

By Thinking Outside the Box, Mitigation Conserves Working Private Lands Intermingled with Public Lands in Key Sagebrush-Grassland Areas

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Montana's efforts to conserve Greater Sage-grouse (GRSG) and GRSG habitats have been long-standing and significant. Most of Montana's highest priority GRSG habitats are found on working private lands managed for livestock. BLM lands comprise 30% of the total, but addressing all threats across a checkerboard ownership in ecologically meaningful ways and at a landscape scale requires outside-the-box tools. Alongside voluntary private land stewardship, developers must mitigate direct and indirect impacts on state, federal, and private lands in designated GRSG habitats for which state or federal permits are required. Mitigation motivates developers to avoid, minimize, reclaim, and compensate for impacts by siting and implementing projects in ways that are least impactful and keep mitigation obligations/costs low. Mitigation motivates private landowners to continue stewarding their lands through the overt acknowledgment and explicit rewards reaped by providing ecosystem services that sustain a host of wildlife species. Developers can satisfy obligations through permittee-responsible projects implemented on state, federal, or private land or by contributing to Montana's Stewardship Account. The Account funds grants to implement projects offsetting development, similar to an in-lieu fee approach. The state will have spent almost \$6.8 million to conserve 77,233 acres through perpetual easements and term leases targeted at private lands from 2016-2020. These projects are strategically located adjacent to and intermingled with BLM lands. State funds were matched with at least \$6.86 million in NRCS and private funds. Developers themselves placed a perpetual easement on private land, permanently plugged and abandoned an oil and gas field on BLM land, and removed and buried overhead electrical distribution lines crossing private and BLM lands. Montana's approach to implementing mitigation across all lands is a novel way to conserve remaining habitats using market forces.