May 18, 1999

A group of 16 interested ranchers met at Earl & Jewell Reed’s house to discuss issues with black-tailed prairie dogs.
The group met with US Fish & Wildlife Service in Denver to see if they “would be receptive to Landowners proposing their own habitat conservation plan” consisting of baseline inventory data collection, monitoring, financing, etc.
The Beginnings...

July 8, 1999

GOAL

To conserve existing eco-systems while balancing the forage base for wildlife and agricultural entities and protecting the private property rights of American citizens.
July 8, 1999

OBJECTIVES

- Identify existing species eco-systems and management practices in the pilot area
- Determine which management practices enhance or deter from the existing species or eco-system viability.
The Beginnings...

July 8, 1999

SPECIES OF CONCERN

- mountain plover
- burrowing owl
- swift fox
- ferruginous hawk
- Swainson’s hawk
- black-tailed prairie dog
- sage grouse
- golden eagle
- Utes Lady tresses
The Beginnings...

Surface Ownership
59% federal
35% private
6% state

Primary Area
247,000 acres
Summer 2000 – US Fish & Wildlife Service dedicates funds for preparation of a conservation agreement for private lands covering:

- black-footed ferret
- black-tailed prairie dog
- mountain plover
- swift fox
- burrowing owl
- ferruginous hawk
- sage grouse
- Ute ladies’ tresses orchid
People were glad Y2K was a non-event
Concorde crashes in France
Bill Clinton was finishing his last term
1 year before 9/11
Top movie – Mission Impossible II
Top song – Faith Hill “Breathe”
Cell phones with MP3 capabilities and internal antennas just released
By early 2004...

Surface Ownership
59% private
6% state
31% Forest Service
4% BLM

Primary Area
946,000 acres
In early 2009...

What is the appropriate scale for the Association’s conservation efforts?

Primary Area
40 million acres
Surface Ownership
77% private
8% state
7% Forest Service
8% BLM

Primary Area
13.2 million acres

MT Acreage
239,700 acres
July 13, 2013

Develop a responsible, common sense, science-based approach to landscape management within northeast Wyoming and southeast Montana.
Conservation Strategy 2013

Capitalizes on existing collaborative partnerships

*Implements across public and private properties*

Supports management with effective monitoring and reporting

*Uses adaptive management to improve conservation benefit*

Is a voluntary agreement, NOT a regulatory document
The Conservation Strategy integrates conservation effort across jurisdictions in the context of the mineral estate and foreseeable development. An implementing Memorandum of Understanding and three Conservation Agreements communicate the strategy:

- A Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) for private lands
- A Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) for lands with a Federal interest (e.g., permit or lease)
- A Conservation Agreement (CA) to address future development of the mineral estate within the designated coal development area and a similar oil & gas area
2 Ecotypes - 8 Covered Species

**Shortgrass species assemblage**
- Black-tailed prairie dogs
- Mountain plover

*66 conservation measures*

**Sagebrush obligate assemblage**
- Greater sage-grouse
- Sage sparrow

*110 conservation measures*
Conservation Strategy

September 22, 2016
US Fish & Wildlife Service sage grouse listing decision
– NOT WARRANTED

November 28, 2016
Notice of Availability for Strategy and
associated Environmental Assessment published in
Federal Register

December 28, 2017
Comment period closed – 22 comments received

March 2017
Signing of Conservation Strategy documents
Conservation Strategy Summary

June 25, 1999
First meeting with
US Fish & Wildlife Service

Over 840 official meetings, numerous phone conversations, 1 on 1 meetings, and personal contacts later. . .

March 18, 2017
Final conservation document is signed
“The landscape-level strategy consists of new conservation actions ...”

“They reflect a significant change in management direction and philosophy for the BLM since 2010 and a long-term commitment to assure the conservation of the species...”

“This change represents a new paradigm in managing the sagebrush landscape for the BLM and amplifies the need for collaboration among Federal, State, tribal, and private partners to conserve the Greater Sage Grouse...”
“Through past and future partnerships and cooperation, we intend to manage the sagebrush steppe ecosystem to achieve our common goal to conserve Greater Sage Grouse and its habitat.”

“The Forest Service will continue to work with partners and stakeholders to develop state-specific or ecosystem-based conservation strategies...”

“Cooperative efforts are important for conservation based upon an ecosystem management approach and will improve efficiency by combining efforts and fostering collaborative working relationships.”
Current Association Snapshot

- Continues as a landowner-led initiative
- A 501(c)3 corporation since 2002
- 15 coal members - 12 Powder River Basin mines
- 1 oil & gas member
- 24 ranch members
- 1.2 million acres
Cooperative Conservation Effort

$3.7 million already invested to understand, protect, and enhance sage and shortgrass habitats

✓ 35,000 acres treated for cheatgrass
✓ 640 acres of enhanced nesting cover in sage-grouse core areas
✓ Partnership effort with multiple groups (USFS, BLM, NE LWG, WGFD, ARS, NRCS...
Sagebrush Mapping

2012
1.2 million acres
7.5” resolution

2014
0.5 million acres
6” resolution

May 2016
1.5 million acres
6” resolution
Sage-grouse Modelling

Includes data from
WY Game & Fish
Peabody Energy
TBGPEA
BLM

Objective achieved
Develop a
gage-grouse RSF
for NE Wyoming
Vegetative Monitoring

800+ transects
growth/shrub height
cover data
macroplot data
photos

Augmented with
17 precipitation &
1 soil moisture
stations
Prairie Dog Projects

2017 mapping
Work is on-going
Maximum colony extent 2016-17
Currently at 65,200 acres

Restoration
Cactus
Aeration
Visual barriers
Prairie Dog Mapping

Also tracking areas of reduced prairie dog activity from plague and other sources.

Current impacted area covers approximately 11,000 acres
Coordinated Research

- USDA Agricultural Research Services
- ARS/UW/TBGPEA Thunder Basin Research Initiative
  - Landscape Management for Multiple Grassland Bird Guilds
  - Interactive Effects of Herbivory and Disturbance on Plant Communities
- Audubon Grassland Birds Initiative
Strategy ♦ Monitoring ♦ Research

... a coordinated effort with

- land & wildlife management agencies
- NGOs and private sector participants
- academia & research groups
The Association and other landowner efforts in partnership with on-going efforts by US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Wyoming Game & Fish Department, other federal, state, and local agencies along with non-governmental organizations provides a good foundation for future progress.
Our mission is to conserve existing ecosystems while balancing the forage base for wildlife and agricultural entities and protecting the private property rights of American citizens.

Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association
Because of agriculture’s predominance on the land base, the fate of much privately owned wildlife habitat in Wyoming is closely tied with the future of the agricultural and livestock industries.

Wyoming State Wildlife Action Plan, 2017
When the situation was manageable it was neglected, and now that it is thoroughly out of hand we apply too late the remedies which then might have effected a cure. There is nothing new in the story... It falls into that long, dismal catalogue of the fruitlessness of experience and the confirmed unteachability of mankind.

Winston Churchill, 1935
PLEASE GOD, Give me just one more oil boom. I PROMISE not to blow it next time.

Bumper sticker from the 1980’s, 2010’s, etc.