



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST  
JOINT VENTURE

*Conserving habitat through partnerships*

2021  
ANNUAL  
OPERATIONAL  
PLAN

*September 2020 Final*



*The mission of the  
Intermountain West Joint Venture  
is to conserve priority bird habitats through  
partnership-driven, science-based  
projects and programs.*

## RELATIONSHIPS

We forge and sustain lasting relationships through collaboration. We strive to **meet people where they are** through listening, understanding, and working together to achieve strategic habitat conservation. This relentless emphasis on partnerships and shared vision creates the powerful opportunity to be relevant to a diversity of conservation perspectives across the West.

## STRATEGIC APPROACH

Our investment in co-produced science and planning -- involving wildlife, habitats, and people -- enables us to focus time, energy, and resources **in the right places with the right people and actions to attain landscape-scale conservation**. And our strategic bent goes far beyond science: it is infused into all aspects of our conservation enterprise, from habitat delivery to operations/administration to communications.

## INNOVATION

Exploring and developing new ways to address complex conservation challenges is in our institutional DNA. The IWJV creates forums at multiple levels and scales in which **innovation and creativity are encouraged, supported, and unleashed**.

## GETTING IT DONE

The hallmark of the IWJV is **the pursuit of tangible, on-the-ground conservation**. This is manifested through our efforts to: 1) implement proactive, voluntary, incentive-based conservation, 2) help partners build science, communications, and habitat delivery capacity for landscape-level conservation, and 3) refine our efforts through adaptive management and continued evaluation of conservation actions.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The Intermountain West Joint Venture’s 2021 Annual Operational Plan establishes the priorities, activities, and budget of the IWJV for the 2021 federal fiscal year (October 1, 2020 through September 30, 2021).

**Audience and Purpose:** This operational plan is for the IWJV Management Board. It enables the Management Board to direct the IWJV’s time, resources, and energy toward the highest-priority efforts in FY 2021. This process is extremely important because we support habitat conservation across 486 million acres of the West through building trust and relationships with an increasingly diverse and growing cast of partners. This plan brings **focus** by directing attention to efforts that help us realize the best return on investment.

**Summary of Content:** Each element in this plan—**Catalyzing Sagebrush Conservation, Expanding Water 4, Redesigning State Conservation Partnerships, Building Capacity of Staff and Partners,** and **Operating and Administering an Effective Joint Venture**—includes **Strategies** that will be undertaken and accomplished in FY 2021, as well as a **Budget Implications** section that describes the funding allocations needed to implement the stated strategies. For help with acronyms used in this plan, see the [Appendix](#).

## 2021 Areas of Emphasis

The IWJV’s conservation priorities are crystal-clear these days, as articulated in the [Catalyzing Sagebrush Conservation](#) and [Expanding Water 4](#) sections of this plan. However, the *ways* in which we catalyze impactful conservation evolve over time in response to the West’s changing ecological and social environments. This year our operations—across initiatives, habitats, and programs—will emphasize the following three concepts:

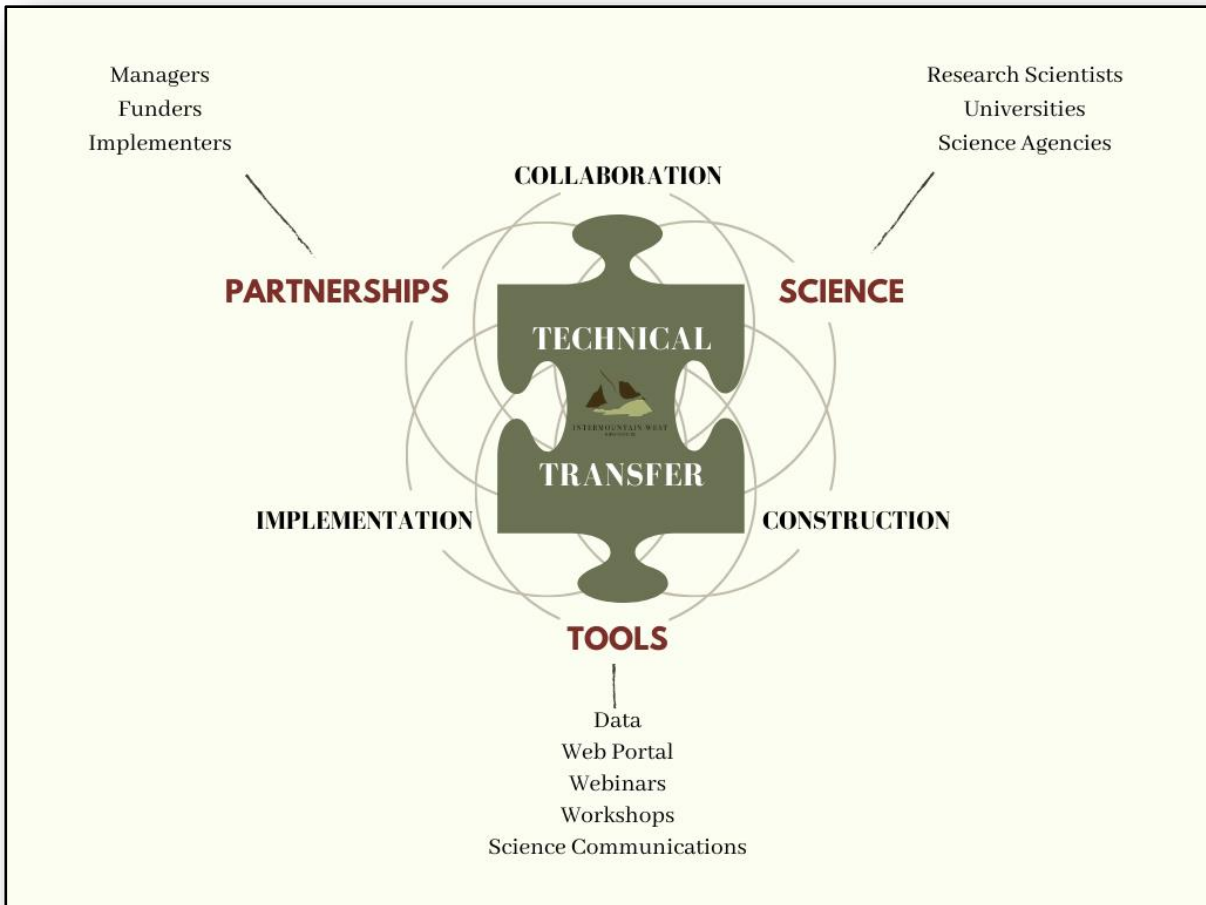
- 1) Communications:** Now, more than ever, the IWJV provides value to our partnership through nimble, responsive, and strategic communications. At a time when our partners are experiencing the ripple effects of a global pandemic and most social interactions are taking place online, **the IWJV is doubling down on innovative strategies to stay in touch with our current partners and engage new and diverse audiences.**

We’re embracing technology-based solutions to expand our communications reach—and that of our partners—to share science, overcome conservation challenges, replicate lessons learned, celebrate achievements, and bring “places” to people. Our hallmark communications efforts—including Hill Visits, field tours, Management Board meetings, and State Conservation Partnership workshops—remain a top priority and will take on a different look and feel as we rely more on social media, webinars, video teleconferencing, and collaborative meeting platforms. As we face an increasingly uncertain future, IWJV’s FY 2021 communications priorities touch all areas of this operational plan and focus on leveraging technology to facilitate diverse and inclusive partnerships for effective conservation and resilient communities.



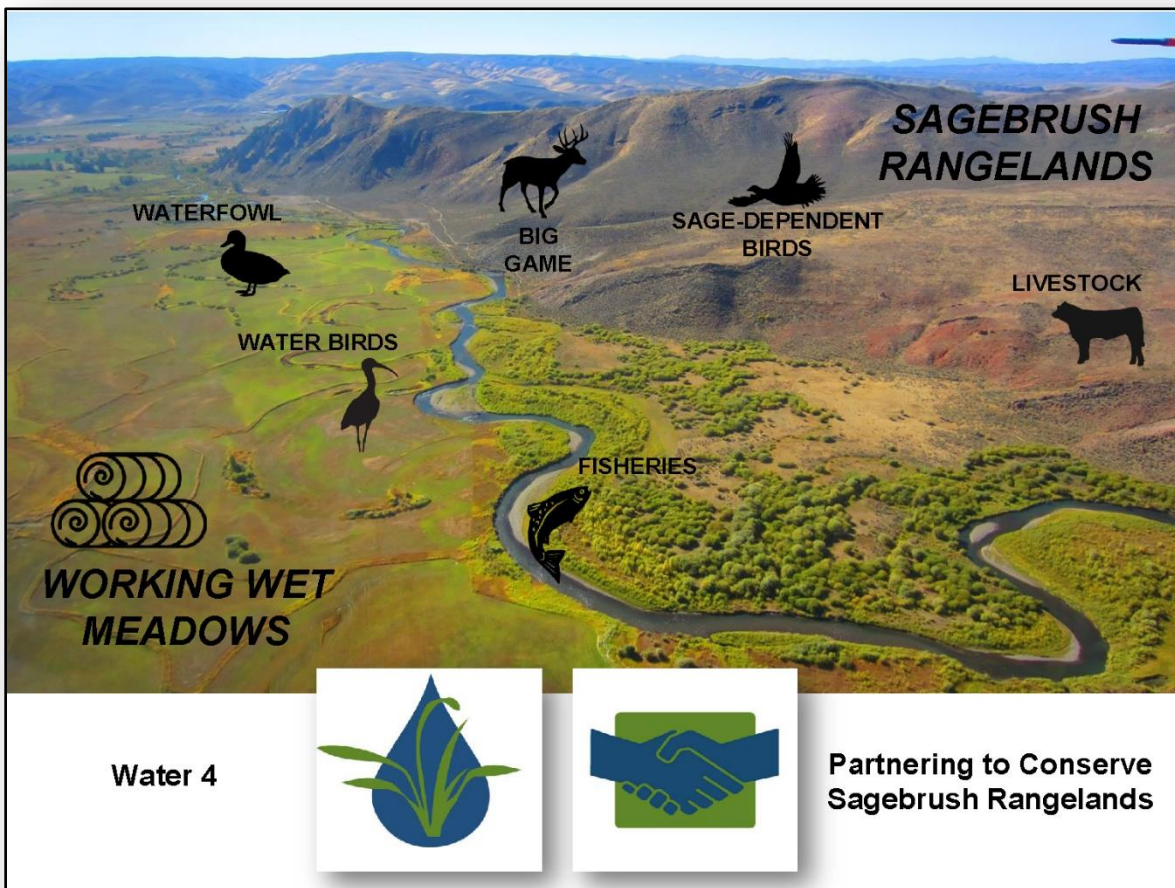
Photo: Laurel Anders

**2) Technical Transfer:** Technical transfer involves working with science-based decision support systems to inform conservation planning and outcome-based evaluations. It is a multi-layered process designed to identify needs and transfer science into action through three components, including: 1) existing or future **co-produced science**, 2) **tools** designed to translate the science into action and address the needs identified by partners, and 3) **partnerships** with implementers, managers, and decision makers interested in utilizing the science. The diagram below lays out these major components and the IWJV's role in the process.



The IWJV acts as a vital bridge that is often a missing link in effective technical transfer. The unique structure of the IWJV, including the ability to work across organizations and geopolitical boundaries, allows us to support and facilitate the design of technical transfer to help partners prioritize conservation projects and evaluate outcomes. Co-produced decision support tools for implementation and funding decisions are incredibly powerful for advancing science-based conservation projects and the impactful investment of funds. In FY 2021, the IWJV will focus on technical transfer within its Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands and Water 4 efforts.

**3) Partner Engagement:** The COVID-19 pandemic has altered business operations throughout the world, including that of our conservation community in the Intermountain West. Social distancing, restricted gatherings, and other precautions to minimize the spread of the virus have dramatically changed the day-to-day operations of the IWJV Management Board, staff, and conservation partners. The pandemic limited the IWJV staff’s ability to meet partners face-to-face throughout the 11-state region via air travel; host meetings or workshops to bring together our Management Board members, SCP Chairs, and other partners; and, work as teams in close proximity in our office setting. Like many conservation organizations, we have experienced some loss of our hallmark relationship building for conservation impact. This reality necessitated that the IWJV look hard at operations in a virtual world, for both the immediate future and as an evolutionary outcome of advances in technology. Meetings and conferences immediately went virtual, so we quickly took to new tools, forums, and virtual ways of doing business. We recognized the loss of “meeting people where they are” in the field, and strived for advances in innovation, acknowledging that we are still “meeting people where they are” in their conservation needs. We are energized by the challenges and opportunities in adjusting our operations to be successful in this unprecedented time. **It is not our intent to survive until things go back to normal; it is our intent to excel in the new world that lays ahead.**



*The vast majority of North America’s sagebrush occurs in the Intermountain West with “green ribbons” of working wet meadows, other wetland habitats, and riparian areas, hotspots of biodiversity in this arid region. Successful conservation of these priority habitats has major implications for wildlife, rural communities, national energy security, tribal livelihood, and recreation. Both of these efforts will continue to drive our work for years to come.*

*Photo: Patrick Donnelly*

# CATALYZING SAGEBRUSH CONSERVATION



Sagebrush rangelands of the Intermountain West are working lands with a vast array of resources and value for people and wildlife. Numerous rural communities and their economies are dependent on the soil, water, plants, and other natural resources of this arid yet rich landscape for

agriculture, energy production, tribal resources, recreation, and other livelihoods.



The sagebrush ecosystem also supports a diversity of birds and other wildlife that are uniquely adapted to the climate and require large open and connected spaces to sustain their populations. Priority sagebrush species of the IWJV include: Greater sage grouse and other sagebrush-dependent birds (e.g., Brewer's sparrow, sagebrush sparrow, sage thrasher, gray flycatcher, green-tailed towhee, and pinyon jay) as well as associated big game species like mule deer, pronghorn antelope, and elk. These species require sagebrush habitats along with wet meadow valleys—often provided by a complex mix of public and private lands—across different parts of their life cycles. However, the quantity, composition, and connectivity of sagebrush habitats has changed over time; the landscape is shrinking due to invasive annual grasses, changing fire regimes, extreme weather patterns, and other threats.

The IWJV partnership has worked to address threats and conserve the sagebrush ecosystem for more than ten years across public and private lands. Our efforts focus on strategic sagebrush habitat conservation through building and catalyzing partnerships across multiple scales. We foster relationships in the field, within and across agencies and conservation initiatives, and bring our diverse voices to Washington, D.C., to reinforce why the conservation of sagebrush rangelands is essential to the future of this country. We plan to address the deep challenges and changes that are needed to conserve sagebrush country by:

- Meeting our partners where they are, asking and listening to their perspectives, and bridging gaps;
- Sharing powerful messages and stories of sagebrush habitat conservation with multiple audiences and across different technologies;
- Building relationships with new and diverse partners that have a role in the future of sagebrush habitat conservation; and,
- Creating innovative solutions and strategic on-the-ground actions across communities and landscapes.

For more information on our recent accomplishments, see the [2019 Annual Report for Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands](#) ([partnersinthesage.com/2019-annual-report](http://partnersinthesage.com/2019-annual-report)).

## 2021 Catalyzing Sagebrush Conservation Strategies

In FY 2021, our sagebrush habitat conservation efforts will focus on the following four **Strategies**:

- Amplify agency and university sagebrush science within the IWJV partnership and invest in evaluating the socio-economic outcomes of sagebrush conservation.
- Build capacity, leverage resources, and engage diverse partners in the Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands effort.
- Develop multi-year source(s) of funding to address the invasive-wildfire cycle via the leadership of the Sagebrush Conservation Committee.
- Provide strategic support to SageWest, a sagebrush communications network.

### **Strategy 1a. Amplify agency and university sagebrush science within the IWJV partnership and invest in evaluating the socio-economic outcomes of sagebrush conservation.**

Due to the scale of sagebrush ecosystems, the wide spectrum of agencies involved in and responsible for sage grouse conservation, and our own internal science capacity, we rely on partnerships with multiple science producers and researchers to inform strategic sagebrush habitat conservation. Implementation has been informed by the efforts of key partners such as Natural Resources Conservation Service Working Lands for Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, and various universities including University of Montana and Oregon State University. Our role is to serve as members of work groups, teams, and forums to co-produce science that drives targeted actions at the landscape scale. A few key examples include:

- Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies Sagebrush Conservation Strategy/Stakeholder Engagement Workshops
- FWS Interior Regions 5/7 Sagebrush Conservation Team
- NRCS WLFW Technical Strategy Sessions
- Bureau of Land Management Conservation and Restoration/Sagebrush Biome Team
- FWS Cross-Regional Science Applications Sagebrush Team

These efforts are collectively creating various landscape-scale conservation strategies to address threats in the sagebrush ecosystem. We will continue to focus on ways to align with these agency-led efforts, provide technical transfer of science and decision support tools, and address gaps in the science-to-implementation cycle (see [Technical Transfer](#)). Specifically, we will focus on the following science tasks:

- **Sagebrush Conservation Business Plan:** Explore the development of a Sagebrush Conservation Business Plan that weaves science, community, and economic drivers of sagebrush conservation into a strategic and shared vision for work over the next five years. This business plan will be designed to link to and complement existing plans and regional science efforts (e.g., Sagebrush Conservation Strategy) and inform the IWJV's co-production and technical transfer niche related to implementation. We envision this project will characterize how regional science supports the local and economic fabric of western communities. This project could potentially be addressed via partial use of Science Coordinator vacancy funds.
- **Socio-Economic Evaluation of Invasive Annual Grasses:** Seek funding resources to implement a socio-economic evaluation of treatments for invasive annual grasses as part of a broader interagency, collaborative effort. The goal of the evaluation is to quantify the current and future threat of invasive annual grasses, assess management effectiveness for the control or eradication of invasive annual grasses, and identify the costs/benefits of fuel breaks with invasion. The study is intended to examine how conservation efforts create jobs that support communities, and stress a need to increase conservation funding to address invasives in the sagebrush biome (supporting the Western Weed Action Plan).

### **Strategy 1b. Build capacity, leverage resources, and engage diverse partners in the Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands effort.**

In FY 2021, we will continue our essential role and support to the BLM-IWJV partnership effort, [Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands](#) ([partnersinthesage.com](http://partnersinthesage.com)). This is our premier effort to achieve strategic cross-boundary sagebrush habitat conservation for people, wildlife, and local economies. Our efforts will be focused on completing actions outlined in the first intra-agency agreement by June 2021; understanding and addressing the priorities of BLM and partners to implement the second intra-agency agreement through June 2024; and investing in existing as well as new and diverse partnerships. We will continue to allocate resources to multiple components of the new agreement including field delivery; communications and outreach; science, monitoring, and technical transfer; and partnership development. We receive direction and guidance on specific priorities from the BLM Management Oversight Group.



## Field Delivery

Through collaboration with BLM, we have created a Sage Capacity Team of [15 community-based partner positions](https://partnersinthesage.com/community-based-capacity) (partnersinthesage.com/community-based-capacity) that coordinate sagebrush conservation across public and private boundaries, break through bottlenecks and challenges, streamline conservation treatments, track and communicate about projects and successes, and facilitate forums that bring local partners together.

This **Sage Capacity Team works together to address conifer encroachment, restore wet meadow habitats, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and cycle of annual invasive grasses, facilitate outcome-based grazing, and conserve big game migratory corridors.** In FY 2021, we will coordinate with BLM and partners on the following field implementation tasks:

- Provide technical support to the Sage Capacity Team including: quarterly conference calls for peer-to-peer exchange; monthly electronic updates related to new positions, the latest decision support tools, and science webinars to inform management and restoration; an interactive lunch or coffee series via a virtual meeting space; and continued field and institutional support for COVID-19 related issues and specific challenges with project implementation.
- Organize the Annual Sagebrush Collaborative Conservation Forum (virtually) for the Sage Capacity Team and a select group of partners to advance cooperative strategic sagebrush habitat conservation. (Note: This workshop is funded via the Technical Transfer budget of the intra-agency agreement.)
- Work with hosting entities of existing positions and the BLM Management Oversight Group to assess our work and funding and adjust as needed for future conservation delivery using a Position Sustainability Assessment.
- Explore additional opportunities for field delivery capacity that are aligned with BLM state, district, and field office priorities including potential investments in Colorado, Oregon, and Wyoming, as well as opportunities to merge the IWJV's Water 4 and Sagebrush efforts in specific landscapes where warranted.
- Continue support of the Outcome-Based Grazing Authorization pilot projects.

Nearly half of the original 11

demonstration projects are in the process of implementation or out for analysis/comment, with the remaining projects in the objective setting and alternative development process. In addition to seeing these projects to completion, we will continue to work with BLM leadership and staff on promoting internal capacity, communications, and training, and share examples of objectives, monitoring, and other components of creating a flexible outcome-based grazing permit.



Photo: Hannah Nikonow



Photo: Sarah Keller

## Communications and Outreach

Under the first intra-agency agreement, our partnership-driven sagebrush communications have resonated with target audiences and laid the groundwork for enhanced strategic focus. Through the use of numerous communications planning tools, and concurrent with the IWJV Strategic Communications Plan revision in FY 2021, sagebrush communications will be developed to: 1) increase awareness about the BLM-IWJV partnership, 2) engage diverse partners in strategic sagebrush habitat conservation with a shared vision to restore and manage highly valued habitat, and 3) showcase proven models and other BLM-led innovations—all for wildlife, communities, and local economies.

As we embark on the second intra-agency agreement, **our sagebrush communications goal remains to advance proactive, collaborative conservation of the sagebrush ecosystem through communications about partnership-driven efforts and science-based conservation practices and outcomes.**

To date, our primary audiences and partners have included BLM, other federal agency partners, state fish and wildlife agencies, private landowners and public land grazing organizations, non-governmental organizations that are key to sagebrush habitat conservation (e.g., Mule Deer Foundation, Pheasants Forever, National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy), and funders. In FY 2021, we will strategically target new audiences, including outdoor recreators and journalists, with content on fire and invasives. Additionally, we will seek new voices to share stories about sagebrush habitat conservation in ways that demonstrate the power of diverse conservation partnerships.

Here are a few ongoing and new projects we plan to accomplish in FY 2021:

- Implement a journalist workshop in the eastern portion of the sagebrush range in a socially distant format or in a completely virtual structure and endeavor to reach new and diverse audiences.
- Complete a strategic, second-wave distribution of [Up in Smoke: Fire and Invasives on Western Rangelands](https://tinyurl.com/UpInSmokeVideo) (tinyurl.com/UpInSmokeVideo), a six-minute film produced in FY 2020 targeted at journalists and non-consumptive recreators (e.g., hikers, bikers, birders). The expanded reach of this information can help broaden exposure to audiences and user groups that haven't been targeted or highlighted in our past communications efforts.
- Produce a five-minute video about fire and invasives to feature the beauty and value of the sagebrush steppe and evoke respect and appreciation for the landscape. The target audience is non-consumptive recreators.
- Expand the outcome-based grazing landing page content on the web portal to include new fact sheets and video developed in collaboration with the BLM and address the significant internal and external interest in this topic and technical transfer needs.
- Assess the Sage Capacity Team's information needs and generate relevant communications to support their work.
- Update the [sagebrush story map](https://partnersinthesage.com/partnerships-action/) (partnersinthesage.com/partnerships-action/) with relevant news for each Sage Capacity Team position, new positions, and their landscapes.
- Continue to produce original, high-quality communications around fire and invasives issues, and mesic/wet meadow habitat restoration.
- Participate in the conifer expansion communications workgroup and contribute to the development of a partnership website (in addition to other tools) to enhance literacy on this topic.
- Maintain key publication outlets (i.e., social media, web portal, newsletter) through which sagebrush communications materials are released, increase technical transfer via webinars and virtual workshops, and enhance these outlets with new technologies to better engage participants in their remote experiences.

The IWJV is going through multiple updates and new developments on its communications planning strategies. Specifically, the multi-year IWJV Strategic Communications Plan will be updated in FY 2021. As part of that update, the Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands and Water 4 communications efforts will be revised with a long-term vision and shorter-term implementation plans for more nimble and effective deployment of communications tools and tactics that engage diverse partners in strategic habitat conservation.

### **Science, Monitoring, and Technical Transfer (to support BLM)**

The original BLM-IWJV intra-agency agreement provided for implementation of six science projects in partnership with NRCS WLFW (Sage Grouse Initiative), UM, and Oregon State University. Three projects have been completed (see [2019 Annual Report](#): Actionable Science). The following three science projects will be finalized in FY 2021, including:

- **Ecosystem Services: Quantifying Trends in Rangeland Health:** This science project supports land management, planning, decision-making, and evaluation of outcomes for sagebrush rangelands, and is available via the [Rangeland Analysis Platform](#) ([rangelands.app/](#)).
- **Conifer Removal for Songbirds on Public Lands:** This project quantifies the large-scale impacts of conifer removal on avian communities.
- **Sage Grouse Response to Juniper Removal:** This two-year outcome-based evaluation builds on research documenting the effectiveness of conifer removal on sage grouse populations at local and landscape scales over time in a 120,000-acre project area in southern Lake County, Oregon.

In consultation with BLM leadership and managers, our team is exploring important roles in the realm of technical transfer. We currently facilitate technical transfer of science products to BLM managers and resource staff, resulting in science supported actions related to conifer removal, wet meadow habitat restoration, rangeland management, and mitigating catastrophic wildfire and the spread of invasives in sagebrush ecosystems. We will contribute financial and/or human capacity to three technical transfer projects in FY 2021 including:

- **Riparian and Wet Meadow Restoration Technical Assistance** (*Project Lead: NRCS WLFW; multiple partners*): This multi-year project provides technical assistance to BLM, NRCS, and local partners seeking to launch projects using Zeedyk and other restoration techniques in priority landscapes.
- **Invasive Annual Grass Risk Assessment Datasets and Tools** (*Project Lead: USGS; multiple partners*): Initiated in FY 2020, this project will: 1) develop an annotated bibliography of recent, peer-reviewed literature for three invasive annual grass species of highest concern (cheatgrass, medusahead, and ventenata); 2) review all geospatial datasets available for these species, including data attributes. For both tasks, information will be distilled in a format that is accessible and easily understood by private, state, federal, and public land managers and decision-makers.
- **Conifer Expansion Literacy Project Website** (*Project Lead: NRCS WLFW; Utah State University Extension; multiple partners*): This project will bring together the science and literature on a user-friendly online platform around conifer expansion into sagebrush habitats and the research guiding the management of these trees.

Lastly, due to challenges with COVID-19 and a delay with the project, we will continue to support **Sage Grouse Habitat and Population Monitoring**, a joint effort between BLM Montana/Dakotas and Pheasants Forever to increase seasonal monitoring staff for sage grouse lek surveys and habitat monitoring through the collection of standardized data in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. This information provides an opportunity to inform application and use of the Rangeland Analysis Platform for BLM purposes.

## Partnership Development

We will continue to advance and coordinate collaboration between the BLM-IWJV partnership and other private, state, federal, tribal, and corporate stakeholders invested in strategic sagebrush habitat conservation. Our overall objective is to strengthen relationships and leverage investment opportunities in innovative agreements and other methods.

In FY 2021, we will focus on the following partnership development tasks:

- Increase our efforts to support BLM internally, especially given the transition and move of staff to the West, including: hosting quarterly meetings with the Management Oversight Group (the decision-making team for this partnership agreement) and fostering relationships with new decision-makers and resource staff; offering webinars for state, district, and field office staff in the Rocky Mountain and Great Basin regions to share more about our partnership and opportunities for support; and, updating our partnership database and BLM office contact list.
- Create a FY 2020 Annual Report to document and share the accomplishments of the BLM-IWJV partnership effort.
- Foster continued collaboration with NRCS State Offices (e.g., Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming) and NRCS WLFW on targeted sagebrush habitat conservation that supports agricultural producers' access to Farm Bill Conservation Programs and the sustainability of their livestock operations across private and public lands.
- Expand, diversify, and energize our sagebrush conservation partnership network by engaging exploration and production companies; Public Lands Council and cattlemen's associations; tribal partners; the outdoor recreation industry (e.g., REI, Patagonia, First Lite); young people in agriculture, and additional under-represented communities and populations who are essential to the future of sagebrush habitat conservation.
- Seek additional public and private funding to cost-share projects aligned with the vision of cross-boundary management and restoration of sagebrush rangelands for people, wildlife, and the economy.



Photo: Bob Wicks

### **Strategy 1c. Develop multi-year source(s) of funding to address the invasive-wildfire cycle via the leadership of the Sagebrush Conservation Committee.**

The IWJV Sagebrush Conservation Committee became operational in FY 2020 with quarterly meetings focused on identifying range-wide actions related to addressing the invasive-wildfire cycle. The committee worked closely with the Sagebrush Executive Oversight Committee and established a relationship with the Western Governors' Association connected to the development of a range-wide toolkit to address invasive annual grasses.

In FY 2021, we plan to focus our efforts on increasing funding for wildfire and invasives across sagebrush rangelands through initiating a multi-year legislative and communications campaign in partnership with the IWJV Government Relations Committee, Partners for Conservation, WAFWA, and NGOs. This year will be particularly important for decision-makers on the Sagebrush Conservation Committee to maintain momentum and laser-like focus on the need to conserve sagebrush rangelands through the 2020 Presidential Election and potential changes in Washington, D.C. (see [Strategy 5e](#)).

Additionally, the Sagebrush Conservation Committee and its partners will focus on supporting states, federal agencies, and communities on voluntary, incentive-based conservation by learning from and sharing strategic approaches to address wildfire and invasives (especially from Idaho, Oregon, and Wyoming), bringing collective tools and awareness to these threats in the absence of the Sage Grouse Task Force, and encouraging “construction-ready” projects. We will review our membership and work to invite new partners to engage in our efforts including the U.S. Forest Service, tribal representatives, Public Lands Council, and others.

### **Strategy 1d. Provide strategic support to SageWest, a sagebrush communications network.**

Launched in 2016, [SageWest](https://partnersinthesage.com/sagewest) ([partnersinthesage.com/sagewest](https://partnersinthesage.com/sagewest)) is a communications network focused on advancing communications and encouraging outreach activities that support collaboration within—and effective conservation efforts across—the sagebrush ecosystem. Guided by its [Charter](#), SageWest endeavors to capitalize on its members’ strengths to increase public awareness and appreciation for sagebrush country. The network currently consists of 469 individuals representing 151 organizations, with the IWJV playing a co-leadership role with the National Audubon Society and FWS. Additionally, the IWJV [hosts a page for the network](#) on its web portal, [partnersinthesage.com](https://partnersinthesage.com).

Over the past few years, SageWest has made important strides in connecting the conservation community working on sagebrush habitat through sharing content, success stories, research, resources, and tools across organizational silos. In the past fiscal year, SageWest modified its structure to regrow its technical team as previous members transitioned into new jobs and shifted its oversight team to an advisory group. In FY 2021, the IWJV will work with SageWest founding members and the technical team to capitalize on technical transfer projects that are of high interest to many members of the sagebrush conservation community. This will appear in the form of webinar facilitation, theme campaigns on topics like fire and invasives, and a virtual workshop for communicators.

## **EXPANDING WATER 4**

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Water 4 efforts have dramatically transformed the IWJV’s approach to wetland habitat conservation. By focusing on **water—the natural resource issue that defines the West**—we are helping partners conserve wetland habitat in a way that is relevant for many reasons for birds, other wildlife, and landscape function. As former IWJV Management Board member, Alexa Sandoval, eloquently stated: “Water is the currency of the West.” [Water 4](https://iwjv.org/water) ([iwjv.org/water](https://iwjv.org/water)) was established **to conserve wet meadows and water for agriculture, wildlife and fisheries habitat, groundwater recharge, and landscape resiliency in ways that matter to people.**

Since its launch in January 2019, Water 4 has been increasingly recognized as a pragmatic and broadly supported effort to conserve habitat through a lens of relevancy. We have focused our work to date on the geographies of significance identified by the IWJV Water 4 Committee, building field delivery capacity to increase the pace and scale of on-the-ground conservation benefitting wetland habitat, irrigated agriculture, native fish, and big game populations. In addition, we have produced some impactful landscape-scale science, implemented a multi-faceted set of communications campaigns, and shared the Water 4 story with congressional offices and agency leadership in Washington, D.C.

In FY 2020, we made substantial progress in operationalizing Water 4 thanks to significant contributions from a powerful array of investors that provided funding for field delivery capacity, science, communications, and partnership development.

For more information on our recent accomplishments, see the [Water 4 Semi-Annual Report](https://www.iwjv.org/water4-semi-annual-report) (tinyurl.com/Water4SemiAnnualReport).

**2021 Expanding Water 4 Strategies**

In FY 2021, our water and wetland habitat conservation efforts will focus on the following three **Strategies**:

- Build capacity, leverage resources, and engage diverse partners in geographies of significance.
- Drive conservation delivery funding to Water 4 landscapes by sharing a larger story of waterbird migration and the importance of the agricultural lands they use.
- Expand wetland dynamics science and facilitate technical transfer of decision-support systems.

**Strategy 2a. Build capacity, leverage resources, and engage diverse partners in geographies of significance.**

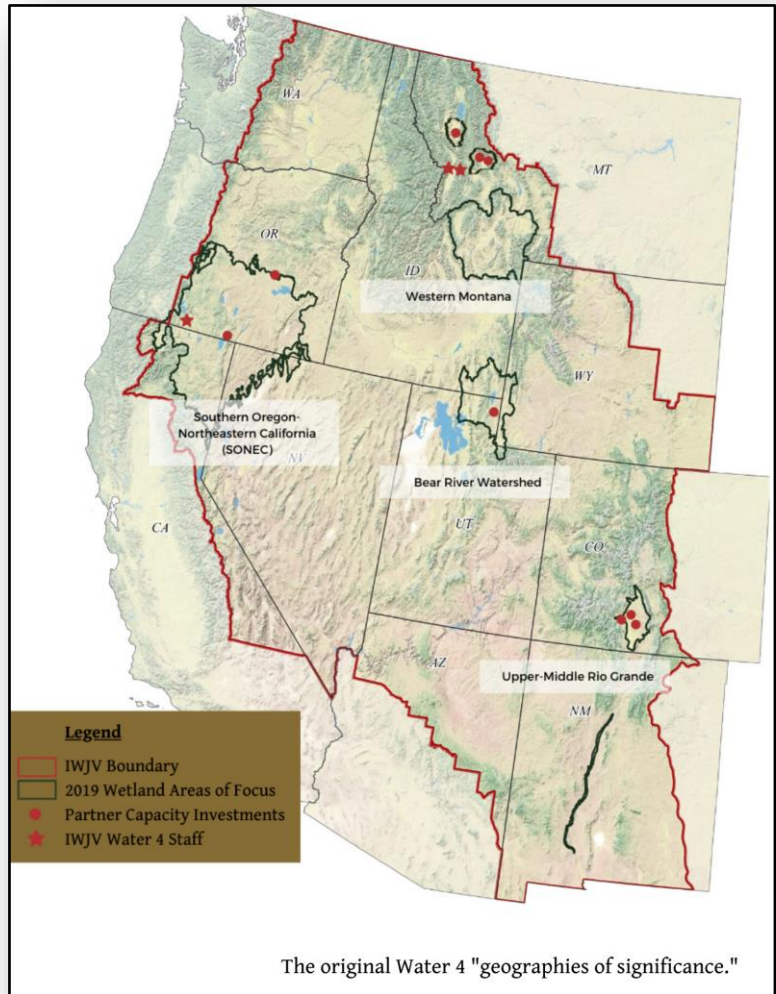
The hallmark of Water 4 progress in its first year was the building of strategic relationships and capacity to catalyze water and wetlands conservation in geographies of significance. In FY 2021, we will further expand the scope and impact of Water 4.

**Field Delivery Capacity**

By **listening to partners and spurring collaboration**, we have identified capacity voids that are hindering the ability of conservation partners and programs to deliver wetland habitat conservation in key landscapes. In response to the identified needs, we brokered a series of creative

funding arrangements to support “boots on the ground” in four focal areas (see map at right) to address those bottlenecks and accelerate conservation at the local level. In FY 2021, we will devote continued support to these focal areas as well as explore new opportunities. Priority tasks include:

- Chart the next five years of the Southern Oregon-Northeastern California Working Wet Meadows Initiative by sustaining the partner positions in Lake and Harney counties, establishing a new partner position to help NRCS deliver conservation in the Snake River Basin of eastern Oregon, and helping Oregon NRCS refine its Conservation Implementation Strategy, which informs on-the-ground habitat conservation objectives. [SONEC is the flagship landscape](https://www.iwjv.org/sonec-working-wet-meadows) (iwjv.org/sonec-working-wet-meadows) in which Water 4 was inspired and our work this year will build momentum for the next five years of strategic water and wetlands conservation addressing the needs of Pacific Flyway waterfowl and waterbirds.



- Expand field delivery capacity in focal areas by creating three to four new positions in the Middle Rio Grande, Bear River Watershed, Southwest Montana, and/or the Klamath Basin through leveraging partnership funding and resources.
- Strengthen the capacity and momentum for conservation easement acquisition in SONEC, Bear River Watershed, Middle Rio Grande, and other key landscapes.
- Merge the IWJV's Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands effort and Water 4 in focal areas through expanded field delivery capacity.



Photo: Christi Bode

### Communications and Outreach

We built a strong foundation and established new partnerships through our fully staffed communications efforts in FY 2020. Well-crafted narratives of Water 4 landscapes and migratory connectivity, public-private lands interdependence, private lands conservation successes, and multi-species habitat conservation that benefits irrigated agriculture and local communities resonated with target audiences including large NGOs and industry associations who helped expand the reach of our communications tools. These messages lay the groundwork for future Water 4 communications about the importance of conserving wetland networks through conservation across public and private lands in the Intermountain West.

In FY 2021, we will use sophisticated communications campaigns to spread messages of migratory connectivity throughout the landscape, elevate the voices of on-the-ground practitioners, and create narratives of successful cross-boundary collaborative conservation initiatives. Here are a few major projects we plan to accomplish:

- Continue to highlight the value of the SONEC region through current science in new *Intermountain Insights* and other communications tools.
- Produce short videos and additional engaging tools about the significance of water, wetlands, and wet meadow habitat conservation, including: the power of public-private partnerships in the Upper and Middle Rio Grande corridor; the value of added capacity to conservation efforts in the Bear River Watershed; the importance of working wet meadows to sandhill cranes in Montana's Blackfoot Valley; and, private wetland habitat connectivity within the Pacific Flyway (with an emphasis on the Klamath Basin).
- Maintain IWJV's key publication outlets (i.e., social media, website, e-newsletter) through which Water 4 communications materials are released.
- Increase and participate in virtual forums, technical transfer webinars, and workshops and augment these outlets with new technologies and best practices to engage participants, enhance their experiences, and share the Water 4 message and model in new networks (see [Strategy 2c](#)).
- Engage new partners, especially those in under-represented communities and populations that are key to Water 4 conservation efforts (e.g., urban communities of Albuquerque and Salt Lake City, Hispanic populations in the Rio Grande corridor, and tribal communities in key landscapes of the Intermountain West). This also includes working with existing partners who are already involved with these communities and providing communications support.
- Produce informational materials about large-scale funding opportunities—e.g., North American Wetlands Conservation Act and NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program—to help current and new partners access funding.
- Create communications tools that convey the interconnectedness of sagebrush and wetland habitats in the Intermountain West.

The IWJV is going through multiple updates and new developments on its communications planning strategies. Specifically, the multi-year IWJV Strategic Communications Plan will be updated in FY 2021. As part of that update, the Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands and Water 4 communications efforts will be revised with a long-term vision and shorter-term implementation plans for more nimble and effective deployment of communications tools and tactics that engage diverse partners in strategic habitat conservation.

### Partnership Development

**Water 4 is rooted in the concept that the best water and wetlands conservation outcomes come from addressing landscape health through shared vision**, rather than focusing on single species, specific lands, or strategies that can be very polarizing. This broader perspective furthers conservation with multi-species benefits and brings in new partners, which, in turn, leverages diverse conservation capacity and funding. In 2020, we focused substantial time, energy, and resources on building new and innovative partnerships around water-based challenges. More specifically, we brought the bird, fish, and big game communities together to demonstrate the power of shared vision and cross-species conservation—e.g., Western Native Trout Initiative, Mule Deer Foundation, and state fish and wildlife agencies. These partnerships are resulting in whole-watershed conservation benefitting irrigated agriculture, multiple species of wildlife, and local communities—an important evolution in our efforts to further conservation for birds and a diversity of other ecosystem services. Building upon this momentum in FY 2021, Water 4 will:

- Develop relationships around cross-boundary and multi-species conservation, transfer conservation lessons across geographies, and connect the relevance of conservation projects through migratory networks and the agricultural water systems that support them.
- Leverage existing partnerships to expand our landscape-scale network and approaches. Key relationships include: Family Farm Alliance, Farmers Conservation Alliance, and University of Wyoming’s Ruckelshaus Institute.
- Create a [semi-annual Water 4 Funders Report](#) to document investments and share accomplishments of Water 4.
- Seek additional public and private funding to cost-share efforts aligned with the Water 4 vision.

### Strategy 2b. Drive conservation delivery funding to Water 4 landscapes by sharing a larger story of waterbird migration and the importance of the agricultural lands they use.

The plights of different species of migratory birds are linked through individual landscapes that make up broader habitat networks across the Pacific and Central Flyways. To make sense of these connections, we are creating strong partnerships with NRCS State Conservationists and other natural resource leaders, developing landscape-scale science to inform investments, and communicating the importance of sustaining a network of connected habitats. The forward-looking concept of preserving entire migratory networks, instead of individual landscapes, is shaping how funders view conservation strategies in the arid Intermountain West.

To reinforce connections between landscapes, in FY 2021 we will:

- Develop Water 4 branding that helps partners clearly articulate the Water 4 approach, communicates the importance of sustaining connectivity of the migratory network across landscapes, and demonstrates that investments in individual geographies can have substantial impacts (see [Strategy 2c](#)).

*Water 4 is helping to illuminate the linkages between landscapes and demonstrate that conservation in key landscapes is essential for sustaining migratory bird networks, which adds a new and powerful dimension to the investment strategies of agency and private investors.*



- Support partners who are developing RCPP proposals in key landscapes with technical assistance and Water 4 branding that includes science and messaging, to strengthen proposals and elevate the value of these water-challenged landscapes. RCPP is viewed as a powerful, voluntary, incentive-based conservation partnership program that creates flexibility and tools for whole watersheds and other mixed geographies.
- Present Water 4 to NAWCA Council Staff, highlighting the IWJV's wetland dynamics and resiliency science, Water 4's human dimensions and relevancy to people emphasis, and the value of wetlands in the key Water 4 landscapes.
- Build new relationships with foundation staff and others directing private funding to conservation activities aligned with the Water 4 principles and goals. Share science with these funders for strategic outcomes to help partners access non-traditional forms of wetland conservation funding.
- Explore opportunities for Water 4 in the Upper Colorado River Basin of Colorado and Wyoming, a critical link in the Central Flyway for sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and other wetland-dependent birds. This region is at the center of many discussions about the future of water in the West, thus is a great fit for Water 4. We will foster partnerships with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Ducks Unlimited, Yampa-White-Green Basin Roundtable, Trout Unlimited, FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, land trusts, and conservation districts to identify and access conservation delivery funding. This landscape, like the Bear River Watershed, also presents great opportunities for integrating Water 4 and sagebrush conservation.

**Strategy 2c. Expand wetland dynamics science and facilitate technical transfer of decision-support systems.**

Since its inception, **Water 4 has facilitated the translation of science into action for strategic habitat conservation.** In FY 2020, this involved incorporating wetland resiliency science into partner planning efforts and initiating the development of a decision support tool to integrate spatial information into conservation planning. The IWJV's long-term partnership with UM provides us with essential office/lab space and support from the university that is imperative to achievement of our science objectives. In FY 2021, Water 4 will continue to allocate significant time and resources to support partners with science for effective conservation planning and decision-making.



*Status of IWJV wetland dynamics modeling: green complete; yellow funded and to be completed FY 2021. Modeling has been conducted at a state level to include all or portions of seven adjacent JVs, indicative of our commitment to IWJV partners that work across state boundaries and supporting cross-JV collaboration. Final data and analyses will provide seamless monthly monitoring of wetland habitat trends from 1984 to present for all 11 western states.*

## State-level Wetland Modeling

The [2013 IWJV Implementation Plan](https://iwjv.org/resource/iwjv-2013-implementation-plan-entire-plan) (iwjv.org/resource/iwjv-2013-implementation-plan-entire-plan) identified wetland dynamics modeling as our highest priority science need. In short, we needed to know where the wetland habitat was *in space and time* and how landscapes were changing. Fast forward eight years: We have developed wetland dynamics and wetland resiliency data sets for the vast majority of the Intermountain West and are on track to wrap up this work in the coming year. In FY 2021, we will expand wetland modeling to Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Washington to complete the IWJV's long-term effort to construct a west-wide wetland and waterbird habitat-monitoring network. Results will support ongoing development of a seamless web-based platform **allowing partners to track wetland conditions across 11 western states**. Final modeling efforts will encompass all of the Intermountain West and portions of the adjoining Central Valley, Northern Great Plains, Pacific Bird, Playa Lakes, and Sonoran JVs.

## Cross-boundary Flyway-scale Wetland Bird Science

A focus on the integration of science across geopolitical boundaries will promote unified strategies for migratory bird habitat conservation (see [Strategy 2b](#)). Projects include collaborative science development with Central Valley, Pacific Birds Habitat, Playa Lakes, and Sonoran JVs. Key tasks include:

- **Pacific Flyway Integrated Landscape Conservation: Meeting the Needs of Waterfowl and Shorebirds in a New Era of Water Scarcity** (*Project Lead: Ducks Unlimited; IWJV; Point Blue Conservation Science; UM; Central Valley JV*): This science project links wetland and waterbird ecology in the Central Valley of California and SONEC. Outcomes will support cross-boundary landscape planning that addresses potential impacts of long-term wetland declines. Special emphasis will be placed on water delivery needs for national wildlife refuge operations in the Klamath Basin. Initial findings are expected in FY 2021.
- **Pacific/Central Flyway Cinnamon Teal Habitat Utilization** (*Project Lead: USGS; University of California-Davis; IWJV*): This effort focuses on the migratory needs of cinnamon teal in the Intermountain West using over 100 GPS-tagged birds to identify and prioritize important stopover habitats and locations. While focused in the IWJV region, outcomes will also include important stopover habitats in the Central Valley, Playa Lakes, and Sonoran JVs. Project completion and publication is anticipated in FY 2021.

## Technical Transfer

Water 4 will create new ways to transfer science findings, assess outcomes, and facilitate strategic conservation delivery investments (see [Tech Transfer diagram](#)). By increasing partner co-production with research, **Water 4 brings new wetland resiliency science into planning and decision making for more effective and efficient conservation**. Outcomes are intended to promote integration of IWJV science into State Wildlife Action Plans, Pacific/Central Flyway planning, and grant proposals—e.g., NAWCA and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Key technical transfer strategies include:

- **Interactive Science:** Improving accessibility to data through stronger relationships between research scientists and implementers is crucial to creating actionable science. In FY 2021, all IWJV peer-reviewed research will be accompanied by web-based tools (see ["Tools" in Tech Transfer diagram](#)) that allow managers and users in the field to explore findings using interactive maps and statistics (see sandhill crane example [here](https://tinyurl.com/SandhillCranesInteractive); tinyurl.com/SandhillCranesInteractive). This approach will allow partners to extract customized results relevant to local, SCP, or flyway needs. Tools will include key biological findings presented in a narrative format easily transferable to planning documents and associated funding proposals.



- **Virtual Science Series for Habitat Conservation Practitioners:** Current realities have rapidly expanded the use of virtual communications. Increased utilization of these tools is providing new and efficient opportunities to share science across a broader spectrum of the IWJV partnership (see [“Implementation” in Tech Transfer diagram](#)). In FY 2021, the IWJV will launch a quarterly virtual science series for habitat conservation practitioners designed to share how IWJV science is being used in habitat conservation delivery in an open forum that encourages partner engagement. The objective of this series is to increase awareness of available IWJV science and further a dialog of science planning to conservation delivery for land managers and conservation practitioners. New interactive web tools will be generated and presented during the talks to facilitate the use of important research. *Target audiences: habitat conservation delivery practitioners from NRCS, FWS, other federal agencies, state fish and wildlife agencies, and NGOs.*



- **Virtual Science Training for Conservation Planners:** Wetlands research and modeling provides the IWJV partnership powerful tools to evaluate long-term ecological trends. The complexity of this information often requires additional manipulation to integrate results into local and state level planning or to customize outputs to address more specific agency/NGO needs (see [“Implementation”](#) and [“Construction” in Tech Transfer diagram](#)). In some instances, the spatial wetland datasets developed by the IWJV provide a great foundation for partners to conduct their own custom analyses to address questions at the scales in which they work. However, our partners often need some guidance on how best to manipulate the data to achieve their conservation planning objectives. To address this gap, in collaboration with UM, the IWJV will host free virtual seminars to natural resource professionals to expand their skills and accelerate the rate at which the IWJV science is applied in strategic conservation delivery. This series is intended to bolster science capacity across the IWJV partnership by helping to train agency and NGO staff to conduct their own analyses with these datasets to meet their state- and landscape-level conservation needs. Participants will be trained in the use of emerging technology and cutting-edge techniques supporting a new era of ecological monitoring and wildlife management in the West. *Target Audience: Technical staff and conservation planners from state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agencies, NGOs, and universities. The mixing of participants ranging from seasoned conservation professionals to graduate students from universities that routinely collaborate with the IWJV (e.g., UM, University of California-Davis, Louisiana State University, Oregon State University) will promote diversity and innovative problem solving.*

## REDESIGNING STATE CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIPS

The IWJV is among the largest and most ecologically diverse JV in North America, encompassing parts or all of 11 western states and 10 different Bird Conservation Regions. Our landscape is experiencing unprecedented levels of change due to a rapidly growing (and relocating) human population, habitat loss and fragmentation, invasive species, accelerated climate change, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To address the challenges and uncertainty facing our landscape and communities, the IWJV brings together a broad collection of partners, including those who are focused on bird habitat conservation, as well as other diverse stakeholders who are essential to community-based, landscape-scale conservation.

For 10 years, our [SCPs](http://iwjv.org/state-conservation-partnerships) (iwjv.org/state-conservation-partnerships) have worked to overcome barriers and find common ground and innovative solutions to address increasingly complex issues affecting the conservation of birds and their habitats within the Intermountain West. These public-private partnerships were designed to engage people in advancing the IWJV's regional conservation priorities at the state and local levels. They have served to connect people with science, projects, and funding, and foster relationships.

The SCPs vary in terms of their role, structure, work, and effectiveness, and the conservation challenges they face are ever evolving. As part of an adaptive approach to addressing these complexities, we recognize the need to transition the SCPs to support the next five years of IWJV partnership-building, engagement, and action to effectively address future conservation challenges.

### **2021 Redesigning SCPs Strategy**

In FY 2021, our SCP work will focus on one **Strategy**.

#### **Strategy 3. Redesign the SCPs to support bird and other wildlife habitat, and community conservation across multiple scales in the Intermountain West (2021-2025).**

In FY 2020, we embarked on this project using a systems thinking framework to motivate change, catalyze collaboration, focus on key coordinated changes, achieve system-wide impacts, and stimulate continuous learning. We interviewed the SCP Chairs/Co-Chairs and had multiple virtual work sessions to explore the SCP model, identify chronic problems and challenges, learn from successes, and thoughtfully explore what we need to change in the system to evolve the work for the future. This project will continue through early FY 2021 with the intention of engaging diverse partners in redesigning and reframing the SCPs. Major tasks include:

- Develop a vision for the SCPs, and revisit the purpose of the SCPs taking into account the systems thinking effort;
- Host a virtual meeting program with SCP Chairs/Co-Chairs and new partners to visualize the future and create innovative avenues for engagement;
- Create a clear implementation strategy with associated resources, including demonstration projects, benchmarks for progress, a stronger relationship with the Management Board, and ways to cluster partnerships together under the umbrella of the IWJV (i.e., connected to catalyzing sagebrush conservation and Water 4);
- Establish a process for outreach, new learning, and diverse engagement in the SCPs;
- Revise/update the SCP content on the IWJV website to reflect the redesign and develop a funding resources page; and,
- Present the redesigned strategy to the IWJV Management Board (Winter/Spring 2021).

## **BUILDING CAPACITY OF STAFF & PARTNERS**

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The IWJV and our partners, including state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agencies, NGO conservation organizations, tribes, and private and industry partners are confronted with unique wildlife and natural resource management challenges. These challenges require new ways of thinking and the leadership capacity within our systems and organizations to identify and address gaps, solve complex problems, mobilize partners, and adapt for the future to achieve lasting results. Some of the issues driving this need include climate adaptation and competing demands for limited water; large-scale, cross-jurisdictional endangered and threatened species management issues (e.g., Greater sage grouse, grizzly bears, wolves, salmonids, etc.); public lands policy and management challenges; and, rapidly-increasing threats that affect rangelands, forests, and communities, like catastrophic wildfire and cheatgrass. The investment in human capacity is needed now because of the rapid pace and scale of change, and the economic and environmental interdependence of these issues that affect a growing and increasingly diverse set of urban and rural partners in the West.

To be effective, it's critical for people in conservation to be able to navigate challenging social and political environments, marshal resources effectively, diagnose problems and intervene artfully, and understand how to execute leadership from multiple points and positions within a conservation issue. Furthermore, there is a growing recognition that the systems that were designed in the past century, or even recent decades, are not the systems that will be needed to address the problems of the future; and we will need a diversity of people with the collaborative capacity to adapt these systems.

### **2021 Building Capacity of Staff & Partners Strategies**

In FY 2021, our efforts to build capacity of staff and partners will focus on the following two **Strategies**:

- Increase conservation relevancy and success through diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Launch the Western Conservation Leadership Development Program.

#### **Strategy 4a. Increase conservation relevancy and success through diversity, equity, and inclusion.**

People and partnerships are the heart and soul of the IWJV. Our organization consists of a Management Board, staff, and partners with a wide range of experiences, expertise, and perspectives resulting in collaborative and effective conservation. We are dedicated to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in our day-to-day work processes. Each member of our team brings a unique set of skills and context that contribute to a high-functioning, innovative, and fast-paced work environment. However, diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges clearly exist within our organization and the conservation community at-large. We believe it is key to engage in this work by seeking to understand, listen, and learn from new perspectives; diagnose the challenges and/or barriers that may keep us from being a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive partnership; and operate with purposeful actions into the future. We also acknowledge that there are differences with respect to how people learn and take action, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. As such, under the direction of the IWJV's Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee, we will begin to address these challenges through four interrelated actions:

- 1) Provide training, education, and knowledge-building experiences for Management Board members, staff, and key partners to work together with professional facilitators and learn a common language that will enable effective internal conversations on DEI issues.
- 2) Distribute resources and implement individual trainings to provide all staff with the opportunity to develop similar DEI skill sets at their own pace.
- 3) Create a lunchtime speaker series or discussion group that provides all staff with the opportunity to research and select resources to discuss at a designated time.
- 4) Strengthen IWJV priorities and initiatives by actively identifying conservation partners that expand our current partnership efforts and are critical to advancing on-the-ground conservation.

#### **Strategy 4b. Launch the Western Conservation Leadership Development Program.**

In FY 2020, we researched and explored the development of a Western Conservation Leadership Development Program in partnership with Wyoming Game and Fish Department and other partners represented on the IWJV Management Board. The purpose of the program is to equip a diverse set of public and private partners in the western region with the leadership and relationship capacities that are needed to inspire and create a legacy of conservation for future generations. We identified The WYldlife Fund to serve as the fiscal sponsor of the program.

In FY 2021, we propose to launch the program with a virtual training module in the spring. This will be a partnership between The WYldlife Fund, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, IWJV, additional state fish and wildlife agencies, federal agencies, corporations, and NGOs. The role of the IWJV will be to provide staff/technical support to launch and market the program to a diverse set of conservation partners. The training module will be funded via tuition of participants.

## **OPERATING & ADMINISTERING AN EFFECTIVE JOINT VENTURE**

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The IWJV's FY 2021 budget of \$4.37 million represents an 11% increase from the previous year's record budget of \$3.90 million, reflecting our continued relevance in the conservation world during a time of great uncertainty. The IWJV's current staff of 13 FTEs—including one vacant position—has been instrumental in building partnerships with BLM leadership, NRCS State Conservationists, FWS Regional Directorates, state fish and wildlife agency leadership, NGOs, USFS, and energy company executives. **Today, 72% of our income is derived from partner contributions, giving us the ability to deliver roughly four times the conservation value that we would be able to achieve by simply using our allocation of \$1 million in base JV funding.** Concurrent with this budget growth, we have developed new operational systems and processes to manage the ever-growing operation.

### **2021 Operating & Administering an Effective JV Strategies**

This will be an important year to devote energy and resources to the efficient operation and administrative oversight of the IWJV given the context of a global pandemic. We are adapting to a COVID-19 work environment by learning how to host effective virtual meetings, telework from home offices, coordinate and collaborate as teams, and foster relationships with existing and new partners without travel to in-person meetings. In many ways, we are realizing new opportunities to strengthen funding partnerships, grow conservation capacity, address organizational challenges with new initiatives, and administer an increasingly complex set of financial agreements. Our operational and administrative efforts will focus on the following five

#### **Strategies:**

- Administer agreements, communicate and deliver results, and collaborate with *core* funding partners.
- Grow conservation funding to support priorities identified in the FY 2021 AOP, and augment the IWJV's entrepreneurial business model.
- Maintain efficient operations in a virtual work environment.
- Evaluate science staffing and contractual needs to support our effectiveness and internal capacity to address the IWJV mission and priorities.
- Build upon government relations successes in uncertain times.

#### **Strategy 5a. Administer agreements, deliver and communicate results, and collaborate with *core* funding partners.**

The majority of the IWJV's income is provided by federal agencies and industry partners through interagency, intra-agency, and non-federal funding agreements. Managing agreements requires significant time and attention to deliver on expected outcomes for the IWJV and our partners. Additionally, each of these partnership efforts requires substantial communications support and reporting on outcomes through annual reports and other accounting efforts.

Our core funding partners include: FWS, NRCS, BLM, ConocoPhillips, and Rocky Mountain Power/Pacific Power. In FY 2021, we will focus on the following priority relationships:

- **FWS IR 5/7, 9, and 10:** In FY 2020, we made tremendous progress in partnerships with FWS IR 5/7 (Denver), IR 9 (Portland), and IR 10 (Sacramento). This involved substantial collaboration with the Science Applications Program regional and national leadership, a powerful full-day workshop with the IR 9 Regional Directorate in Portland, involvement by the IWJV's Director of Strategic Partnerships in the FWS Sagebrush Conservation Team, and collaboration throughout the year with IR 10 on the Klamath Basin. The three FWS regions (via Science Applications, National Wildlife Refuges, Ecological Services, and PFW programs) allocated \$326,000 to the IWJV to support field delivery capacity, science, technical transfer, and communications efforts in FY 2021. We will seek other areas of common vision and continue to build collaborative funding relationships around mutual objectives with these regions, in addition to pursuing a relationship with Science Applications via the Washington, D.C. Office.
- **NRCS—Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and Oregon:** NRCS State Conservationists are key decision-makers in the implementation of private lands sagebrush and wetland habitat conservation. We currently have extremely productive partnerships with Colorado NRCS, Montana NRCS, and Oregon NRCS. In addition, we are working with New Mexico NRCS to deliver a science project to support Farm Bill program implementation. Notably, in FY 2020, we cemented our partnership with Montana NRCS to support wetlands, water, and/or native fisheries conservation in the Blackfoot Watershed, Mission Valley, and Southwest Montana over the next four years. In FY 2021, we will be highly focused on delivering tangible results to NRCS in these states. NRCS is the leading investor in Water 4, providing \$655,200 to the IWJV to strengthen private lands conservation in key landscapes.
- **BLM Washington, D.C. Office and California, Montana-Dakotas, and Nevada State Offices:** The BLM Washington, D.C. Office has become an instrumental contributor to our sagebrush habitat conservation through the Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands effort (see [Strategy 1b](#)). In FY 2019 and 2020, we secured agreements with BLM state offices in California, Montana-Dakotas, and Nevada to support sagebrush field delivery capacity positions and science/monitoring. In FY 2021, BLM is providing \$1,830,100 to the IWJV for sagebrush rangeland management and restoration; we anticipate increasing this funding throughout the year. We will prioritize quarterly meetings with BLM leadership to continue to advance and deliver on this essential BLM-IWJV partnership moving into its fifth year of implementation.
- **Industry Partnerships:** Our two premier industry partners—ConocoPhillips and Rocky Mountain Power/Pacific Power—continue to demonstrate their commitment to the IWJV and its ability to leverage federal investments in conservation. In FY 2021, ConocoPhillips is providing \$300,000 and Rocky Mountain Power/Pacific Power is contributing \$30,000 to support the IWJV's sagebrush conservation work and operations. We will collaborate with these companies throughout the year to maximize returns on their investments. Clearly, these partnerships are at the core of the IWJV's growth and success over the last decade.

Our entrepreneurial business model has been successful thanks to our team that manages and tracks a multi-layered budget with many complexities. For example, we obligated all our interagency/intra-agency funding and 98% of our appropriated FWS base JV funding in cooperative agreements by September, optimally setting up IWJV business operations for the coming year. In FY 2021, we will conduct a thorough review of our budget tracking system and make improvements as needed to sustain accuracy and improve efficiency.

### **Strategy 5b. Grow conservation funding to support priorities identified in the FY 2021 AOP and augment the IWJV's entrepreneurial business model.**

We will seek to grow our conservation capacity and impact by building relationships in the following new arenas and/or sources of funding:

- **Exploration and Production Companies:** In FY 2019 and 2020, the IWJV Management Board and its senior staff conducted a powerful set of meetings with industry partners in Dillon, Montana and Denver, Colorado. The second meeting, hosted by EOG Resources was attended by nine oil and gas exploration and production companies with strong interest in proactive, voluntary sagebrush conservation. The vibe was extremely positive and highlighted common vision for productive, long-term habitat and range conditions along with healthy business operations. Literally days later, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered stay-at-home orders. An associated reduction in petroleum consumption, coinciding with other marketplace events, resulted in the oil and gas sector suffering an historic downturn in prices. Petroleum prices have recovered to some degree over the last five months and it appears that several companies remain interested in long-term alliances with the IWJV. We plan to re-engage with industry partners early in FY 2021 and resume discussions around potential collaboration.
- **NRCS State Offices:** In FY 2020, we received a verbal commitment from the Utah NRCS State Conservationist to develop a Utah NRCS-IWJV interagency agreement to build capacity for wet meadow and sagebrush conservation in the Upper Bear River watershed, which will catalyze funding for on-the-ground conservation in the future. In FY 2021, we will develop the Utah NRCS agreement, execute a joint meeting with Oregon NRCS and Montana NRCS leadership to envision future collaboration in these two key states, and establish next steps with Colorado NRCS to build upon our successful San Luis Valley partnership (see [Strategy 2a](#)). Finally, we will explore the potential for new partnerships with Idaho NRCS and Wyoming NRCS.
- **USFS:** In FY 2020, our Government Relations team met with the leadership of USFS and discussed the opportunities to establish an interagency agreement to support Water 4 and sagebrush habitat conservation. Shortly, thereafter, the global pandemic, the retirement of our USFS Management Board representative, and the need to address other priorities stalled our progress in strengthening the relationship with USFS. However, we plan to re-engage with USFS leadership and resume these important conversations about partnership coordination and funding in FY 2021.
- **Private Foundations and Other Fundraising:** Members of the Management Board and senior staff are interested in exploring mechanisms to increase private contributions through foundations and other unique donations. For example, Water 4 is developing an important relationship with WNTI and exploring opportunities to work with the Walton Family Foundation to grow conservation capacity in priority landscapes. Additionally, our tech transfer efforts are leading us in the direction of building bridges between science and funders to show outcomes and impacts across habitats. Lastly, we are exploring mechanisms and opportunities with Pheasants Forever to create a pathway for private contributions to support sagebrush habitat conservation.

### **Strategy 5c. Maintain efficient operations in a virtual work environment.**

It is highly likely that the connection to our partners will be primarily virtual for a portion, if not most, of FY 2021. We have adapted, in real-time, to the abrupt changes brought on by the pandemic and devoted substantial effort to strategically preparing for both virtual and in-person business. Well-organized, engaging, and highly impactful events and meetings are critical to our operations. Our team will continue to focus on delivering effective meetings, regardless of environment, and providing necessary follow-up to advance collective objectives, including these events:

- IWJV Management Board Meetings (quarterly; in person, virtual, or hybrid)
- Annual Sagebrush Collaborative Forum (see [Strategy 1b](#))
- Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands Meeting with BLM Leadership (quarterly; see [Strategy 1b](#))
- SCP Virtual Program (see [Strategy 3](#))
- Various IWJV Committee Meetings (Government Relations Committee, Sagebrush Conservation Committee, Water 4 Committee, etc.)



Further, we will focus on developing, sharing, and demonstrating new tools to hone our partnership's collective abilities to connect and advance the IWJV mission and priorities through virtual platforms. We are committing time for training as well as developing [guidance documents and webinars to share this information with partners](https://tinyurl.com/VirtualMeetingGuidance) (tinyurl.com/VirtualMeetingGuidance). This innovation will lead to new ways to conduct meetings, engage partners, and facilitate dialogue in an effective virtual platform. It also includes the recognition that, for some, the virtual world may be a perceived or very real barrier to business, so we will devise ways to be sensitive to the challenges some partners may experience, both personally and professionally, in a technology-based environment. The need for effective and durable conservation partnerships is as strong as ever so we will embrace opportunities to learn, model, share, and evolve the tools for working in these new platforms as "meeting partners where they are" takes on different meanings in the future.

**Strategy 5d. Evaluate science staffing and contractual needs to support our effectiveness and internal capacity to address the IWJV's mission and priorities.**

We have recruited and maintained a highly professional and uniquely skilled staff with a diverse set of expertise and backgrounds. In FY 2020, our Science Coordinator resigned from the IWJV, creating a federal staff vacancy. We envisioned moving forward to refill this position, and then the pandemic with its associated repercussions on the economy and uncertainties caused senior staff to pause and rethink this position and its future. As such, we plan to work in FY 2021 with members of our Management Board, the Operations Assessment Committee and other committees, and partners to identify the appropriate long-term solution for science support. In the short-term, we will explore avenues for meeting our sagebrush science support needs (see [Strategy 1a](#)).

We will also continue working with the UM Avian Science Center to employ student support for our operations. Given the likelihood that IWJV staff will work remotely for some or all of FY 2021, we will identify specific projects, such as GIS, for student employees rather than general office support.

**Strategy 5e. Build upon government relations successes in uncertain times.**

The IWJV celebrated a \$1.5-million increase in overall JV funding in FY 2020, thanks in large part to the work of the Government Relations Committee, other IWJV partners, and staff in developing strong relationships with key congressional members and agency decision-makers in Washington, D.C. We remain committed to maintaining and fostering these relationships—virtually and, hopefully, in-person in FY 2021.

The IWJV's hallmark adaptability will be important in an election year in which federal agency priorities could shift pending potential changes in the Administration and/or Congress. We will continue to advance our government relations endeavors as follows:

- Support the Association of JV Management Boards in strengthening the JV community by sharing the successes and value of JVs;
- Champion strong conservation program funding with members of Congress through communications that enhance awareness of the IWJV's work;
- Support sagebrush rangelands conservation by advancing funding to aid our Partnering to Conserve Sagebrush Rangelands effort and address the threats of wildfire and invasives;
- Share the story of Water 4 and seek funding to catalyze new and expanded partnerships, address capacity needs, and catalyze high-impact conservation that delivers results for water users around multiple objectives;
- Help craft conservation concepts as part of a national effort to recover American agriculture and the future of working lands, addressing the impacts of the pandemic on agricultural producers in the West.

The focus by the world and our country on the COVID-19 crisis warrants an adaptive approach to our planned government relations work in FY 2021. We may be unable to meet in person with leaders of key federal agencies and members of Congress until the virus risks are diminished. Even then, we will likely need to carry out our work in some new and innovative ways. The pandemic presents challenges that may spur new ways of thinking about conservation as a means of economic recovery, long-term stability, and resilience for the communities of the Intermountain West. Together, the committee will navigate the impacts and adjust our tactical strategies as needed to be effective.

## APPENDIX: LIST OF ACRONYMS

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AOP: Annual Operational Plan  
BLM: Bureau of Land Management  
DEI: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion  
FWS: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
FY: Fiscal Year  
GIS: Geographic Information Systems  
IR: Interior Region  
IWJV: Intermountain West Joint Venture  
JV: Joint Venture  
NAWCA: North American Wetlands Conservation Act  
NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service  
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization  
PFW: Partners for Fish and Wildlife  
RCPP: Regional Conservation Partnership Program  
SCP: State Conservation Partnership  
SONEC: primarily southern Oregon and northeastern California, plus a slice of northwestern Nevada  
UM: University of Montana  
USFS: U.S. Forest Service  
USGS: U.S. Geological Survey  
WAFWA: Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  
WLFW: Working Lands for Wildlife  
WNTI: Western Native Trout Initiative