

Thunder Basin Grasslands Prairie Ecosystem Association

Conservation in NE Wyoming

May 18, 1999 - March 18, 2017



The Beginnings...

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 Beginnings...

June 25, 1999

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.

The Beginnings...

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**

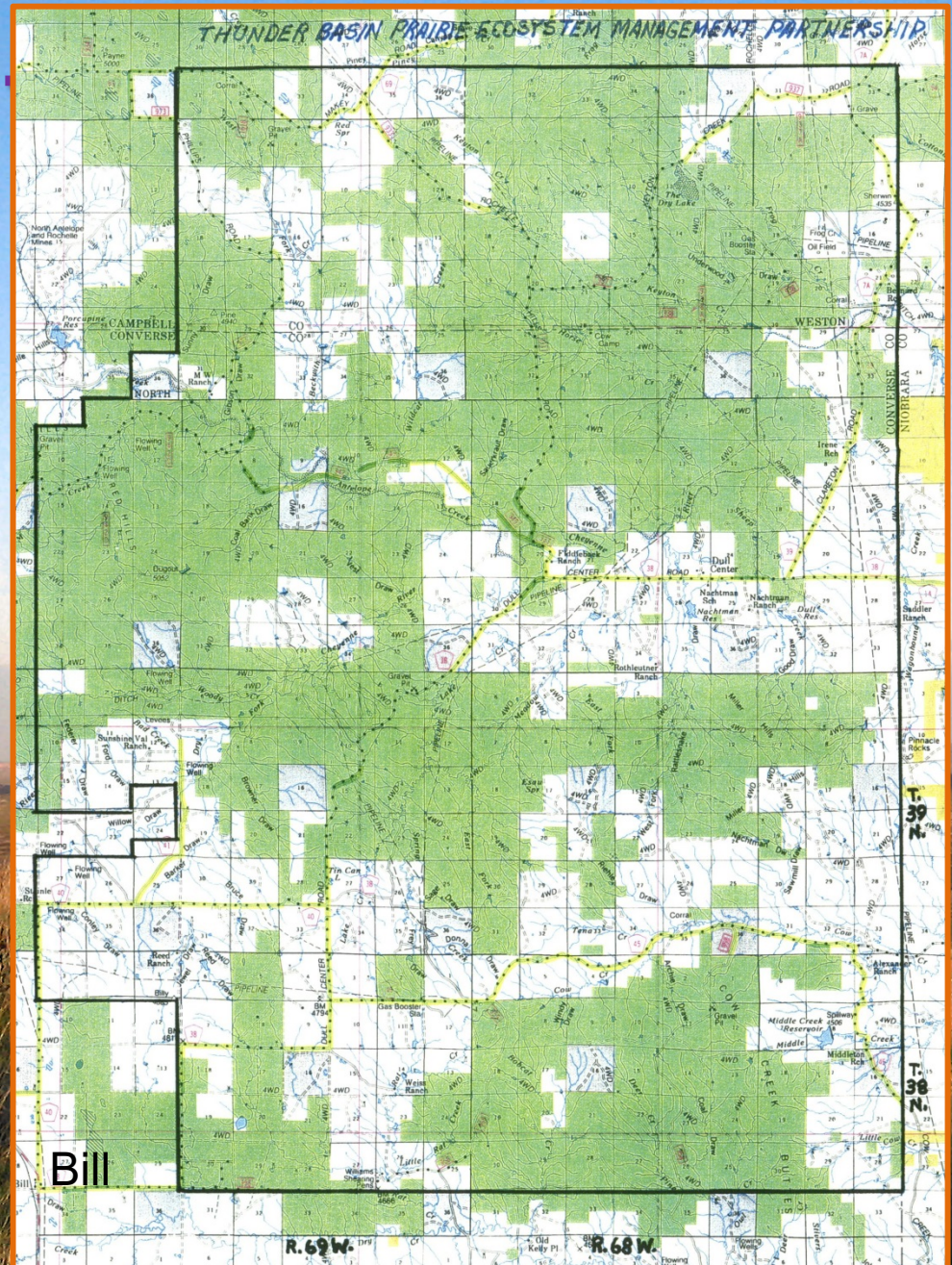
59% federal

35% private

6% state

Primary Area

247,000 acres



Forward Progress...

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

And then the world changed...

- *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

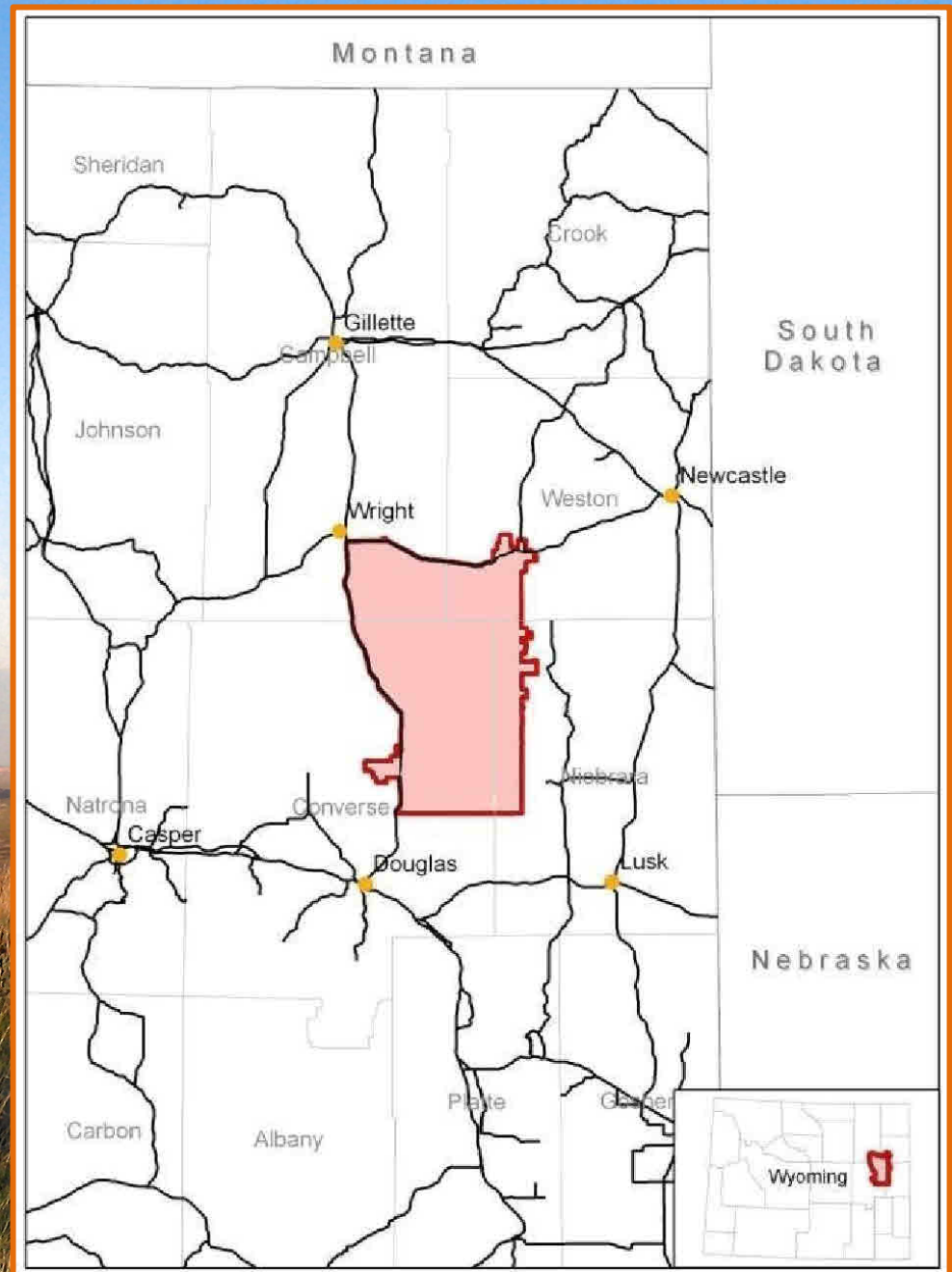
6% state

31% Forest Service

4% BLM

Primary Area

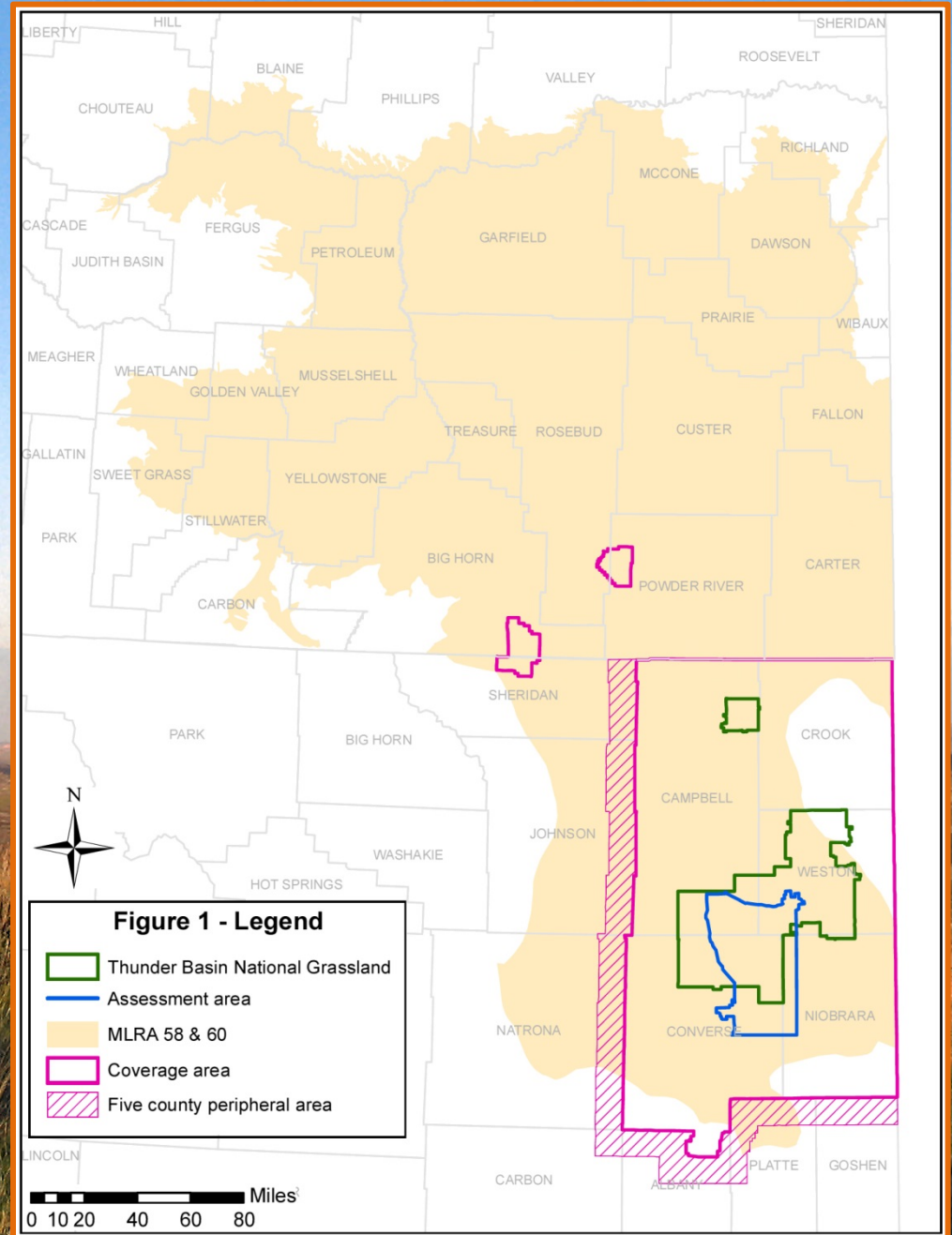
946,000 acres



In early 2009...

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

Primary Area
40 million acres



July 2013...

Surface Ownership

77% private

8% state

7% Forest Service

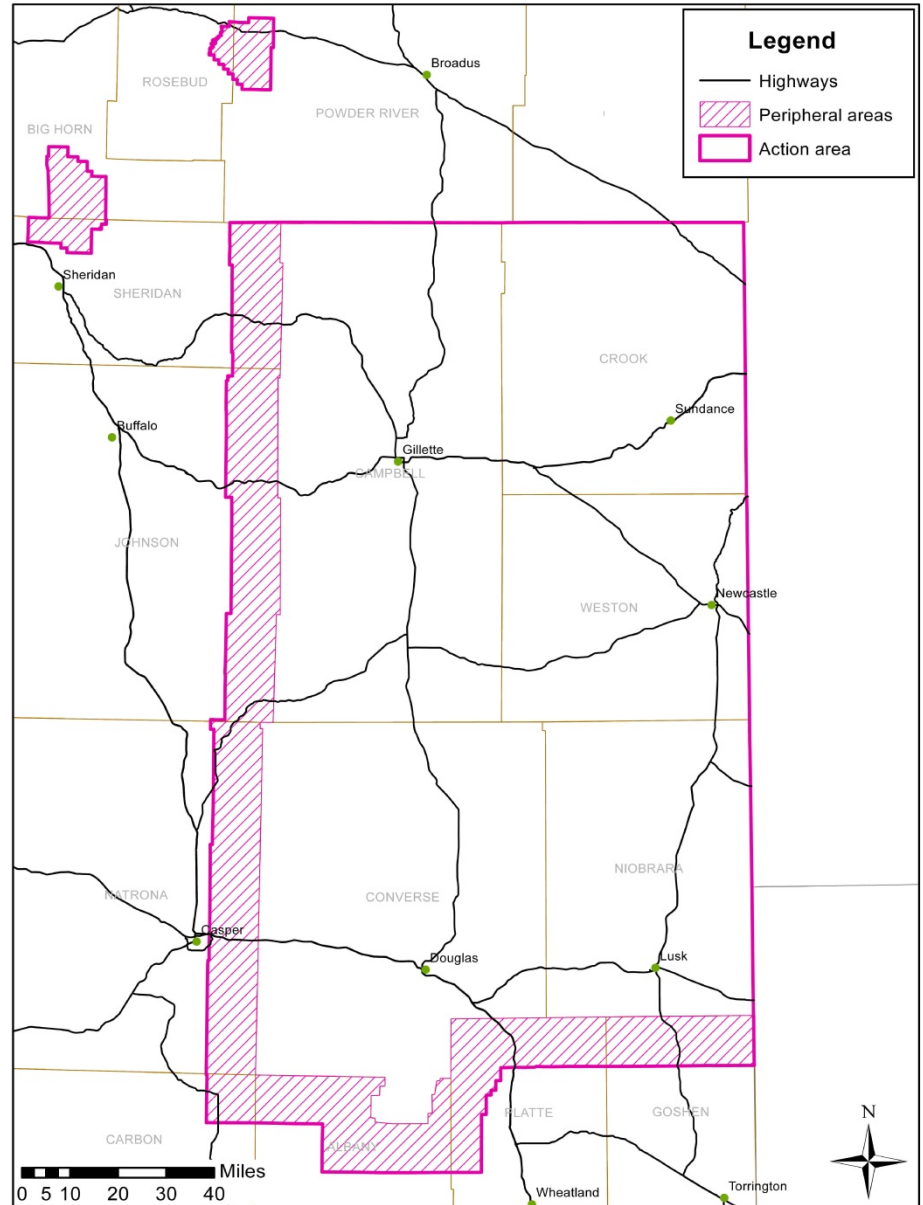
8% BLM


Primary Area

13.2 million acres

MT Acreage

239,700 acres





July 13, 2013

**Conservation Strategy
submitted to US Fish & Wildlife
Service.**

Association Mission 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

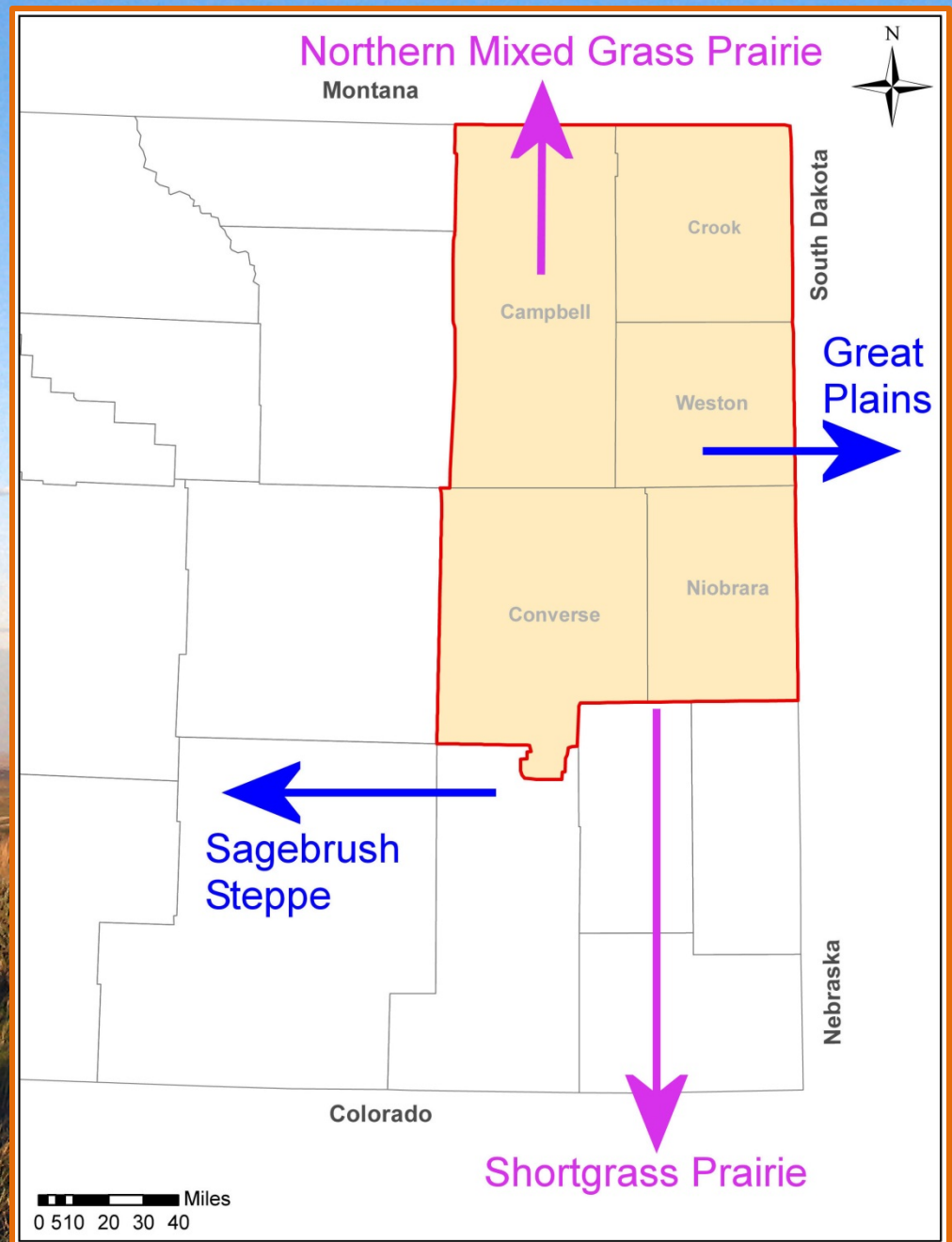
Uses adaptive management to improve conservation benefit

Is a voluntary agreement, NOT a regulatory document

Conservation Strategy 2013

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*
- ✓ *Burrowing owl*
- ✓ *Mountain plover*
- ✓ *Ferruginous hawk*

66 conservation measures

Sagebrush obligate assemblage

- ✓ *Greater sage-grouse*
- ✓ *Brewer's sparrow*
- ✓ *Sage sparrow*
- ✓ *Sage thrasher*

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

BLM 9-plan documents

“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...”

USFS 9-plan documents

“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

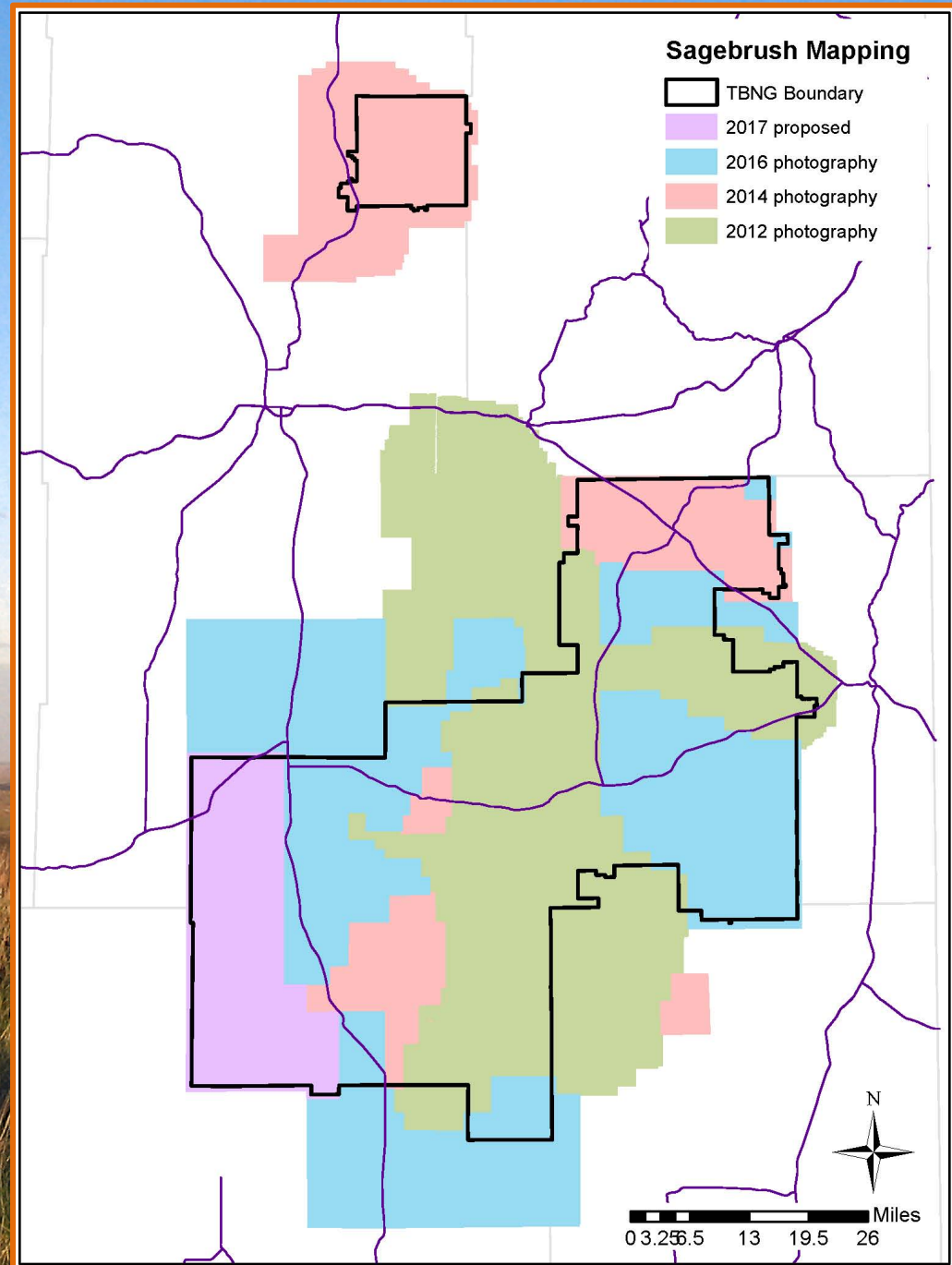
1.2 million acres
7.5" resolution

2014

0.5 million acres
6" resolution

May 2016

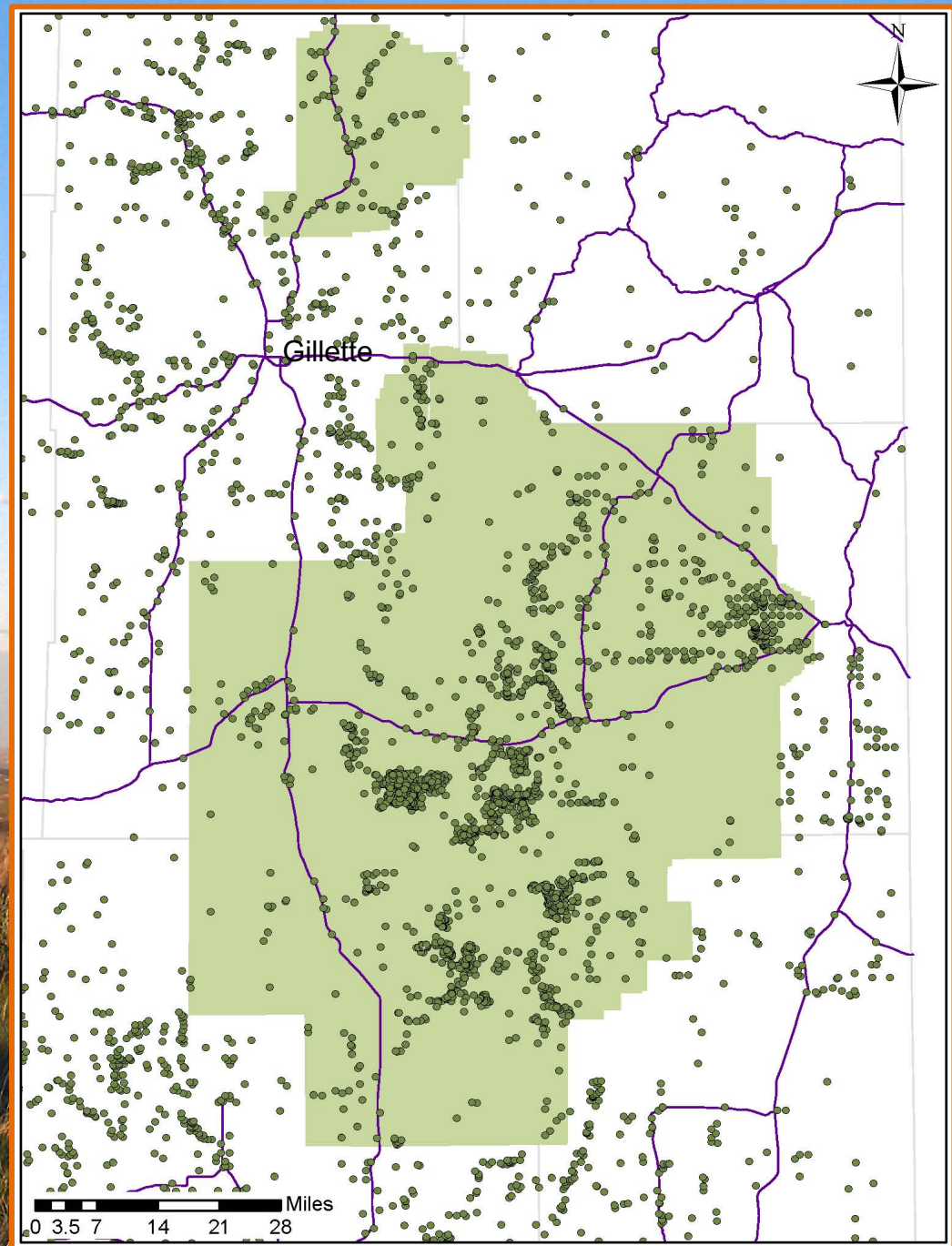
1.5 million acres
6" resolution



Sage-grouse Modelling

Includes data from
WY Game & Fish
Peabody Energy
TBGPEA
BLM

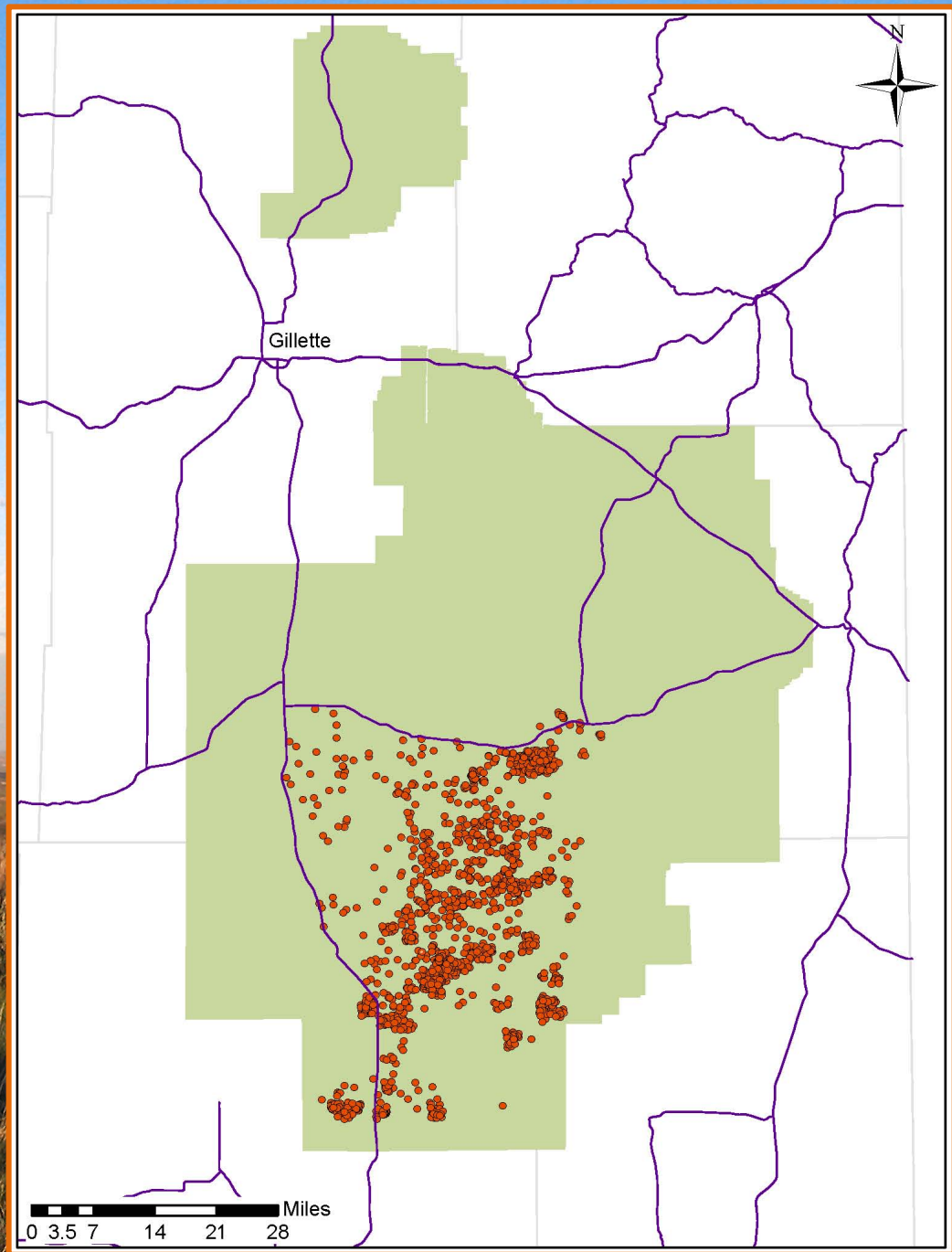
Objective achieved
Develop a
sage-grouse RSF
for NE Wyoming



Vegetative Monitoring

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

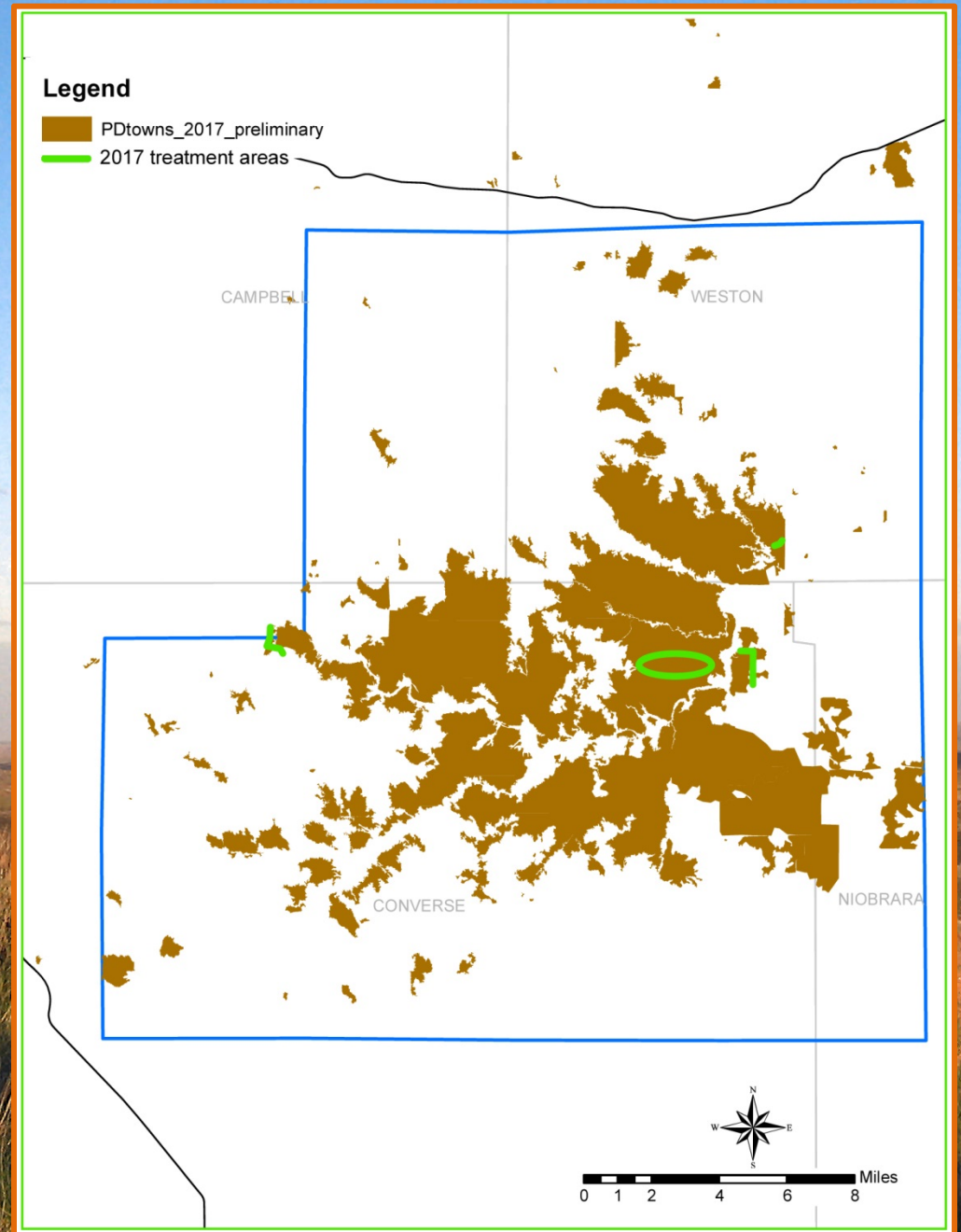
Augmented with
17 precipitation &
1 soil moisture
stations



Prairie Dog Projects

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

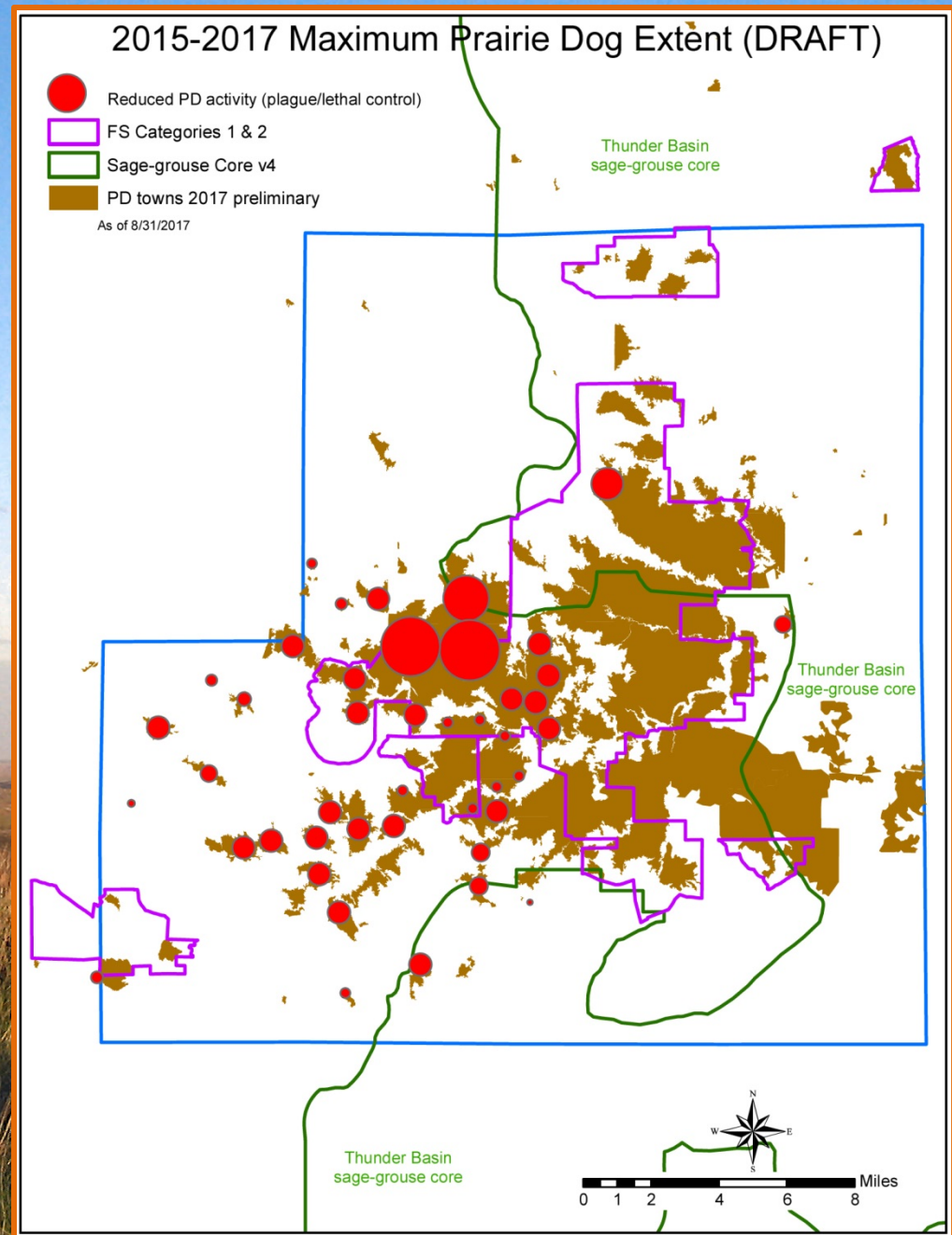
Restoration
Cactus
Aeration
Visual barriers



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



Closing Thoughts ...

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.

The background of the image is a photograph of a grassy field under a blue sky. A large, light-colored rounded rectangle with an orange border is centered on the image, containing the mission statement text.

**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.