



Memorandum

May 2, 2024

To: Paul Souza
Regional Director, Pacific Southwest Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Subject: Continued Commitments to Implement Formalized Conservation Efforts for the Bi-State Distinct Population Segment of the Greater Sage-Grouse

With this memorandum we wish to clearly indicate our agency's continued commitment to conserving the sagebrush landscape and the ecosystems which the Bi-State Sage grouse Distinct Population Segment (DPS) and other wildlife depend upon. We also commit to our ongoing efforts to maintain the sustainability of the agricultural producers whose management continues to provide essential habitat elements that sage grouse and other at-risk species depend upon.

As mentioned in our previous commitment letters, the Bi-State landscape is comprised mostly of federally owned public lands with only 8% of this 60-mile wide and 170 mile-long landscape in private ownership. Ranchers here rely on their continued use of federal grazing allotments to make their agricultural operations viable and in turn maintain large and intact landscapes. Working collaboratively with these private stewards and the Bureaus of Land Management (BLM), US Forest Service (Forest Service) and our respective state wildlife agencies is imperative to deliver conservation across boundaries and achieve outcomes that benefit the production of food while also enhancing habitat for grouse and other resident wildlife.

Since 2010, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has dedicated significant technical and financial resources through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) to proactively address threats impacting the sagebrush ecosystem across the entire range of the greater sage grouse in eleven western states. As the regulatory requirements for sage grouse continue to evolve across the range, NRCS' commitment of technical assistance, funding, staffing, and collaboration has not wavered. The unique rangeland resources found in the six population management units (PMUs) that comprise the Bi-State area have and continue to remain a top priority for both our Agency and the SGI.

Coordination, Action Plan Update, and Execution

Starting in 2010, NRCS became very active in sage grouse conservation efforts and began working closely with federal and state agencies to collaboratively assess, plan, design, fund, and implement actions that directly benefit the Bi-State DPS sage grouse. In 2012, NRCS signed onto the first of two MOUs with other participating state and federal agencies to provide a formal framework to facilitate interagency cooperation and ensure a coordinated multijurisdictional effort to conserve Greater Sage grouse populations and habitats within the Bi-State DPS of California and Nevada.

In support of the MOU's, Nevada and California NRCS technical staff also participate in the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and routinely assist partners with scoping, threat assessment, and identification of actions that NRCS could commit to undertaking within our existing authorities. As active members of the Bi-State Executive Oversight Committee (EOC), NRCS leadership continues to incorporate input from the TAC and promote the actions of our MOU and Bi-State Action Plan. Currently, we are nearing completion of the 2024 Bi-State Action Plan update.

Past Funding

To implement SGI, NRCS utilizes voluntary and incentive-based conservation programs authorized under the conservation title of the various Farm Bills implemented in 2008, 2014, 2018, and expected in 2024. Farm Bill programs provide both technical and financial assistance to landowners in the form of conservation planning assistance, payments to offset a portion of the cost associated with applying the conservation practices and funding to establish easement or rental payments for long term conservation. Although participation in Farm Bill programs is voluntary, participants that receive financial assistance enter into a binding federal contract or easement to ensure that conservation practices are applied according to the schedule and compliance within NRCS standards and specifications.

Through the Annual Bi-State Accomplishment Reports, NRCS provides details on our contributions to addressing two top priorities of the 2012 Action Plan: (1) establishing conservation easements on private lands to ensure critical brood habitat persist and (2) removing encroaching conifers that degrade habitats and increase predation, primarily on public lands.

Table 1 below provides a summary of NRCS contributions to date, broken down into blocks of time that correspond with our Farm Bills. The *Committed* column corresponds to the amount of funding NRCS committed to as part of the broad \$45M commitment by all agencies to fully fund implementation of the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan for the DPS of greater sage grouse.

Table 1. NRCS CA/NV Funding FY 2010-2024

Time Period	Committed (\$)	Easement (\$) Programs	EQIP (\$) – Mostly Conifer treatments
2010-2014	0	24,707,000	1,294,000
2015-2017	12,000,000	19,307,804	412,867
2019-2024	0	3,929,537	566,893
Total	12,000,000	47,944,341	2,273,760

Note that although NRCS only formally ‘committed’ to funding \$12M in Bi-State specific actions, since 2010 we have invested approximately \$50M in direct, on the ground Bi-State projects through the SGI. Funding contributions are strategically targeted to top priorities of purchasing easements to maintain wet meadows and preventing conversion to other land uses and removing encroaching conifers that fragment and degrade otherwise functional habitat.

Regulatory Mechanisms

In 2010, NRCS voluntarily worked with US Fish and Wildlife Service and initiated development of the Conference Report (CR) for greater sage grouse across 11 states, including the Bi-State DPS population. We engaged with US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) across several Regions to develop this CR to assist in planning our proposed action of utilizing NRCS practices to enhance habitat for sage grouse and address the resource concerns of farmers and ranchers while minimizing any potential impacts. Through the conference process, NRCS worked with USFWS to determine potential adverse effects from implementing conservation practices and developed conservation measures to reduce those potential effects to sage grouse and their habitats. NRCS has mandated the use of this CR for all projects funded since 2010. This mandate continues today.

Future Commitments

NRCS remains firmly committed to continuing our work with producers and partners conserving sagebrush habitat in the Bi-State region. Upon authorization of the new Farm Bill, NRCS will utilize existing and any new applicable programmatic authorities to continue building on the conservation work completed under the past three Farm Bills. Sage grouse remain one of our national focal species under our [Working Lands for Wildlife \(WLFW\) initiatives](#) and our [WLFW Sagebrush Framework for Conservation Action](#) is fully focused on conservation of the sagebrush biome through strategic focus addressing primary threats.

Please let us know if there is any additional information that you need from us on our commitments to the Bi-State DPS of the greater sage grouse.

Sincerely,

CARLOS SUAREZ
California State Conservationist

HEIDI RAMSEY
Nevada State Conservationist

Cc:

Terry Cosby, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Washington DC
Astor Boozer, Regional Conservationist, Western Region, NRCS, Washington DC
Charlton Bonham, Executive Director, California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Alan Jenne, Director, Nevada Department of Wildlife
Justin Barrett, Deputy Field Supervisor, USFWS, Reno Fish and Wildlife Office
Steve Abele, Biologist, USFWS, Reno Fish and Wildlife Office
Jennifer Eberlien, Regional Forester, USFS, Pacific Southwest Region
Mary Farnsworth, Regional Forester, USFS, Intermountain Region
Gordon Toevs, Acting California BLM State Director
Jon Raby, Nevada BLM State Director
Mark Sogge, Regional Director, USGS, Pacific Region