

A Summary of Conservation Activities of the Dillon, MT Sage-grouse Local Working Group



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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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

This report “Summarizes the Conservation Actions” taken by the Dillon Sage-grouse Local Working Group (SG-LWG) divided into sections as follows:

- Description of the local working group
- A brief description of conservation issues identified by the Dillon Sage-grouse SG-LWG as they relate to 12 overall state conservation issues identified in the *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana*
- A short discussion of issues identified by the Dillon SG-LWG
- A short overview of activities taken to accomplish the conservation strategies identified in the state plan
- And of the twelve conservation issues identified in the state plan which have been addressed specifically by the Dillon SG-LWG.

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.”

Map of Sage-grouse Core Habitat Areas of Southwest Montana

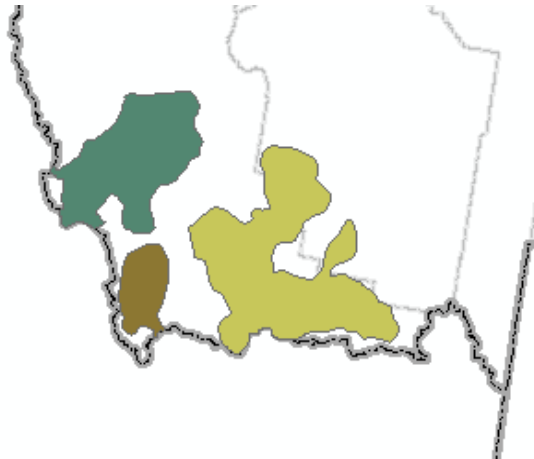


TABLE 1 TWELVE STATEWIDE SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY MONTANA SG-LWGs 2005	
Fire Management	Power Lines and Generation Facilities
Harvest Management	Predation
Livestock Grazing Management	Recreational Disturbance of Sage-grouse
Mining and Energy Development	Roads and Motorized Vehicles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

TABLE 2 OF THE TWELVE SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE STATE PLAN THE DILLON SG-LWG ADDRESSED EACH AS SHOWN 2007-2010*	
Issue	How Addressed
Fire Management	C,W,F,FA
Harvest Management	
Livestock Grazing Management	W,F
Mining and Energy Development	W,F
Noxious Weed Management	
Outreach, Education, and Implementation	C,W,F,FA
Power Lines and Generation Facilities	C,W,F,
Predation	
Recreational Disturbance of Sage-grouse	C,FA
Roads and Motorized Vehicles	C,FA
Vegetation	W,F
Managing Other Wildlife	

*Cells highlighted in blue indicate an item specifically addresses by one of the following:

- C** = Correspondence – public comment letter
- W** = Workshop topic
- F** = Field tour
- FA** = Field activity i.e. planting, placing fence markers

TABLE 3 THE DILLON SG-LWG IDENTIFIED FIVE KEY ISSUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasive Plant Species
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The adverse effects of wildfire or prescribed fire
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tied for third 3rd place
Infrastructure (fence, roads, power lines, communications towers)
Conversion & fragmentation of habitat caused by residential subdivisions & development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conifer invasion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsustainable or incompatible grazing

TABLE 4 PRIORITY ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY THE DILLON SG-LWG
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider populations at risk:
Are there populations known or suspected to be declining?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify future actions or situations that could create new risk factors for population viability. In the Dillon area this includes:
West Nile Virus
Increased recreational activity
Potential threats from increasing use of rural areas residential development
Energy development and transmission infrastructure
Other?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions that reduce or minimize sage brush habitat. This area includes:
New conversion of sagebrush habitat to cropland
Eliminating sagebrush (including burning, plowing, mowing, or use of herbicides) as part of effort to promote grass growth, or other
Wildfire
Subdivisions and housing development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate seasonal habitat
Drought and other factors can affect forb and insect production, both of which are important food sources for young sage-grouse
Water availability (where as sage-grouse tend to associate with moist areas during mid and late summer/early fall, they do not need open water)

TABLE 4 CONT: PRIORITY ISSUES IDENTIFIED FOR THE DILLON SG-LWG AREA
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Noxious weeds
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Effects of predation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conifer expansion

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

A SUMMARY OF THE DILLON SG-LWG ACTIVITIES 2007-2010

From 2007-2010 the Dillon SG-LWG held over 30 events or projects encompassing regularly scheduled meetings, tours, written public comment, grant applications or other field projects.

Table 5 lists the events in chronological order along with the day, location and type of activity. A brief description of some of the events follows:

TOURS

In the fall of 2008 the Dillon SG-LWG initiated a sage-grouse habitat tour of private ranch land west of Twin Bridges. The focus of the tour was to observe the results of a prescribed burn and herbicide treatment on the quality of sage-grouse habitat in a Mountain Big Sagebrush, *Artemisia tridentata vaseyana* plant community.



Rangeland Diversity Workshop Twin Bridges, MT



Field Tour of Private Ranch Using Prescribed Fire Management

Other tours focused on a power line route planned through southwest Montana, an important local issue for the Dillon area. NorthWestern Energy's (NWE) proposed 500kv Mountain States Transmission Intertie Project (MSTI) would connect power plant generation facilities in eastern Montana with the Townsend area south to Las Vegas, passing near Dillon. The Dillon SG-LWG has been proactive on this issue, keeping the public informed at its regularly scheduled meetings. Status reports are given routinely to the local working group by FWP, BLM and NorthWestern Energy at regularly scheduled meetings. The Dillon SG-LWG has provided both verbal and written comment on the proposed power line route. Through these efforts the local working group engaged on a regular basis on power line options and mitigation opportunities. The Dillon SG-LWG organized a field tour in March 2009 of the power line route to assess power line routing options. The field tour was attended by agency personnel, the SG-LWG members and NorthWestern Energy Company employees. During the tour, areas lacking sufficient sage-grouse surveys were identified and the energy company agreed to fund additional sage-grouse surveys in order to attempt to fill in the informational gaps.



Power line Route Alternatives Tour



Effects of Energy Development and Sage-grouse Workshop

WRITTEN COMMENT

The Dillon SG-LWG has provided written comment on local issues pertinent to their area affecting sage-grouse which have included comments on a leasing proposal to burn sagebrush on DNRC state land in the Corral Creek area. They have continued to comment on numerous public documents, BLM's energy corridors environmental impact statement (EIS), energy lease sales, and DNRC state energy lease sale. They have also reviewed and commented on six BLM livestock grazing allotments. Based on feedback from the SG-LWG and others, the BLM embarked on a plan to reduce unnecessary trails within Reservoir Creek and Cross allotment to improve recreational opportunities and wildlife habitat.

GRANTS

The Dillon SG-LWG secured three grants during this time period, one was a Grazing Land Conservation Initiative (GLCI) grant and two National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) sub-grants administered by the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF). Two grants were used to secure expert speakers and to facilitate a field tour. The third grant was used to purchase the raw materials to manufacture enough fence markers to mark ten miles of fence. The GLCI grant supported two outreach efforts by the Dillon SG-LWG, one held in Twin Bridges in September 2008 titled *Rangeland Diversity Workshop* covering range management, sage-grouse biology, water developments, sagebrush identification and sagebrush burning. A field tour on a private ranch followed the meeting to look first-hand at the effects of prescribed fire and herbicide use. A second MWF grant supported presentations addressing energy development and sage-grouse. This grant secured David Naugle, Ph.D of the University of Montana-Missoula to present the results of research projects on sage-grouse and energy development. Presentation of these studies to the Dillon SG-LWG participants, landowners, agency staff and other stakeholders was critical to propagating a science-based understanding and response to the unique and substantial challenges and potential strategies for conserving sage-grouse under various energy development proposals. The remaining MWF grant was used to purchase the raw materials for making fence markers to be used by the Dillon SG-LWG or any interested conservation partner in the state. With the funding from this grant, the Dillon SG-LWG purchased materials to mark fences in locations where sage-grouse have been documented to strike wire fences or are likely to do so because of close proximity to breeding leks or other high attendance habitats. Montana State sage-grouse plan of 2005 identified various strategies for reducing the harmful effects of fences in sage-grouse habitat including increasing the visibility of fences by marking them to reduce unintentional strikes. Approximately seven miles of fence has been marked by volunteers in Beaverhead, Petroleum and Valley counties. In the Dillon area, a biology class from University of Montana-Western assisted in placing fence markers on a newly installed fence.

ON THE GROUND PROJECTS

The Dillon SG-LWG carried out the development of a public lek viewing site at Reservoir Creek because of pre-existing conflict where public viewing was believed to be causing excessive lek disturbance. This large lek is thought to get more visitation than any other sage-grouse lek in western Montana. The SG-LWG formed a committee that developed text for a removable sign to inform and educate the public on responsible viewing which has now been in use for several lekking seasons. Working cooperatively with the BLM and the DNR, unnecessary roads were closed with a single road approved into the lek, and signage is now posted seasonally for educating the public and providing proper “appropriate” lek viewing methods. Other field

activities involved fence marking done by a biology class at University of Montana Western and a demonstration on how to build wildlife escape ramps for stock tanks.



Manufactured Escape Ramp Demonsatration



Placement of Public Lek Viewing Sign at Reservoir Creek



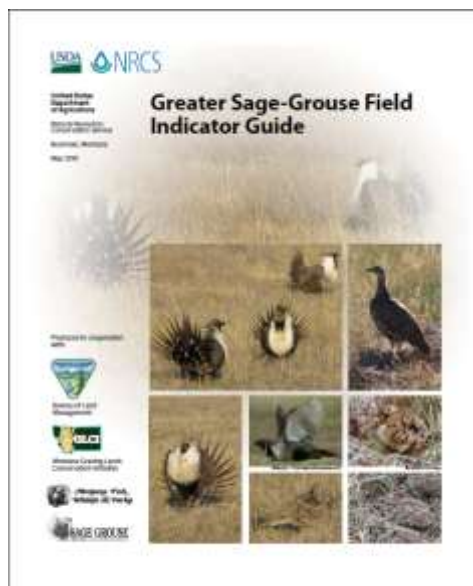
University of Montana Western Biology Class Placing Fence Markers

PUBLICATIONS

A new sage-grouse publication titled *Greater Sage-grouse Field Indicator Guide* was developed jointly with working group input and participation. It is an illustrative guide to sage-grouse field indicators. It was viewed as an important outreach tool that provides hands-on information about sage-grouse and is useful for people out on the land such as landowners, hunters, sports people and wildlife enthusiasts. The publication is available for download at the Montana NRCS website below.

http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/biology/sagegrouse/sg_fieldguide/index.html

The publication has since been reprinted by NRCS's national headquarters and then was distributed to all eleven states with sage-grouse.



CHALLENGES

The Dillon SG-LWG has been successful in providing outreach and education on local issues despite having no operating budget. As would be anticipated, they have encountered challenges not necessarily unique to them but nevertheless, indicative of individual interests having to come together for a common goal. The Dillon SG-LWG has successfully acquired small grants which they have used to schedule workshops, field trips, engage professional speakers, and advertise such on local radio stations, newspapers, and bulletin boards. Interest in sage-grouse by landowners has fluctuated, primarily with the threat of endangered species listing.

Table 5
Dillon Sage-grouse Local Working Group Activities 2007-2010

Date	Activity	Location
Ongoing – General	Public notice and outreach – Dillonite Daily, Dillon Tribune, Montana Standard and KDBM-KBEV radio	Dillon and surrounding area
March 22, 2007	Planning meeting / outreach – agency updates, CCAA, Adopt-a-Lek, Reservoir Creek viewing lek, Corral Creek burn, EIS – energy Corridor	Dillon
March 27, 2007	DNRC Corral Creek Burn – written comments sent addressing proposal to burning sagebrush habitat	Dillon – SG-LWG
September 4, 2007	Planning meeting / outreach – Windmill ruling update, CCAA, watchable wildlife site, energy development, utility line,	Dillon
October 3, 2007	Executive committee meeting of the state sage-grouse committee	Billings
November 6, 2007	Planning meeting / outreach	Dillon
February 7, 2008	Planning meeting / outreach – proposed state lands energy lease sale, Reservoir Creek lek viewing area and management, power line actions and mitigation opportunities	Dillon
February 14, 2008	Written comments sent on <i>West Wide Energy Corridor Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement</i>	Dillon

Table 5 Cont:
Dillon Sage-grouse Local Working Group Activities 2007-2010

Date	Activity	Location
June 25, 2008	Listing decision meeting, CCAA, MST I power line, Grazing land Conservation Initiative	Dillon
September 14, 2008	Northwestern Energy briefed the working group on proposed 500 Kv power line routes through southwest Montana	Dillon
September 17, 2008	A Livestock Interactions on Sagebrush Grasslands was held in Twin Bridges. Guest speakers include Dan Taylor, Jeff Mosley, Peter Lesica and Jon Siddoway. The presentation session was followed up with a tour of sage-grouse habitats and further discussions of the issues.	Twin Bridges
October 20, 2008	Planning / Outreach – FWP Core area map status, Grant funding possibilities, State lands energy leasing, conifer encroachment removal opportunities	Dillon
November 20, 2008	Planning / Outreach – status of federal listing decision, working group to request tour with EIS team, habitat improvement opportunities encroachment, Core area map status, power line input and route, proposed state lands lease sale, Cooperative sage brush initiative (CSI)	Dillon, Clark Canyon, Lima
November 20, 2008	Members agreed to pursue two MFWP grants. One to host three outreach educational workshops around the state addressing sage-grouse and energy development. The other two purchase raw fence marker materials for volunteers to cut and place on fences. Three workshops were held in Miles City, Malta and Dillon and enough raw materials were purchased to do mark ten miles of fence. Approximately ten miles of fence have been marked in Beaverhead, Petroleum and Valley counties.	Dillon
March 24, 2009	MSTI Power Line corridor field tour – SG-LWG & Industry representatives / mitigation discussion	Dillon
March 27, 2009	Intermountain West Joint Venture Capacity grant submitted – unsuccessful	Dillon
March 2009	Grant application submitted – Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) - unsuccessful	

Table 5 Cont:
Dillon Sage-grouse Local Working Group Activities 2007-2010

June 19, 2009	Planning / Outreach – Action plan reviewed, federal listing decision update, lek monitoring report, Audubon report, Adopt-a-lek, NEW power line, BLM leasing, Naugle report, Waage report	Dillon
Summer 2009	U of M Western- biology/ecology class places fence markers out in sage-grouse habitat	Dillon
December 17, 2009	NRCS strategy, MSTI power line, landowner indicator guide publication, NRCS west wide initiative, Wyoming study on fence mortality, BLM grant opportunity	Dillon
December 17, 2009	Landowner Indicator Guide comments – approved	Dillon
February 14, 2011	Grant applications: Sage-grouse conservation project; southwest Montana fences and funding of a speakers bureau	Dillon
March, 2010	Intermountain West Joint Venture Capacity grant submitted – unsuccessful	
March 11, 2010	Outreach – Listing Decision – speakers USFWS, NRCS programs, private lands programs, CCAA, Grant opportunity	Dillon
Spring 2010	Reservoir Creek lek viewing area, sign purchase and installation, and 2-track reclamation effort	Dillon
August 20, 2010	Conference call / SG-LWG opportunity Grant development	Dillon
October 18, 2010	Planning and outreach – new conferencing report NRCS/USFWS, BLM grant, COR enterprises & Conservation Corps support for fence markers, MSTI update, TNC report, Draft WORK PLAN REVIEW	Dillon
November 4, 2010	Letter to Northwest Energy on appropriate monitoring and mitigation of MSTI power line	Dillon
November 1, 2010	Dillon SG-LWG Action Plan Adopted	Dillon

DILLON LOCAL WORKING GROUP
SAGE-GROUSE ACTION PLAN
Oct. 2010 – Oct. 2011
(November 1, 2010)

Note to readers: The following is prepared primarily for use by the local working group, but it is also anticipated that others outside of the local working group may have interest in this document. So, it is written to provide some basic information to persons who may not be familiar with the local geography, 'surroundings, and issues.

Introduction

The Dillon area working group is one of 4 working groups currently operating in Montana originally identified in the "Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-Grouse in Montana- 2005." Dillon is the only working group in the southwestern portion of Montana; all of the other locations are to the east. The next closest working group location is in Musselshell county.

The Dillon Local Working Group began meeting in December of 2003. Meetings were open to all and participants included agricultural interests, sportsmen, power companies, and representatives of state, federal, and tribal agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Approximately 20-35 persons attended each meeting. The LWG first met in December 2003, and has continued to meet 3-4 times per year since. The primary focus of the meetings has been to review the goals and conservation actions recommended by the Montana state management plan for greater sage-grouse conservation, review programs providing financial assistance to landowners for sage-grouse-related improvements and conservation measures, review pending activities that may impact habitats and populations, host expert presentations on the results of scientific research, review state and federal conservation planning, and to begin on-the-ground projects.

The current co-chairs of the Dillon LWG are Ben Deeble and Nathan Finch, appointed by consensus in March 2010 for two-year terms.

Geographic Area

There was no pre-determined geographic area for the Dillon area working group. Participants in the meetings have included persons from Beaverhead, Madison, and surrounding counties in Montana.

Landownership and public land management in this portion of Montana include:

Private landownership

Land and minerals managed by the Bureau of Land Management

Lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service

Lands managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

Red Rocks Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

Lands managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

General Description of Habitat

Southwestern Montana is within the Mountain Foothills Mixed Sagebrush ecotype. In this part of Montana, most sage-grouse habitat occurs on inter-mountain valleys and on forested mountain slopes at elevations ranging from 5000 to 8000 feet. Slope varies from nearly level to 45 degrees on some mountainsides. Grass and sagebrush are interspersed with forested areas. Major drainages include Red Rock, Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Ruby Rivers, and Blacktail Creek.

General Description of Sage-Grouse Population

Based on available data and anecdotal information, sage-grouse populations in these counties experienced declines in the latter half of the 20th century, but more recently appear to have stabilized based on lek counts and fall harvest data including harvest wing counts.

Despite harsh winters that can occur in this part of Montana, sage-grouse survive winters well, especially compared to other upland game birds. Sage-grouse use sagebrush for food and shelter during the winter months. (Refer to the "Montana State Management Plan" for more information on seasonal habitat needs.)

Some sage-grouse in southwestern Montana migrate (sometimes up to 50 miles) between separate summer and winter areas. Ongoing research has documented migratory movement across the Continental Divide between eastern Idaho and Big Sheep Creek Basin in southwestern Beaverhead County, and between the Centennial Valley in SW MT and Clark County, Idaho.

Research on habitat and sage-grouse populations is being conducted by FWP, BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and National Wildlife Federation in the Dillon Local Working Group Area. This includes work on lek counts, habitat mapping, and migration patterns.

Key Issues for Sage-Grouse in the West

After thoroughly analyzing the best scientific and commercial information available, the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded in March 2010 that the greater sage-grouse warrants protection under

the Endangered Species Act. However, the Service has determined that listing the species for protection is precluded by the need to take action on other species facing more immediate and severe extinction threats. As a result, the sage-grouse will be added to the list of species that are candidates for Endangered Species Act protection. The Service will review the status of the sage-grouse annually.

The Service analyzed potential factors that may affect the habitat or range of the greater sage-grouse and determined that habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from wildfire, energy development, urbanization, agricultural conversion, and infrastructure development are the primary threats to the species.

Greater sage-grouse populations have been declining since the 1960s. Some population projections and analysis of threats suggest the declining population trend will continue across the species. Effective conservation measures can help to abate these anticipated negative effects.

Invasive plants are also a serious rangewide threat to greater sage-grouse habitat because they can out-compete sagebrush and are increasing wildfire frequencies, further contributing to direct loss of habitat. Once established, invasive plants reduce and eliminate vegetation essential for greater sage-grouse to use as food and cover. Sagebrush restoration techniques are limited and have generally been ineffective. However, maintaining healthy sagebrush grasslands with a full complement of native perennial grasses, forbs and shrubs can effectively reduce the invasion of these habitats by exotic plants.

Federal agencies manage the majority of greater sage-grouse habitat in the United States. Overall, the ability of these agencies to adequately address the issues of wildfire and invasive plants across the landscape is limited. Energy development and its associated infrastructure are expected to continue. Protective measures including strategic locating of energy developments away from core sage-grouse habitat are needed to reduce threats into the future.

Substantial new information on West Nile virus (WNV) and impacts on the greater sage-grouse has emerged since 2005. The virus is now distributed throughout the species' range, and affected sage-grouse populations experience high mortality rates with resultant, often significant reductions in local populations. Infections in northeastern Wyoming, southeastern Montana, and the Dakotas seem to be the most persistent. Outbreaks vary between years, with hotter late summers that support high mosquito abundance promoting the highest observed mortality rates. Limited information suggests that sage-grouse may be able to survive an infection; however, because of the apparent low level of immunity and continuing changes within the virus, widespread resistance appears unlikely.

Dillon Area Issues

The Dillon Local Working Group confirmed that the five issues below are key issues.

1. Invasive Plant Species
2. The adverse affects of wildfire or prescribed fire
3. The following appeared "tied" for 3rd place:
 - i. Infrastructure (includes fences, roads, power lines, communication towers, and pipelines, developed for any purpose)
 - ii. Conversion and fragmentation of habitat caused by residential subdivision and development
4. Conifer invasion
5. Unsustainable or incompatible grazing

In addition, the group also identified the following as priority issues.

Key issues are focused on the objectives of the state plan-sage grouse populations and sage-grouse habitat. It is assumed that primary emphasis will be given to those populations that are known or suspected to be at risk, or where future actions or stressors could create new risk factors. Areas with stable populations will be less of a focus (except where future actions could be a problem.

Consider populations at risk:

Are there populations known or suspected to be declining?

Identify future actions or situations that could create new risk factors for population viability. In this area this includes:

West Nile Virus;

Increased recreation activity;

Potential threats from increasing use of rural areas for residential development;

Energy development and transmission infrastructure;

Other?

Actions that reduce or minimize sage brush habitat. In this area this includes:

New conversion of sagebrush land to cropland

Eliminating sagebrush (including burning, plowing, mowing, or use of herbicides) as part of efforts to promote grass growth, or other

Wildfire

Subdivisions and housing development

Adequate seasonal habitat

Drought and other factors can affect forb and insect production, both of which are important food sources for young sage grouse

Water availability (whereas sage-grouse tend to associate with moist areas during mid and late summer/early fall, they do not need open water)

Noxious Weeds

Effects of predation

Conifer Expansion

Actions Taken To-Date

The Dillon LWG, in addition to holding regular meetings, has undertaken several actions to assist sage-grouse conservation.

Encouraged the BLM to implement some road closures and rehabilitation, and fence removals and marking in the Reservoir Creek allotments;

Designed and helped designate a public sage-grouse viewing lek in the Reservoir Creek area;

Formally commented on both a federal proposal to designate an energy transmission corridor through Beaverhead Co. and a subsequent proposal to route the MSTI power line through sage-grouse habitats of the same region;

Facilitated an informational field tour to inform and give input on a power line route. Participants included the power line company and other stakeholders;

Supported a 2009 public workshop and field trip in the Twin Bridges and Rochester Basin area examining sage-grouse habitat and management options;

The SG-LWG has held regular meetings to inform and focus public attention on sage-grouse issues; Applied for and received grants to conduct outreach meetings in Dillon, Miles City and Malta to inform the public regarding energy development issues; Additionally, funds were received to purchase enough raw for fence markers.