



WATER 4 ACCOMPLISHMENTS FY 2023

iwjv.org/water



INTERMOUNTAIN WEST
JOINT VENTURE

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WATER 4: CONSERVING WET MEADOWS AND WATER IN WAYS THAT MATTER TO PEOPLE

Water 4 is a well-established and broadly recognized conservation approach for sustaining wetlands in the Intermountain West. Water 4 is recognized at the highest levels of government, resulting in increased and new investments from key agencies to support locally led conservation efforts. Thanks to these investments, the Water 4 partnership continues to make headway, even as drought and climate change fundamentally alter the valuable wetland and irrigated agricultural lands of the West.

THE WATER 4 TOOLBOX

USING **SCIENCE, CAPACITY, & COMMUNICATIONS** TO SUPPORT:

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS



MODERNIZATION OF FLOOD IRRIGATION INFRASTRUCTURE



RESTORING & SUSTAINING HYDROLOGIC FUNCTION



MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC WETLANDS





WHERE WE'RE HEADED

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF WATER 4

STAFF MAKES HEADWAY ON NEW IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

In fiscal year (FY) 2023, Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) staff laid the groundwork for a new Implementation Plan, to be released in FY 2024. The plan will integrate new science that tracks wetland trends and link to innovative conservation strategies that support wetland sustainability in the West for both people and wildlife.

“Our science paints a new picture of wetlands in the Intermountain West. The current challenge is maintaining resilience in the face of wetland drying. Sustaining flood-irrigated hay meadows and pastures through irrigation infrastructure projects and conservation easements, supporting management of public wetlands with reliable water supplies, and restoring and sustaining the hydrologic function of watersheds are cutting-edge wetland conservation approaches that we'll emphasize in our new Implementation Plan.

Dave Smith, IWJV Coordinator

NEW WATER 4 LEADERSHIP

The IWJV prides itself on being able to pull from its own talent and experience to fill internal capacity gaps. In FY 2023, founding Water 4 Coordinator Joy Morris moved into a position as Conservation Programs and Operations Coordinator for the IWJV. **Erica Hansen**, previously a Science to Implementation Specialist for the IWJV, stepped up to fill the role of Water 4 Coordinator. Erica's work with the Wetland Evaluation Tool and other Water 4 science has primed her to lead the program as it moves into a more dynamic, science-driven future.



Erica Hansen



A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP WITH NRCS

CA, ID, MT, NV, OR & UT



NEW NRCS PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS EXPAND WATER 4 WORK

In FY 2023, the IWJV signed interagency agreements with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in six states. New partnership agreements in Utah, California, Idaho, and Nevada—as well as renewed agreements in Montana and Oregon—will expand capacity delivery across these six states, strengthen the IWJV's partnerships, and multiply Water 4's impact on wetland conservation in the Intermountain West.

Thanks to NRCS and partner agreements, as well as base IWJV funding, capacity investments will occur in up to 15 new areas. The capacity investments are expected to increase the delivery of conservation to important wetland geographies in FY 2024.

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Partnering with the IWJV and Water 4 will enhance NRCS efforts to strategically deliver conservation programs across Utah in a way that benefits producers and communities as well as wildlife.

*Emily Fife, Utah State
Conservationist, Natural
Resources Conservation Service*



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS IN SONEC & THE KLAMATH BASIN

NRCS INVESTMENTS IN OREGON

Momentum is building to restore wetland function in Oregon's Klamath Basin and the greater Southern Oregon–Northeastern California (SONEC) region. Investments from the Oregon State Office of the NRCS are leveraging funding from partners like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife program and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to put conservation on the ground across this important landscape.



HIGHLIGHTS FROM FY 2023

- Assisted in developing the Sprague River restoration proposal for Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funding. Water 4 continues to support potential Farm Bill-funded conservation practices and landowner incentives to complement this BIL project.
- Worked with partners to develop a new Conservation Implementation Strategy for mesic habitat enhancement in Lake County. This program will expand funding for low-tech, process-based restoration in the Warner Mountains and Goose Lake tributaries. Water 4 is also working to develop additional capacity and support landowner outreach efforts in Lake County.
- Participated in and supported Lake Abert/Chewaucan collaborative discussions.

KLAMATH BASIN FARMING AND WETLANDS COLLABORATIVE RCPP

The IWJV is working with partners and leveraging the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to economically support landowners who provide waterbird habitat on agricultural lands in the Klamath Basin. Other benefits of this program include improving water quality and creating habitat for other aquatic species.



COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION IN THE TREASURE STATE

NRCS INVESTMENTS IN MONTANA

Investments from the Montana State Office of the NRCS are enabling the IWJV to support capacity that enhances non-governmental and landowner collaboration with NRCS offices in important western Montana landscapes.

ENHANCING COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS IN THE BLACKFOOT WATERSHED

Funding from the Montana State Office of the NRCS is supporting capacity positions with the Blackfoot Challenge and the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Together, these organizations are applying their collaborative approach to restore and conserve the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and associated wetland habitats—and the wildlife and people they support.



SUPPORTING THE BITTERROOT WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP

This partnership among landowners, producers, NGOs, and agencies is strategically working in the Bitterroot watershed to implement wet meadow conservation and other NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs on working lands. This work is focused on accelerating the program delivery while enhancing communication and strengthening the capacity of those carrying out conservation initiatives.

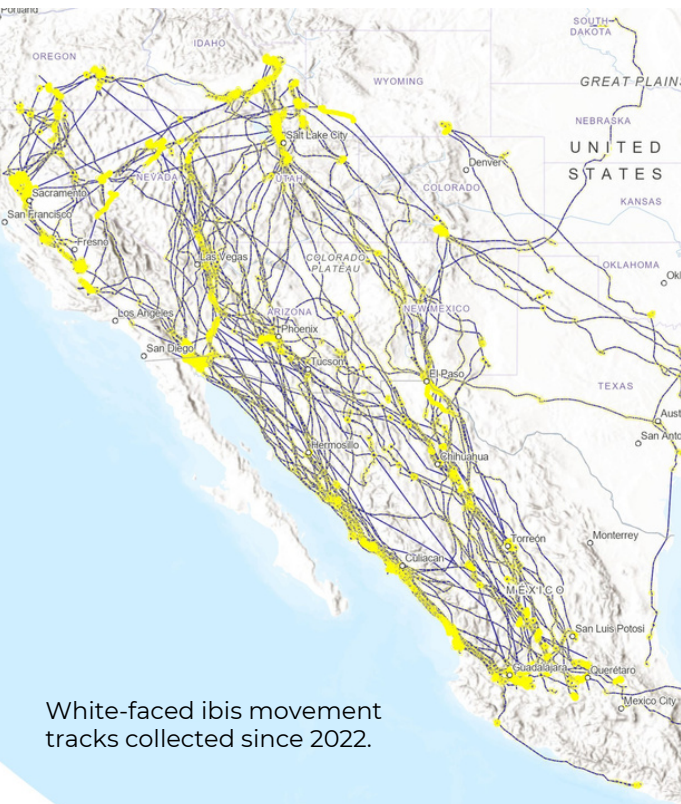
In FY 2023, the Bitterroot Watershed Partnership developed the Water Conservation Program to enhance conservation and restoration efforts in the Bitterroot watershed. The Partnership is working with NRCS and local irrigators to build collaborative efforts focused on water resource stewardship in the Bitterroot Valley.



In FY 2023, key wetland science investments facilitated the first-ever, broad-scale quantification of wetland and riparian ecosystem benefits linked to flood-irrigated agriculture in the riparian corridors of the Intermountain West. Among other findings, the research shows direct habitat benefits from ranching that support a majority of breeding greater sandhill cranes in the West. Once published, this research is expected to improve the understanding of ecosystem services derived through ranching and flood-irrigated grass-hay. In 2024, new tools and the integration of these findings will be built into the IWJV's Wetland Evaluation Tool (WET).

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE OF WETLANDS IN THE WEST

WATER 4 SCIENCE



White-faced ibis movement
tracks collected since 2022.

WHITE-FACED IBIS STUDY CONTINUES

An additional 80 transmitters were deployed in FY 2023 in an effort to learn about white-faced ibis migratory pathways, site fidelity, and wintering regions. This research, which began in 2022, uses ibis as an umbrella species to identify strategies that offset the effects of climate change and wetland loss in western North America.

In addition to the efforts of IWJV and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Migratory Birds staff, this work was supported by a network of partner volunteers trained in capture and attachment techniques, as well as Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, U.S. Geological Survey Western Ecological Field Station, Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, and Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

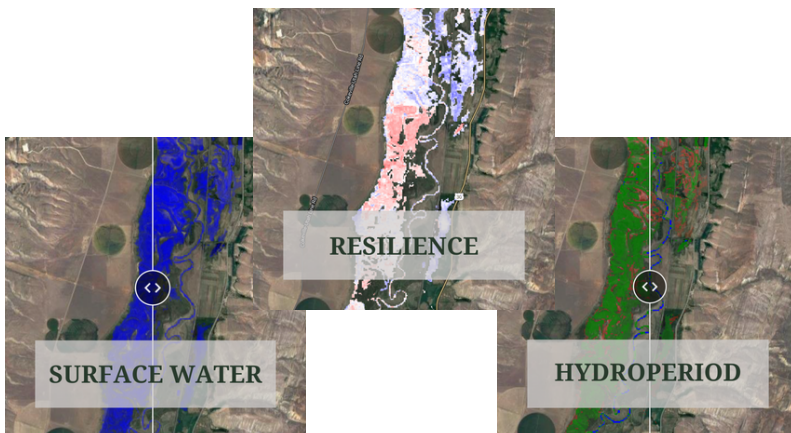


LAUNCHING THE WETLAND EVALUATION TOOL

WATER 4 SCIENCE

In 2023, the IWJV rolled out the full, 11-state Wetland Evaluation Tool (WET). Previously available only in preliminary, single-state modules, WET helps land managers leverage local knowledge to create a landscape-scale picture of important areas to prioritize for land and water conservation.

In 2023, WET updates included improvements to the modeling process, including the use of satellite-based radar imagery. This technology can penetrate clouds, unlike other satellite data sources previously used to generate WET. The incorporation of satellite-based radar imagery into the WET models ensures that monthly surface water updates in WET can occur in near-real time, regardless of cloud cover.



The three WET modules

BRINGING WET TO NEW PARTNERS

- Targeted outreach and trainings to over 40 individuals, groups, and organizations to share WET as a conservation tool and provide support for leveraging this new science for on-the-ground impacts.
- Presented at the Pheasants Forever Conservation Speaker Series to demonstrate the importance of Montana's Mission Valley to the Pacific Flyway.
- Supported working lands conservation.
 - Presented at the Idaho Cattle Association Annual Meeting to share how new science is supporting the importance of ranching practices to wildlife in the West.
 - Presented at the Land Trust Alliance Rally to share how WET can be used to quantify and communicate the importance of private land conservation.
- Created [a landing page](#) to share WET and relevant resources for users.



STRENGTHENING ACEP-ALE LAND TRUST-NRCS PARTNERSHIPS

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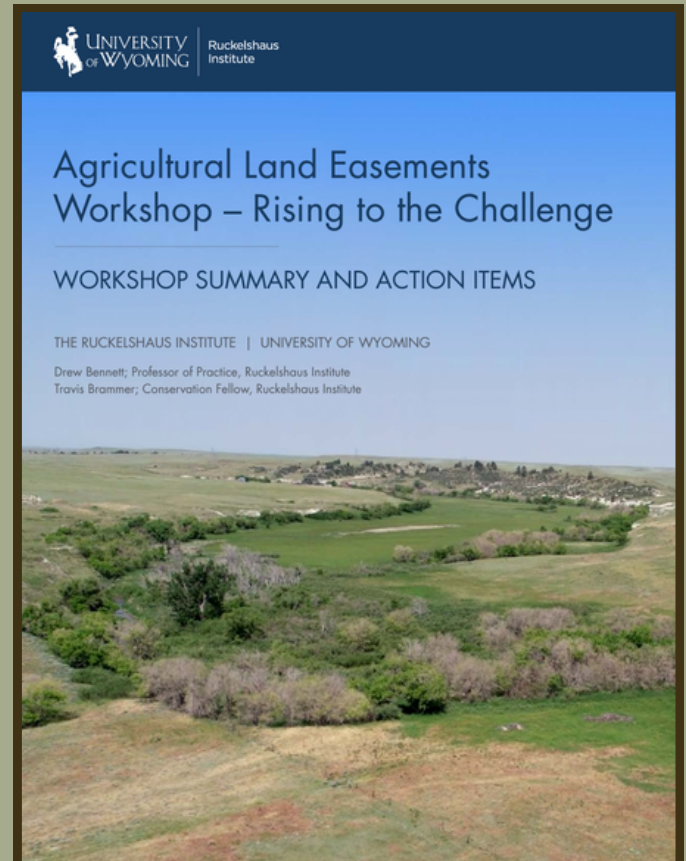
To improve the pace and scale of conservation, state conservationists and state staff need to be on the same page as land trusts. That will require effort from both land trusts and state conservationists.

2023 ACEP-ALE Workshop Participant

In January 2023, the IWJV and the University of Wyoming's Ruckelshaus Institute of Environment and Natural Resources hosted the “Agricultural Land Easements Workshop – Rising to the Challenge.” The two-day workshop convened land trust staff, funders, NRCS state staff, and other partners who have significant experience with the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program–Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE), to help improve the pace and scale of ACEP-ALE implementation.

WORKSHOP RESULTS

- Increased support for NRCS capacity in Montana, California, and Oregon.
 - Catalyzed funding for partner positions within NRCS California and Oregon state offices to help accelerate NRCS easements.
 - Secured investments from the Montana State Office of NRCS for additional partner capacity to support land trust efforts in southwest Montana.
 - Added support through partner positions to promote conservation easements through ACEP-ALE in all three states.
- Advanced connections across a network of easement practitioners.
- Made other NRCS advancements:
 - Raised the ceiling on easement appraisals requiring national office review from \$1 million to \$3 million.
 - Simplified and accelerated the process for land trusts to become Certified Entities.





CONNECTING THROUGH COMMUNICATIONS



TELLING THE STORY OF CONSERVATION IN THE WEST

Water 4 communications highlights in FY 2023 included:

- A [storymap](#) featuring an oxbow restoration project and a tribally held easement on a Sycan River ranch in Oregon.
- An [article](#) on a collaborative network of partners that's putting conservation on the ground in the Bear River Watershed.
- A [success story](#) about a key public land Wetland Reserve Easement in the Klamath Basin.
- A [video and article](#) on the cumulative success of decades of riparian restoration in Montana's Blackfoot Watershed.

EXPANDING OUR REACH THROUGH COMMUNICATIONS PARTNERSHIPS

Water 4 continually seeks to foster deeper, more engaging, broader-reaching—and thus more effective—conservation communications. Staff worked to achieve better cross-organizational messaging and audience reach through partnering with other conservation communicators.

In 2023, Water 4 collaborated with communicators from partner organizations like the NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as neighboring Joint Ventures, to tell stories of conservation success in the Intermountain West.



This year, the IWJV also partnered with the [Center for Collaborative Conservation](#) to host a bi-monthly, virtual event intended to facilitate and foster

communications partnerships. The [Storyteller's Circle](#) allows conservation storytellers to network, collaboratively tackle challenges, and hold each other accountable for doing the “deep work” of telling meaningful and engaging stories.



SCALABLE CONSERVATION ACROSS THE WEST

THE WATER 4 MODEL



EARLY INVESTMENTS LEAD TO CONSERVATION RETURNS

Water 4 is founded on the concept of growing effective local partnerships. Early investments in on-the-ground conservation in key landscapes enable strategic, science-driven conservation that supports community priorities. Ultimately, this leads to conservation impacts that expand far beyond the initial scope of an individual capacity position or project.

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Producers in the Middle Rio Grande need more accessible options to protect the land and water they have been stewarding for generations. Our partnership with Water 4 helps us advocate for high-level policy changes that would make federal conservation more accessible and equitable, not just in New Mexico but nationwide.

Cecilia Rosacker

*Executive Director, Rio Grande Agricultural
Land Trust*

Bear River Watershed

In FY 2023, the Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust completed a 1,204-acre easement on a working ranch near the headwaters of an important Bear River tributary. This easement would not have been possible without the IWJV-supported Bear River Watershed Conservation Coordinator position, which was essential for building increased land protection capacity across multiple states and organizations.

Middle Rio Grande

New Mexico partners joined IWJV staff in Washington, D.C., for our Hill Visits, to elevate the needs of underserved producers and highlight inequities of federal conservation easement programs that can be inaccessible due to transaction cost barriers.

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