USDA
United States Department of Agriculture

Dan Ashe
Director
United States Fish & Wildlife Service
Main Interior
1849 C Street, Northwest, Room 3331
Washington, District of Columbia 20240-0001

Subject: Assurance of Implementation of Bi-State Action Plan for Greater Sage Grouse

Dear Mr. Ashe:

We are pleased to provide to your attention a joint effort to focus and accelerate conservation activities to protect and restore habitat for the Greater Sage Grouse in the Bi-State Area. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), through the U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has been working with you and other partners for many years to conserve the Bi-State Population straddling the Nevada-California border. We participate in the Bi-State Local Area Working Group (LAWG) alongside Federal, State, Tribal, and private conservation partners and together in 2012, a technical advisory committee completed a comprehensive Bi-State Action Plan (Plan) to remove threats to the species.

The Forest Service and NRCS remain fully committed with the other Bi-State LAWG partners working to conserve the sage grouse population. We strongly support the 2012 Plan as the guiding solution for Bi-State birds and use it to guide our conservation investments. The Plan identifies two top priorities: (1) establishing conservation easements on private lands to ensure critical brood habitats persist and (2) removing encroaching conifers that degrade habitats and increase predation, primarily on public lands. Since 2010, USDA has finalized contracts for about $27.5 million of on-the-ground projects addressing critical threats identified in the Action Plan for the two top priorities--primarily the establishment of conservation easements, removal of encroached conifer, and restoration of brood habitats. Both the Forest Service and NRCS stand ready and firmly committed to doing more.

The Bi-State Executive Oversight Committee estimates it will cost about $38 million to fully implement the remaining priority actions identified in the Plan. The Executive Committee's estimate assigns the Forest Service and NRCS with approximately 80 percent of the total conservation investments that are needed. The intent of this letter is to explicitly commit our agencies to full implementation of our respective portions of the Plan. We have developed the attached implementation plans for each Agency that focus conservation on high-priority projects and facilitate rapid implementation.

Of the $38 million in estimated need, approximately $13.9 million is the responsibility of the Forest Service. The Forest Service hereby commits to funding all of the restoration work which will result in full implementation of all the Forest Service's related measures in the Plan. All Forest Service projects will be implemented within ten years with high-priority projects completed first (5-7 years). Similarly, NRCS commits to funding $10 million for conservation easements and another $2 million to accelerate conifer removal on public lands. This new contribution by NRCS adds to their demonstrated track record having already secured $24.7 million in conservation easements to secure and protect habitat since 2012. NRCS commits to having all their projects implemented within the next five years.

Importantly, NRCS is designating the range and pasture lands in the Bi-State restoration focus areas as "grasslands of environmental significance" under the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). This special designation will enable NRCS to provide up to 75 percent of a conservation easement purchase cost which will, in turn, improve the likelihood that NRCS can partner with other entities and willing landowners to invest in easements. In addition to easements, NRCS will target $2 million from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to speed conifer removal on public land. NRCS will coordinate with both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on lands that they administer to accelerate these conifer removal activities. Finally, NRCS is also committed to the continued use of EQIP to help implement other important actions that protect and restore sage grouse, such as brood habitat restoration, implementation of enhanced grazing systems, and fence marking.

While NRCS's commitment of $12 million to benefit the Bi-State sage grouse habitat is firm, it is important to recognize that our programs are voluntary and it is hard to predict precise parcels or projects that will be enrolled each fiscal year. In the attached NRCS implementation schedule, we detail the NRCS commitment and project funding each year. Securing easements on additional lands identified in the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan may also be realized and increase protections of critical sage-grouse brood rearing habitats.

Some revision to Forest Service and NRCS implementation schedules and corresponding costs may be necessary through adaptive management as new information is obtained. Personnel working for our collective agencies, BLM, the U.S. Geological Survey, and state wildlife agencies will continue to refine habitat mapping and reassess priority treatment areas, using the latest information on the species distribution and use of the habitat. We are committed to refining our implementation accordingly. The USDA and the Department of the Interior agencies participating in the Bi-State LAWG are also entering into a Service First Agreement to maximize interagency cooperation, efficiency and effectiveness in implementing the Action Plan.

In addition to the above targeted actions, we are also committing to ensure that appropriate planning, coordination, and habitat restoration occurs on public lands to benefit the Bi-State sage grouse population. The Forest Service will complete the ongoing planning efforts on the

Humboldt-Toiyabe and Inyo National Forests to provide adequate standards and guidelines and implement the Action Plan for conservation of Bi-State sage grouse habitat on the National Forest System lands.

To insure consistency across jurisdictional boundaries the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is working collaboratively with BLM in Nevada, preparing Land and Resource Management Plan amendments specifically focused on conservation and enhancement of important habitat. The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is scheduled for completion by the end of 2014. The FEIS and plan amendments will not only guide Forest Service and BLM management activities, but facilitate any work NRCS conducts with producers who have allotments on public land.

The Inyo National Forest is currently revising its Forest Plan. Bi-state sage-grouse is identified as an at-risk species in the plan revision process. As required by the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR 219), the revised plan will include direction to provide the ecological conditions necessary to support the persistence of the Bi-State sage grouse in the plan area. Species-specific plan components, including standards or guidelines, will be included in the revised plan as needed to provide the ecological conditions necessary to conserve the species.

The Executive Oversight Committee (EOC) for the Bi-State LAWG has submitted a summary of its conservation accomplishments to date under separate cover to your agency. We hope you will consider the LAWG partners' considerable accomplishments to date as well as this joint Forest Service/NRCS commitment as you proceed with your evaluation. With this letter we wish to clearly indicate our commitment to conservation of the species and its habitat.

We will continue to maintain close relationships with your staff and our partners to deliver focused conservation actions to benefit working lands -- whether they are private or public -- as well as the sage grouse. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

JASON A. WELLER
Chief
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Thomas L. Tidwell

THOMAS L. TIDWELL
Chief
Forest Service

Bi-State Sage-grouse Habitat Restoration 10-year Work-plan					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
FY 14	**NEPA** Complete East Walker East Landscape Habitat Improvement Project (EA)	**EWLHIP-1,2, and 3**	H,M,L	29,000 acres of PJ removal approved. Complete EA	$52,471 (Funded)
	NEPA Wheeler Creek Restoration #43887 Meadow restoration (CE)	HIR1-4-DCF	H	1.5 miles 19 acres, of degraded meadow habitat improved. Complete CE	$72,473 (Funded)
	Implementation Long Doctor PJ removal	NA	M	Last Year	$84,000 (NDOW)
	Implementation China Camp Pile burn	NA	M	Last year	$40,000 (NDOW)
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$29,000 (Funded)
FY14 total					$277,944 Funded
FY 15	**NEPA** Huntoon Valley/Swauger Creek (CE)	MER4-3	H	7150 acres P/J Removal Partial Private property	$33,000
	NEPA Aurora/Gregory Flats- PJ Removal (CE)	MER4-4	H	6,600 acres P/J Removal to improve habitat	$33,000
	Implementation Rosaschi Ranch upland habitat improvement project	HIR2-1MG	H	150 Acres upland range habitat improvement	$75,000
	Implementation Wheeler Flat grazing Management	HIR1-3DCF	M	Work with Permittee to revise AOI	$25,000
	Implementation East Walker East Landscape Habitat Improvement Project	**EWLHIP-1,2, and 3**	H,M,L	First Year implementation contract NDOW $125,000 Pending	$472,920
	Implementation Wheeler Creek Meadow Restoration	HIR1-4-DCF	H	1.5 miles, 19 acres of degraded riparian area improved CDFW $70,000 Pending	$150,000
	Monitoring White Mountain sage-grouse population	RAM1-2 RAM1-5 RAM2-2 RAM3-4 RAM4	H	Funding includes: Forest Service crews; contracts with USGS for capture work and collecting vegetation plot data; and the State wildlife agencies for flight-time	$90,390
	NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$18,925
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$310,000
FY15 Total					$1,013,235
FY16	**NEPA** Masonic/Red Wash, China Camp (EA)	MER4-2/HIR1-1MG	H,M	11,750 acres P/J Removal Partial Private	$80,000
	NEPA Desert Creek #2 Cheat grass control (CE)	HIR2-3DCF	H	120 acres	$33,000
	NEPA Walker/Bodie P/J Removal (CE)	MER4-1 East	H,M,L	12,200 acres	$33,000
	NEPA Huntoon Valley/Swauger Creek (CE) Year two	MER4-3	H	Complete CE	$15,000
	NEPA Aurora/Gregory Flats- PJ Removal (CE) Year two	MER4-4	H	Complete CE	$15,000
	Implementation Huntoon Valley/Swauger Creek	MER4-3	H	First year implementation contract	$332,998

Bi-State Sage-grouse Habitat Restoration 10-year Work-plan					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
	Implementation East Walker East Landscape Habitat Improvement Project	**EWLHIP-1,2, and 3**	H,M,L	Second Year implementation contract	$472,962
	Implementation Desert Creek #2 Cheat grass control	HIR2-3DCF	H	First year implementation contract	$10,000
	Monitoring White Mountain sage-grouse population	RAM1-2 RAM1-5 RAM2-2 RAM3-4 RAM4	H	Funding includes: Forest Service crews; contracts with USGS for capture work and collecting vegetation plot data; and the State wildlife agencies for flight-time	$70,230
	Inyo NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$19,030
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$310,000
FY16 Total					$1,391,220
FY17	**NEPA** Lower Rough Creek/Del Monte Canyon PJ Removal CE	MER4-5	H	9,000 acres PJ Removal	$33,000
	NEPA Upper Aurora Canyon, Aurora/Gregory Flats Meadow Restoration (CE)	Hir1-3B HIR2-3 MG	M	Restore degraded meadow habitats.	$33,000
	NEPA -Masonic/Red Wash, China Camp (EA) Year two	MER4-2/HIR1-1MG	H, M	Complete EA	$40,000
	NEPA East Walker/Bodie P/J Removal (CE) Year two	MER4-1	H, M, L	Complete CE	$15,000
	Implementation Huntoon Valley/Swauger Creek	MER4-3	H	First year implementation contract	$332,998
	Implementation Desert Creek #2 Cheat grass control	HIR2-3DCF	H	Second year implementation contract	$10,000
	Implementation East Walker East Landscape Habitat Improvement Project	**EWLHIP-1,2, and 3**	H, M, L	Third year implementation contract	$472,920
	Monitoring White Mountain sage-grouse population	RAM1-2 RAM1-5 RAM2-2 RAM3-4 RAM4	H	Funding includes: Forest Service crews; contracts with USGS for capture work and collecting vegetation plot data; and the State wildlife agencies for flight-time	$70,230
	Inyo NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$19,030
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$310,000
FY17 Total					$1,336,211
FY18	**NEPA** Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal (EA)	MER 4-6	M, L	17,500 acres of P/J removal	$80,000
	NEPA Lower Rough Creek/Del Monte Canyon PJ Removal CE Year two	MER4-5	H	Complete EA	$15,000
	Implementation Masonic/Red Wash, China Camp	MER4-2/HIR1-1MG	H, M	First year implementation contract	$525,059
	Implementation Aurora/Gregory Flats- PJ Removal	MER4-4	H	First year implementation contract	$937,870

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	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
	Implementation Desert Creek #2 Cheat grass control	HIR2-3DCF	H	Third year implementation contract	$10,000
	Monitoring White Mountain sage-grouse population	RAM1-2 RAM1-5 RAM2-2 RAM3-4 RAM4	H	Funding includes: Forest Service crews; contracts with USGS for capture work and collecting vegetation plot data; and the State wildlife agencies for flight-time	$71,010
	Inyo NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$19,250
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$310,000
FY18 Total					$1.968,189
FY 19	**NEPA** Desert Creek PJ Removal (CE)	HIR1-1DCF	M	1,750 acres of PJ/Removal	$33,000
	NEPA Jackass Flat/Antelope Valley PJ/Removal (CE)	MER4-9	M	825 acre PJ removal project.	$33,000
	NEPA Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal (EA) Year two	MER 4-6	M, L	Complete EA	$40,000
	Implementation East Walker/Bodie P/J Removal	MER4-1	H, M, L	First year implementation	$301,687
	Implementation Aurora/Gregory Flats- PJ Removal	MER4-4	H	Second year implementation contract	$937,870
	Implementation Masonic/Red Wash, China Camp	MER4-2/HIR1-1MG	H, M	Second year implementation contract	$525,059
	Implementation Lower Rough Creek/Del Monte Canyon PJ Removal	MER4-5	H	First year implementation contract	$76,500
	Implementation Upper Aurora Canyon, Aurora/Gregory Flats Meadow Restoration	Hir1-3B HIR2-3-MG	M	First year implementation contract	$250,000
	Monitoring White Mountain sage-grouse population	RAM1-2 RAM1-5 RAM2-2 RAM3-4 RAM4	H	Funding includes: Forest Service crews; contracts with USGS for capture work and collecting vegetation plot data; and the State wildlife agencies for flight-time	$71,010
	Inyo NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$19,250
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$310,000
FY19 Total					$2,597,376
	Implementation East Walker/Bodie P/J Removal	MER4-1	H, M, L:	Second year implementation	$301,687
	Implementation Lower Rough Creek/Del Monte Canyon PJ Removal	MER4-5	H	Second year implementation contract	$76,500
	Implementation Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal	MER 4-6	M, L	First year implementation contract	$749,265
	H-T NF Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$250,000
FY20 Total					$1,377,452
	Implementation: Desert Creek PJ Removal	HIR1-1DCF	M	First year implementation contract	$231,250
	Implementation Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal	MER 4-6	M, L	Second year implementation contract	$749,265

Bi-State Sage-grouse Habitat Restoration 10-year Work-plan					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
	Overhead Cost (Table 2)				$200,000
FY21 Total					$1,180,515
	Implementation Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal	MER 4-6	M, L	Third year implementation contract	$749,265
	Implementation Jackass Flat/Antelope Valley PJ/Removal	MER4-9	M	First year implementation contract	$63,000
	Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$200,000
FY22 Total					$1,062,215
	Implementation Jackass Flat/Antelope Valley PJ/Removal	MER4-9	M	Second year implementation contract	$63,000
	Implementation Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal	MER 4-6	M, L	Forth year implementation contract	$749,265
	Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$175,000
FY23 Total					$1,062,190
FY24	**Implementation** Spring peak, Mt. Hicks. Powell Mtn. PJ Removal	MER 4-6	M, L	Fifth year implementation contract	$749,265
	Overhead Cost (Table 2)	NA			$150,000
FY24 Total					$899,265
Activity name, ID numbers, and priorities are based on Bi-state sage- grouse action plan project list available on 5/21/2014 Action Plan Refers to the bi-State Action plan, H = High, M = Moderate, L = Low priorities					

Summary Bi-State Sage-grouse Habitat Restoration 10-year Work-plan			
Non-PJ Removal	PJ Removal acres	Implementation Cost	Overhead Cost
6 Projects, 3 Watershed 1 upland, 1 cheat grass, 1 range management, 5 years annual monitoring	95,000 Acres	$11,242,508	2,695,485
		Total	$13,937,993

Table 2: Forest Overhead Cost

H-T and Inyo NF annual costs associated with program management and implementation	
H-T NF Program Manager GS-12	$85,000 (Decrease after FY19)
Inyo NF Program Manager GS-11 (2)	$10,725 (1% increase each FY)
Inyo NF Housing for field crews	$7,200
Inyo NF Housing for field crews	$7,200
Inyo NF Field per diem for field crews	$1,000
Implementation COR	$45,000
Heritage Resource Inventory	$100,000 (Decrease After FY 2021)
Rosaschi Ranch Irrigation O & M, prescribed fire, and weed treatments	$75,000
Resource Advisor Kit Updates	$5000

Cost by year

Fiscal Year	Total Cost
2014*	$277,944
2015	$1,013,235
2016	$1,391,220
2017	$1,336,211
2018	$1,968,189
2019	$2,597,376
2020	$1,377,452
2021	$1,230,515
2022	$1,062,265
2023	$1,062,265
2024	$899,265
Total	$13,937,993

*Funded through NFRR 2014 appropriated H-TNF and pending NDOW partnership. Not included in the total.

NRCS Proposal to implement Bi-State Sage Grouse Action Plan

The Bi-State landscape is comprised mostly of federally owned public lands (92%) and ranchers here rely on their continued use of federal grazing allotments to make their agricultural operations viable. Although federal lands dominate the landscape, much of the water is located in irrigated and non-irrigated meadows on the privately owned lands and is critical to sage grouse brood survival.

Unlike the broader 11 state sage grouse story, required actions here are largely not regulatory in nature; instead top priorities are establishing conservation easements on private lands to ensure critical brood habitats remain and removing encroaching conifers that degrade habitats and increase predation, primarily on public lands. The Bi-State Action Plan specifically identifies the location and extent of each required to achieve success. This plan was commissioned and approved by the FWS and all other state/federal partners in March of 2012.

NRCS is firmly committed to implementing the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan as a key part of Sage-grouse Initiative's (SGI) national conservation strategy. Since 2010, we've finalized contracts for $26 million of on-the-ground projects addressing critical threats identified in the 2012 Bi-State Action Plan; primarily the establishment of conservation easements, removal of encroached conifer and restoration of wet meadows to improve brood rearing habitat (Figure 1).

Year	EQIP	WHIP	GRP	WRP	FRPP*	Total SGI $
2010	$ 119,778	$ 36,209	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ 155,987
2011	$ 430,294	$ 90,353	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ 520,647
2012	$ 234,642	$ 31,367	$ 2,218,565	$ 278,400	$ 11,400,000	$ 14,162,974
2013	$ 303,447	$ 47,492	$ 9,570,557	$ 0	$ 1,240,000	$ 11,161.496
Totals	$1,088,161	$ 205,421	$11,789,122	$ 278,400	$ 12,640,000	**$ 26,001,104**

Figure 1- Funding totals include both CA and NV; FRPP funding includes cooperative partnership dollars.

NRCS is prepared to further increase the commitment of technical and financial resources to address the key threats identified in both the Bi-State Action Plan and in the FWS's proposed rule through a cooperative approach with Bi-State landowners and our partners.

Proposed Actions

Outreach to Bi-State Landowners

Communication with Bi-State landowners is critical and the number one job is to clearly convey our plans to join forces to proactively implement the Bi-State Action Plan. This outreach will be directed to landowners within Bi-State Action Plan priority areas and conducted by an interagency team with a unified message. Specifically we will inform ranchers about project

prioritization as defined by updated Bi-State Action Plan, opportunities for participation and funding, and establish a schedule to provide frequent communication and updates.

Conservation Easements

Establishing conservation easements with private landowners is identified as a top priority in the Bi-State Action Plan. NRCS has made significant investment in Bi-State easements, having closed on many priority transactions already and plan to finalize easements on 3 additional high priority properties in FY14. The estimated cost for establishing easements on the remaining priority properties is $13 million with additional lands also identified to increase protections of critical sage-grouse brood rearing habitats. NRCS will dedicate and utilize funding from the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) to assist partners with establishing identified conservation easements in the Bi-State.

Specifically, NRCS proposes the following:

- Designate the Bi-State region as 'Grasslands of special environmental significance' under ACEP allowing NRCS to provide 75% of the easement costs versus the standard 50%.
- Conduct targeted outreach to landowners and provide details about ACEP and opportunities for participation.
- Engage with Land Trusts, State Governors, County governments, and other partners to secure additional matching funds.
- Dedicate a minimum of $10 million in ACEP funding (75% of $13 million) to establish priority conservation easements in the Bi-State.
- Request ranchers' permission to provide current status of easement transactions to FWS to inform ESA listing decisions.

While it's difficult to precisely predict the parcels landowners will offer for enrollment each FY, the table below represents our projected funding from ACEP.

Bi-State ACEP funding projected by FY					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
FY 14	Conservation Easement	**NA**	H,M,L	conservation easement	$4,000,000
FY15	Conservation Easement	**NA**	H,M,L	conservation easement	$3,000,000

Bi-State ACEP funding projected by FY					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
FY16	Conservation Easement	**NA**	H,M,L	conservation easement	$1,000,000
FY17	Conservation Easement	**NA**	H,M,L	conservation easement	$1,000,000
FY18	Conservation Easement	**NA**	H,M,L	conservation easement	$1,000,000
TOTAL					**$10,000,000**

Conifer removal

Conifer removal is the other high priority action identified in the Bi-State Action Plan and is located primarily on public lands administered by the US Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The USFS and BLM have recently developed aggressive implementation plans to ameliorate this threat and NRCS is prepared to help our federal partners by facilitating efficient delivery of large scale conifer removal projects and offering funding from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to accelerate removal across both public allotments and private lands.

Specifically, NRCS proposes the following:

- Co-sponsor a 'Conifer Forum' where key ranchers, agency personnel, and partners from Oregon and Idaho can share their demonstrated success tackling large scale encroaching conifers across mixed ownerships with Bi-State partners and landowners.
- Coordinate with USFS and BLM to identify priority areas where NEPA is complete or underway and offer EQIP to permittees to accelerate implementation.
- Conduct focused outreach to potential ranchers holding allotments about restoration opportunities through a second FY14 EQIP SGI sign-up period. Several changes in the new Farm Bill coupled with outreach will encourage additional interest.

- Dedicate a minimum of $2 million in EQIP funding to accelerate implementation on public allotments.
- Explore options to utilize SGI SWAT partnership to help facilitate accelerated implementation similar to arrangement with Idaho BLM.
- Secure additional partners to help implement projects.
- Continue conifer encroachment treatments on private lands. Request ranchers' permission to provide current status of these treatments to FWS to inform ESA listing decisions.

While it's difficult to precisely predict the specific projects landowners will offer for enrollment each FY, the table below represents our projected funding from EQIP.

Bi-State EQIP funding projected by FY					
	Activity	Action Plan ID #	Action Plan Priority	Activity/Restoration Goals	Cost
FY14	PJ Removal	NA	H,M,L	Accelerate PJ removal on public allotments	$300,000
FY15	PJ Removal	NA	H,M,L	Accelerate PJ removal on public allotments	$500,000
FY16	PJ Removal	NA	H,M,L	Accelerate PJ removal on public allotments	$500,000
FY17	PJ Removal	NA	H,M,L	Accelerate PJ removal on public allotments	$500,000
FY18	PJ Removal	NA	H,M,L	Accelerate PJ removal on public allotments	$200,000
TOTAL					**$2,000,000**