major accomplishment. These plans encompass much of the sage-grouse habitat in the migratory northern Valley County PAC and significant areas in southern Valley / Phillips PAC, as well. Hopefully, the planned acreage we will have on the shelf by spring 2015 can be considered in the FWS listing decision.



Silverberry (Wolf-willow) on cooperating ranch near Canadian border



International boundary fence between Canadian Grasslands National Park (GNP) and cooperating ranch.



Kelsey Molloy, who is completing her Master's thesis study of grassland birds in the GNP, points out familiar land marks on the Canadian side.

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I have been located in the Malta Field Office since mid-March. Being new to the NRCS I've been learning how NRCS contracting and programming works. Additionally I've been learning how to use Toolkit and Protracts and I've been educating myself about sage-grouse populations in this area.

I have attended local conservation district meetings and the CMR Wildlife Refuge Working Group meetings in order to make connections with people in the community. I attended a partners meeting held in Glasgow by Pete Husby on April 2 with MT FWP and NRCS. I met with the BLM range management specialist in Malta so that we will be able to work together on SGI projects that go across BLM lease land. We have one EQIP-SGI application which if it is contracted will have a pipe line and fence going across BLM as well as private land. This spring I assisted MT Fish Wildlife and Parks with lek surveys.

I had an article distributed in the Phillips County News (see below) about the fencing partnership in Montana that allows landowners without NRCS contracts to get free fence markers. I have visited with John Fahlgren in Valley County to see what projects he has worked on and how he does inventory. Working with him has been very helpful in seeing how he approaches planning and inventory. I have also made connections with Grasslands National Park and a Canadian producer with sage-grouse. They are interested in seeing how things progress with sage grouse in the states, and especially in Montana. Someone at the park was able to share information they had about sage grouse wintering in habitat along the Milk River, where one of our producers has an application for SGI.

I have started on inventory for SGI applications that we have in the office. Working on inventories will continue to be my priority for the rest of the summer.

Since starting this position I have attended the following trainings and workshop:

Sage Grouse Initiative training, Missoula, MT	March 25-27
Endangered Species Act Compliance for SGI webinar	March 31
Plant materials training, Havre, MT	April 9
Management of Grazing for Fish and Wildlife webinar	April 10
Wildlife friendly water sources webinar	April 11
Riparian assessment training, Havre, MT	April 14
Fundamentals of rangeland seeding webinar	April 16
Nutritional Balance (NutBal) training, Havre, MT	April 22
Sage Grouse Initiative Twin Falls, ID	May 6-8
Range school, Stanford, MT	May 22

ATV training, Glasgow, MT	June 3
Range inventory training with Rick Caquelin Chinook/ Malta, MT	June 9-10, July 14-15
NRCS Cultural Resources Training, Bozeman, MT	June 17-19
Wetland mapping tools training, Havre, MT	June 25
Grazing planning workshop, Havre, MT	August 4

Challenges in Phillips County

There are some challenges for SGI in Phillips County. People often focus on threats to sage grouse due to predation, which makes it harder to discuss other actions that can be taken to improve sage grouse habitat. Most producers have a mixture of deeded and lease land, so working with other agencies or making grazing plans on private can be a challenge. Although producers are interested in water developments, pipelines, etc., it is more difficult to get them interested in prescribed grazing with SGI.

Future projects

I will be working on a prescribed grazing plan for a large ranch in southern Phillips County with a mix of deeded land, BLM and CMR Wildlife Refuge leases. I will be starting inventory on this place at the end of July. In addition I will work on some smaller inventories and riparian assessments on other properties as time allows.

I think that the producers here would be interested in the predictability provided by SGI contracts but they don't know much about this possibility. I am planning on holding a public meeting/ workshop when inventory wraps up in the fall to inform producers about this aspect of SGI. I am hoping to generate additional interest in SGI with this workshop and benefit ranchers at the same time.

I'm hoping to attend an NRCS range planning training in September, if there is room for me. These two trainings should help me in writing plans with the inventory I have during the winter. I will use the fall and winters to work on conservation plans and make connections with more producers so that I will have projects in place to work on for next year. I will also help with projects as needed and as time allows in Valley County and possibly Blaine County.



Sage grouse wintering near a property with an SGI application in December 2013. Phillips County, MT. Photo courtesy of Nick Cairns.



Sage grouse wintering near a property with an SGI application in December 2013. Phillips County, MT. Photo courtesy of Nick Cairns.



Silver sagebrush habitat north of Malta, MT.



Big sagebrush on a claypan ecosite in South Phillips County, Montana.

New partnership allows NRCS to provide free fence markers for sage grouse

PCN 6/4/2014

by Kelsey Molloy

Thanks to a new partnership with several agencies including Bureau of Land Management and Montana Association of Conservation Districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will now be able to offer free fence markers to interested landowners. Fence markers are used to reduce the risk of sage grouse collision with fences. NRCS can assist landowners in determining high risk areas where fence markers would be most useful in preventing collisions.

In some parts of the greater sage-grouse

range fence strikes occur with about 1 fence collision per mile in the breeding season. Over 90% of fence collisions for this species take place within 1 mile of their breeding grounds, called leks. Terrain can also influence the risk of fence collisions for the grouse.

With this fence marking partnership the NRCS can provide assistance to landowners in determining where these high-risk areas are. Marking fences in these high risk areas can reduce collisions by 80%. The fence markers are pieces of vinyl siding that are placed every 3 feet on the top wire of a fence. This makes

the fence more visible to the birds as they fly into the lek in the early dawn. Often collisions are not noticed as they occur in areas of dense sage brush and predators will remove downed birds quickly.

For anyone interested in additional information on sage grouse conservation please visit the Sage Grouse Initiative website at sagegrouseinitiative.com. Landowners who are interested in obtaining fence markers or assistance in placing them can contact Kelsey Molloy at the local NRCS office at 406-654-1334 or simply stop by the office.