



The Wyoming Department of Agriculture is dedicated to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources and quality of life.

February 18, 2010

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Attention: Paul Shelton
PO Box 33124
Casper, WY 82602

Dear Mr. Shelton:

Following are the comments from the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (WDA) on Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) initiative to develop a Wyoming Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy (Strategy).

Our comments are specific to our mission within state government: dedication to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources, and quality of life. As this proposal has major impacts upon our agriculture industry, our natural resources and the welfare of our citizens, we believe it is important you continue to inform us of proposed actions and decisions and provide us the opportunity to express pertinent issues and concerns.

The WDA genuinely appreciates the effort of Wyoming NRCS to authorize additional funding for projects on private lands to enhance sage-grouse habitat. We have reviewed the Montana Strategy regarding their list of 12 Issues Requiring Conservation Actions. We believe this list is comprehensive and a good starting point for Wyoming. Many of the issues listed in Montana's Strategy are nearly verbatim in Wyoming's draft statewide Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) for sage-grouse. We understand the CCAA has not been finalized or approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, however Jerry Jasmer serves on this committee and is familiar with the list of threats and conservation measures proposed in the draft CCAA. We urge the NRCS work closely with Jerry in using the draft version of the CCAA to assist in developing the Wyoming Strategy and to ensure the funding for the Strategy supports the CCAA permit requirements.

Specifically, the draft Wyoming statewide CCAA will require an approved grazing management plan. NRCS is named as a partner in developing these individual grazing plans in sage-grouse habitat on private ranchlands. We encourage the Wyoming Strategy focus a large percentage of staff time and funding to assist CCAA permittees in developing these grazing management plans meeting the requirements of the CCAA. We do not believe Wyoming NRCS has the manpower for developing these grazing management plans alone, but we would support NRCS taking the lead and providing the guidance, education and direction to partners such as Wyoming Conservation Districts or Wyoming Cooperative Extension staff to help in the process. When NRCS develops ranking criteria for applicants we suggest, those who have or hold an approved

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CCAA permit will have a higher ranking since many of the requirements of the CCAA come with an expense to the landowners to implement the projects.

Other items specific to private ranchlands in the CCAA, on which the Strategy can provide financial assistance include; ground truthing of sage-grouse seasonal use, location of new fences, identification of new fences with approved markers to alleviate fence collisions and treatment of sagebrush habitat through chemical, mechanical or biological methods.

While Wyoming has developed the core sage-grouse areas concept across our state, there is a strong need to refine this map. The draft CCAA has a conservation measure of mapping the different sage-grouse seasonal habitat use on individual ranches. We would strongly encourage NRCS involvement in ground truthing the seasonal use and refining Wyoming's core sage-grouse habitat areas. The refinement of the map would allow project development and use of funds to be more specific and beneficial to the grouse. Methods of monitoring the grouse and potential benefits of a project should also be developed prior to implementation. We believe an additional factor for ranking criteria for NRCS Strategy funding could be the development of these maps.

In addition to reviewing and implementing Strategy conservation measures, we encourage the NRCS work closely with the Wyoming Sage-grouse Local Working Groups and reviewing their Conservation Plans. These plans already include localized threats and conservation measures. The groups have worked hard to develop their localized list of conservation measures and understand local needs and where project funding would be most appropriate. Many of the groups' projects are funded through the Wyoming Legislature. We encourage the NRCS work with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) to understand their funding criteria and integrate the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) funding with these projects.

The WDA has worked jointly with the Governor's Planning Office and the WGFD to develop a state approved list of "De minimis Agricultural Practices." Currently the list is in draft form, but we understand it is near completion. The goal of the De minimis Agricultural Practices list is to jointly approve the specific agricultural practices commonly required to operate an economically viable farm or ranch, the list of Best Management Practices to mitigate these practices for sage-grouse when necessary and which agency would provide assistance for the mitigation. We strongly encourage NRCS contact Ryan Lance at the Governor's Planning Office or Mary Flanderka from WGFD to get a final draft of this list when developing the NRCS Strategy.

It is our understanding the Wyoming Strategy will bring additional EQIP and WHIP funding to address projects related to improving sage-grouse habitat. We strongly support the use of these additional funds, but do not support the NRCS moving funds already designated for traditional EQIP and WHIP projects. If NRCS would transfer funds to this Strategy, ranchers without sage-grouse on their lands would not rank high enough to capture Farm Bill funding to implement projects, such as pivot construction, which will not immediately or intentionally benefit sage-grouse or their habitat, but greatly benefits the agricultural operation. Furthermore, we cannot support the future of Farm Bill funding such as EQIP or WHIP to have endangered species

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attached to funding criteria. This funding was developed to conserve soils, improve water quality and the environment. While wildlife is often a beneficiary in projects, we will not support the NRCS or federal government to steer funds away from their original intent; to benefit agriculture, first and foremost. Finally, we strongly encourage NRCS ensure this funding has a long-term life span and not designate these funds as a one-year funding source. Landowners need stable funding sources to use as matching funds for projects, which often cost thousands of dollars.

We strongly support NRCS in the development of their Strategy. We believe the most important part of the implementation of this strategy is to coordinate efforts and partner with the many agencies and organizations, which are trying to accomplish the same set of goals. Wyoming NRCS has listed a number of tasks and assigned a staff member to ensure this is accomplished. We support the list proposed without additional changes at this time. We appreciate the opportunity to comment and are willing to assist in any way possible.

Sincerely,



Jason Fearneyhough
Director

JF/jw

Cc: Governor's Planning Office
WDA Board of Agriculture
Wyoming Stock Growers Association
Wyoming Wool Growers Association
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts
Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation
Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Wyoming State Grazing Board