



Montana SGI Summary Report - 2016

There are currently SGI partner conservationists in four locations in Montana- Ekalaka (Carter County), Malta (Phillips County), Forsyth (Rosebud County), and Roundup (Musselshell County). Roundup is a new partner location as of spring 2017 and replaced the position serving Valley County in Glasgow. These positions are hosted by the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Montana.

Summary of Montana SGI accomplishments to date:

	Grazing Systems Plan In Progress-acres	Grazing Systems Planned-acres	Grazing Systems Applied-acres	Conifer Removal Plan In Progress-acres	Fences Marked or Removed Plan In Progress-feet	Fences Marked or Removed Planned-feet	Fences Marked or Removed Applied-feet	Seeding Plan In Progress-acres	Seeding Planned-acres	Easement Plan In Progress-acres	EQIP	WHIP
2012		7,850				13,200						
2013	330,490	37,964	21,398	-	28,861	-	-	320	-	-		256,066
2014	73,518	448,000	40,095				10,560	4,400	640		429,267	
2015	51,140	119,353			10,000	79,200	83,707	640	50		1,030,440	
2016	109,154	122,691	6,107	1,600	102,960	34,490	42,204	1,967		13,000	489,162	
Total	564,302	735,858	67,600	1,600	141,821	126,890	136,471	7,327	690	13,000	1,948,869	256,066

FFY 2016 Activities:

In the Malta office, Kelsey Molloy contracted a Prairie Pothole Wetland Grassland Retention Program (PPWGRP) special initiative project which seeded 3 fields (a total of 135 acres) from cropland to a native grass mix. 7 acres of this was a pollinator planting, which will be evaluated in the future to determine the success of the seed mix and see what works for future projects

The Glasgow office contracted two grazing application which included two prescribed grazing system in general sage-grouse habitat along with water developments and a fence to implement the grazing plan 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. The office also started working with a producer on placing an easement through ACEP on their land- the property falls in the migratory corridor between North and South Valley County and it will be excellent to provide permanent protections for this land.

The Glasgow office and Luke McCarty, former SGI Range and Wildlife Conservationist started working on a project with the Children's Museum in Glasgow to create an interactive exhibit that displays sagebrush ecosystems and the birds that utilize them. This project will help to provide an educational resource to the area and help to create an interest in both natural resources as well as the importance of sagebrush ecosystems.

Recently Heather Nenninger out of the Forsyth office worked with the Rosebud Conservation District to obtain a 223 grant from the Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation. Heather saw that there was a significant amount of headcutting on ephemeral streams on a ranch she was there working on which was causing a loss of wet meadow and riparian habitat. These mesic areas are vital for greater sage-grouse brood-rearing. The grant will help fund several inexpensive and simple projects to heal headcuts. These experimental projects will help inform future conservation work in the area and improve habitat for sage-grouse.

With the help of Justin Hughes the Ekalaka office has obligated 10 contracts totaling \$2,645,931.79 in SGI EQIP monies to be used on 60,305 acres in Carter County in the last fiscal year. 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. A large chunk of obligated funds will be used for re-seeding 935 acres of crop fields back to permanent vegetation. 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. Many of this years obligated contracts are adjacent to existing SGI contracts, creating great contiguous conservation efforts.

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.

Looking Ahead

In 2017 Montana NRCS worked to create a special initiative for seeding cropland to perennial cover. In Phillips County there are currently four applications for ~2000 acres of reseeding cropland to perennial grassland/ sagebrush, the majority of which are in core area 2 as well as several other applications in other counties. We are hoping to fund these projects in the next few months and work with the landowners and other partners to provide infrastructure for grazing on these acres. Recent research from eastern Montana has found that the amount of cropland on a landscape decreases the long term persistence of leks on the landscape (Smith et al. 2016). Ideally planting cropland to grass will substantially reduce fragmentation from cropland on these landscapes, create new habitat, and possibly increase the probability of leks persisting on the landscape. This helps address one of the biggest threats to sage-grouse in eastern Montana.

Additionally the Malta office is working on funding two Sage Grouse Initiative applications to fund improvements to grazing systems, mark fences, and install escape ramps. In Valley County there were three operations inventoried in summer of 2016. These applications will continue to be worked on and possibly funded in 2017. The Ekalaka office is working on 15 additional SGI applications this year.

The SGI range and wildlife conservationists will be surveying greater sage-grouse leks this spring and providing that monitoring data to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.