A Summary of Locally-Driven Proactive Actions of the Montana Conservation Districts and other Conservation Partners for Sage-grouse

The role of the sage-grouse local working groups is to adapt the state plan to specific local areas to develop and implement strategies that will improve or maintain the sagebrush steppe and reduce or mitigate factors that may further reduce greater sage-grouse habitats or populations. (Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana 2005)

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Purpose	3
What are the Montana Conservation Districts?	3
Summary of Montana Conservation District, The Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD), and other Conservation Partner Actions for Sage-grouse	
Progress Report on Sage-grouse Opportunity Grants	5
Tables Table 1. Twelve Statewide Sage-grouse Conservation Issues Identified by the Montana SG-LWG 2005	.3

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

This "Summarizes the Conservation Actions" taken pro-actively by the Montana Conservation Districts and other conservation partners for sage-grouse and is outlined as follows:

- What are the Montana conservation Districts?
- A brief description of the twelve overall state conservation issues identified in the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana 2005
- A Summary of Montana Conservation Actions taken by Conservation Districts and other Conservation Partners
- And Status of the Sage-grouse Opportunity Grant offered to SG-LWGs and other Conservation Partners

The Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Greater Sage-grouse in Montana 2005 was developed over the course of two years, it is the plan for managing sage-grouse in Montana. The Plan states:

"The role of the sage-grouse local working groups is to adapt the plan to specific local areas to develop and implement strategies that will improve or maintain the sagebrush steppe and reduce or mitigate factors that may further reduce greater sage-grouse habitats or populations." The Montana Conservation Districts are not official sage-grouse local working groups however, some are proactively addressing the issues.

TABLE 1 TWELVE STATEWIDE SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY MONTANA SG-LWGs 2005		
Fire Management	Power Lines and Generation Facilities	
Harvest Management	Predation	
Livestock Grazing Management	Recreational Disturbance of Sage-grouse	
Mining and Energy Development	Roads and Motorized Vehicles	
Noxious Weed Management	Vegetation	
Outreach, Education, and Implementation	Managing Other Wildlife	

WHAT ARE THE MONTANA CONSERVATION DISTRICTS?

Montana's 58 conservation districts (CDs) utilize locally-led and largely non-regulatory approaches to successfully address general natural resource issues. CDs have a decades-long history of conserving Montana's state resources by helping local people match their needs with technical and financial resources, thereby getting good conservation practices on the ground to the benefit of all Montanans.

NOTE: This report does not take into account extensive conservation efforts underway in Montana by Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP). Only activities conducted by the Dillon SG-LWG are reported.

A SUMMARY OF MONTANA CONSERVATION DISTRICT, THE MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (MACD) AND OTHER CONSERVATION PARTNER ACTIONS TAKEN TO CONSERVE SAGE GROUSE

MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (MACD)

 2010 The MACD, using a grant provided by the Bureau of Land Management, offered grants in support of the Montana Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (SG-LWG) and conservation partners interested in sage grouse conservation. Nine grants were subsequently awarded.

PETROLEUM COUNTY

- 2005 Applied and received a Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI) grant in support of four sage-grouse workshops offered throughout the state in the communities of Grass Range, Glasgow, Twin Bridges and Jordan.
- June 2009 Multi Species Grazing Workshop (Winnett)
- June 2009 Petroleum County Conservation District and GLCI bus tour investigating hoof action, club moss management and boom bust grazing (Winnett)
- April 2010 Producer Meeting (sage-grouse, Winnett)
- May 2011 Rangeland and Natural Resources Workshop (Winnett)

VALLEY COUNTY

- December 2009 Valley County sponsored a workshop in partnership with the Glasgow SG-LWG it was held in Malta, *Winter Roundup with a Twist*
- 2009 Conservation District board member appointed as representative to Glasgow SG-LWG

ROSEBUD COUNTY

• February 2011 Sponsored in partnership with the Miles City SG-LWG a landowner informational workshop on Sage-grouse and landowner programs Successful Ranching in Sage-grouse Country

PROGRESS REPORT ON SAGE-GROUSE OPPORTUNITY GRANTS – (Nine grants offered)

The Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD), using a grant provided by the Bureau of Land Management, offered grants in support of the Montana Sage-grouse Local Working Groups (SG-LWG) and conservation partners interested in sage-grouse conservation activities. Successful applicants and project descriptions follow. Progress reports will be forthcoming as these projects are underway. Nine projects were awarded in 2010:

1) Dillon SG-LWG Reducing Sage-Grouse Collisions with Fences

Sage-grouse are known to collide with fences, causing injury and mortalities. Simple techniques can be used to mark fences which can reduce collision rates by over 60%.

Additional funds are needed to fund and incentivize the marking of more fences on both private and state land in southwest Montana. If funds were available, it is likely that a partnership could be facilitated by the LWG between private landowners, agencies, and NGOs to identify the highest priority fences, then fabricate and install the markers.

The objective of this project is to identify and mark up to 10 miles of fence by the fall of 2011, and as a result eliminate injuries and mortalities to hundreds of sage-grouse over the next decade.

New scientific studies have documented that collisions with wire fences may make a substantial contribution to grouse injuries and mortality. One Wyoming study documented grouse strikes at a rate of at least twelve collisions or mortalities per fence/mile/year, and that increasing fence visibility by marking wires with simple plastic tabs reduced collision rates by over 60% (Christiansen 2009).

Fences appear to be more problematic the closer they occur to sage-grouse leks or key wintering habitats. Many miles of wire fences occur in these counties within ½ mile of active leks; the exact amount is currently being quantified in cooperation with the BLM. Approximately two miles of fence on BLM land has already been marked by efforts of the Western Montana Sage-grouse Local Working Group (LWG) near Dillon, but the vast majority of fences remain unmarked.

2) Dillon SG-LWG Speakers Bureau for ranchland and sage-grouse conservation

Public outreach is needed to communicate with and identify landowners potentially interested in ranchland and sage-grouse conservation. The proposal is to recruit, advertise and bring a series of speakers to towns in southwest Montana such as Dillon, Twin Bridges, Lima, Wisdom, Ennis, Sheridan and Alder to discuss ranchland and sage-grouse conservation efforts and opportunities.

The talks would be promoted as both educational outreach and social events. The talks may be done in conjunction with other events, or stand-alone.

The Dillon Local Working Group for sage-grouse conservation has been based in Dillon since founded in 2003. Meetings have been attended by several landowners from the Dillon-area, but landowner attendance has declined, and there has been little capacity for outreach to outlying communities.

The objective of this project is to recruit and bring speakers to present to audiences in five communities surrounding Dillon in Beaverhead and Madison counties.

3) Miles City SG-LWG Outreach Workshops for sage-grouse Conservation

Public outreach is needed to communicate with and identify landowners potentially interested in improved ranchland management and sage-grouse conservation. The proposal is to recruit, advertise and bring a series of speakers in an effort to expose new people to the latest information and research on the sage-grouse issue. An eleven county area of southwest Montana is involved. Local communities such as Baker, Broadus, Alzada, Ingomar and Ekalaka will be considered. The meeting will focus on ranchland management and sage-grouse conservation efforts and opportunities. The talks may be done in conjunction with other events, or stand-alone.

The Miles City Sage-grouse Local Working Group conservation activities have been based in Miles City. Meetings have been attended by several landowners from the Miles City-area, but landowner attendance has declined, and there has been little capacity for outreach to outlying communities.

The objective of this project is to recruit and bring speakers to present to audiences in communities that have not been directly exposed to the local working groups outreach before. Therefore, one of the expected accomplishments will be "outreach to new people" and in "new areas". We expect the funding to support 2 to 4 events based on how expensive the individual workshops are.

4) Miles City SG-LWG Wildlife Escape Ramps

Sage-grouse are susceptible to drowning in livestock watering facilities. A number of programs have been implemented by NRCS, BLM and others to install escape ramps in stock water tanks. This however, does not reach everyone as some people do not participate in programs for one reason or another. This grant would make ramps available for a nominal fee of \$20 to anyone who is interested. They would be available throught the local county conservation district office or FWP offices.

The objective of this project is to address a known threat to sage-grouse by reaching a group of private landowners who don't typically participate in government sponsored programs. The funds requested will secure approximately 60 ramps at approximately \$50.00 each. Landowners will purchase them for \$20.00 each allowing us to purchase approximate 30 more for a total of 90 ramps. The measurable result will be that if all ramps have been distributed the results will be 100%.

5) Petroleum County Sage Grouse & Rangeland Monitoring and Conservation

The Petroleum County Conservation District along with interested producers would establish 36 rangeland monitoring transects within Petroleum County focusing on Sage-grouse habitat with in Cote Area #3. These sites would establish baseline data needed to determine long-term rangeland trend, demonstrate maintenance of rangeland health, and or continued progress towards meeting rangeland health standards.

All participating producers would have a better knowledge of the health of their rangeland and the potential for sage-grouse threats or habitat concerns on their own private lands as well as adjoining public lands.

6) Phillips County's Sage Grouse

This sage grouse conservation proposal integrates on-the-ground habitat stewardship with outreach efforts to landowners in Phillips County, Montana. Fifty wildlife escape ramps for livestock watering troughs will be constructed to Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) specifications and offered free of charge to landowners for placement in priority sage grouse areas of Phillips County. Local producers and youth will be given multiple opportunities to hear area-specific presentations (at livestock industry meetings and as part of school programs) on sage grouse conservation efforts and opportunities for local people to participate in this work. Landowners with key sage grouse habitat will be contacted by project personnel and offered the opportunity to have lek and/or brood counts conducted on their properties by a professional wildlife biologist. Data collected during the lek and brood counts will be provided to the landowner in a written report, along with information on sage grouse conservation and data needs, and how landowners might participate in incentive programs for sage grouse conservation. The outcome of this multi-faceted project will be increased understanding of, and participation in, sage grouse conservation efforts by landowners in one the stronghold regions for sage grouse in Montana.

a) Improve sage grouse survival in Phillips County, Montana, through increasing the use of wildlife escape ramps in livestock water troughs. A minimum of 50 NRCS-approved wildlife escape ramps will be distributed to landowners for deployment in water troughs in priority sage grouse habitat.

- b) Increase landowner understanding of the status of sage grouse on their own particular operations. Between four and ten Phillips County landowners will have professional sage grouse surveys (lek and/or brood counts) conducted on their properties, and will receive a written report presenting the survey data along with information on sage grouse stewardship accomplishments and opportunities tailored specifically for their operation.
- c) Increase local acceptance of and participation in sage grouse conservation activities. Accurate regional information on sage grouse conservation will be delivered by ranchers (leaders of RSA) and to ranchers (at local livestock meetings and schools) in an estimated four events. We expect to reach one-third to one-half the ranching families in Phillips County through these presentations.

7) Ranchers Stewardship Alliance

This sage grouse conservation proposal integrates on-the-ground habitat stewardship with outreach efforts to landowners in Phillips County, Montana. Fifty wildlife escape ramps for livestock watering troughs will be constructed to Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) specifications and offered free of charge to landowners for placement in priority sage grouse areas of Phillips County. Local producers and youth will be given multiple opportunities to hear areaspecific presentations (at livestock industry meetings and as part of school programs) on sage grouse conservation efforts and opportunities for local people to participate in this work. Landowners with key sage grouse habitat will be contacted by project personnel and offered the opportunity to have lek and/or brood counts conducted on their properties by a professional wildlife biologist. Data collected during the lek and brood counts will be provided to the landowner in a written report, along with information on sage grouse conservation and data needs. and how landowners might participate in incentive programs for sage grouse conservation. The outcome of this multi-faceted project will be increased understanding of, and participation in, sage grouse conservation efforts by landowners in one the stronghold regions for sage grouse in Montana. Stewardship accomplishments of local landowners will be documented and highlighted, paving the way for greater respect for the importance of ranching in conservation of habitat for sagebrushdependent wildlife.

8) Centennial Valley

Education and outreach are essential in disseminating information regarding Sage-grouse conservation and the importance of healthy sagebrush ecosystems. This proposal focuses on outreach and education for college and high school students from the University of Montana – Western (UMW), Ecology Project International, and Wild Rockies Filed Institute. Cattle grazing represent the dominant land use throughout southwest Montana Sage-grouse habitat. Many students from UMW come from ranching backgrounds, so outreach will provide these students with biological context for understanding and communicating science-based

stewardship of Sage-grouse habitats. The students directly involved in the project will disseminate information directly to family members and could influence public opinion.

The objective of this project is to provide learning experiences for >100 college and high school students from across Montana, and to provide local cattle ranchers with grazing management recommendations that meet grazing objectives and maximize food resources for Sage-grouser and other sagebrush obligate species.

9) Western Sustainability Exchange

Western Sustainability Exchange (WSE) is developing a major program that will accomplish key objectives of the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana. WSE will accomplish these objectives by connecting ranchers who use stewardship practices that protect habitat to makes willing to pay a reasonable premium. Ultimately, WSE will develop a comprehensive program that targets' outlets in the culinary and natural food sectors, institutions and direct sales to a broad range of consumers.

WSE will produce on-the-ground conservation outcomes in two ways. The first is by documenting the effectiveness of range management practices in protecting sage-grouse habitat and promoting the practices to landowners in key habitat areas. The second and most important is by motivating landowners to adopt these practices because of the financial benefits that result from protecting habitat.