

Annual Report 2014

Strategic Habitat Plan



Wyoming Game and Fish Department
April 2015

*Conserving Wildlife
Serving People*

Aquatic Habitat
Terrestrial Habitat
Statewide Wildlife and
Habitat Management
Habitat and Access Branch
Lands Administration
Information, Education and
Publications Programs
Wyoming Landscape
Conservation Initiative

Message from the Director

Hello friends,

Thank you for your interest in the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Strategic Habitat Plan. This is a deeply collaborative effort with people from all across the state pitching in to make this report possible, but also in making the projects outlined on the following pages a reality.

The importance of habitat to wildlife, both terrestrial and aquatic, cannot be overstated. To gauge the health of any population one does not need to look past that species' habitat. Those in fish and wildlife management examine the amount and quality of habitat and then go to work in conserving and improving that habitat to benefit the animal in question. This is exactly the effort underway right now, in the national spotlight, for sage grouse. Wyoming has led the way with an approach identifying core habitat, and then to protect and improve it. Other states have taken Wyoming's lead and are implementing similar plans. This is all being done to conserve the bird and keep it from ever going on the endangered species list. But, again habitat is the central focus of conservation efforts.

Outside of the national spotlight, but equally challenging are Wyoming's work with cutthroat trout and mule deer. Our approach in the Cowboy State to help restore populations of both species is again to put an emphasis on habitat.

The sage grouse, cutthroat trout and mule deer plans are long-term efforts, which is another hallmark of habitat efforts, but the statewide commitment creates optimism that we are on the right path.

Much was done for both species in 2014. You can read more about that in the coming pages. But, the habitat work done for all species was impressive. Thousands of acres were improved by reducing invasive species and noxious weeds; stream habitats were enhanced and connected benefiting fish and other aquatic species; thousands of trees were planted to the benefit of the entire ecosystem. These are just a few of the highlights and I would like to recognize and say thanks on behalf of Game and Fish. We realize we cannot do this alone and the partners who support habitat efforts are numerous and come from all sectors including landowners, non-profit sportsman and wildlife organization, local governments, and state and federal agencies. It is a heavy lift, but together we have done a lot and leave Wyoming a better place.

Best,

Scott Talbott
Director Wyoming Game and Fish Department

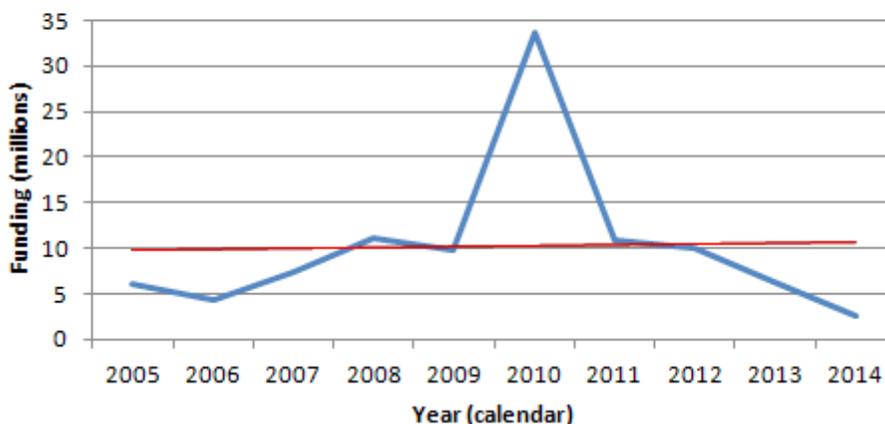


Executive Summary

In 2014 the Wyoming Game and Fish Department continued to address challenges identified in our Wyoming Game and Fish Commission approved Strategic Habitat Plan (SHP). This annual report highlights many of these achievements. Despite a downturn in available WGFD funds in 2013 and 2014, the Department, with assistance from our many great partners, has managed to continue implementing meaningful projects aimed at protecting and enhancing a wide range of habitat types across Wyoming. In streams and riparian areas, 38 projects involving significant funds were underway to manage watershed vegetation, restore functioning stream channels, reduce stream bank erosion, and provide fish habitat. Restoring passage and creating connectivity among tributary streams continues to be a focus to ensure fish populations persist. Work on 54 terrestrial habitat projects occurred throughout the year to improve habitat conditions through the removal of invasive species, prescribed burns, forb and food plot seeding, mechanical tree removal, mowing, chopping, and lawson aerator treatments. Fence conversions, water developments, and pipelines continue to dominate efforts on Commission-owned lands. A large portion of the Lands Branch maintenance and operating budget is for habitat and access property rights, including permits, lease payments, property taxes, and personnel management.

The graph below illustrates total funding that goes toward addressing on-the-ground Strategic Habitat Plan goals. Although the trend line is stable, funding levels in 2014 were the lowest of the preceding 10 years. This is the result of a decrease in available funding from the WGFD's Habitat Trust Fund and the associated loss of matching dollars from partners that these funds typically generate. There were also fewer WGFD field personnel in 2014 which further limited on-the-ground implementation of SHP projects. The large spike observed in 2010 can be attributed, in part, to an increase in conservation easements completed in 2010.

10 Year WGFD Funding for the Strategic Habitat Plan



WGFD applied for funding from outside sources amounting to approximately \$1.72 for each WGFD dollar expended for on-the-ground fish and wildlife habitat activities.

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Habitat Vision

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) is the steward of all Wyoming's wildlife, dedicated to the conservation of sustainable, functional ecosystems capable of supporting wildlife populations at least as healthy, abundant and diverse as they were at the dawn of the 21st century. The WGFD promote a holistic approach to habitat management, integrating management and various land uses through collaborative efforts with the general public, conservation partners, private landowners and land management agencies. The WGFD will increase public awareness of the need for managing for quality wildlife habitat today to ensure healthy and abundant wildlife populations in the future. Wyoming Game and Fish Commission lands will be managed to emphasize and maintain wildlife habitat and public access values for which they were obtained.

Mission

Promote and maintain the availability of high quality habitat to sustain and enhance wildlife populations in the future.

Goals

- Goal 1. Conserve and manage wildlife habitats that are crucial for maintaining terrestrial and aquatic wildlife populations for the present and future.
- Goal 2. Enhance, improve and manage priority wildlife habitats that have been degraded.
- Goal 3. Increase wildlife-based recreation through habitat enhancements that maintain or increase productivity of wildlife.
- Goal 4. Increase public awareness of wildlife habitat issues and the critical connection between healthy habitat and abundant wildlife populations.
- Goal 5. Promote collaborative habitat management efforts with the general public, conservation partners, private landowners and land management agencies.

Habitat Program Expenditures

- I. Approximate WGFD trust, fish passage and non-recurring funds (figures rounded to the nearest \$1,000) expended for on-the-ground projects primarily directed at implementation of SHP goals and management on Wyoming Game and Fish Commission (WGFC) lands during calendar year 2014 (these figures do not include personnel salaries, supplies, materials, and equipment used for routine WGFD maintenance and operation and WGFC property tax and lease payments):

WGFD Funds Expended on SHP Goals:

\$930,000

- II. Non-WGFD funds expended for implementation of SHP goals for calendar year 2014 from or in collaboration with various sources including: 1) Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Fund (WWNRT), 2) USDA Farm Bill federal government funds, 3) other federal government funding programs, 4) other state and local government funding sources, 5) nongovernmental organizations, 6) Wyoming Governors Big Game License Coalition (WGBGLC), 7) private landowner contributions (including in-kind), 8) corporations and businesses, 9) private donors, and Wyoming State Legislative Capitol Construction funds:

Non-WGFD Funds Expended on SHP Goals:

\$1,601,000

Grand Total for SHP Goals:

\$2,531,000

WGFD applied funding from outside sources amounting to approximately **\$1.72** for each WGFD dollar expended for on-the-ground fish and wildlife habitat activities. This outside funding is critical for implementing the SHP and conserving our wildlife resources. Overall, personnel directly involved in implementing SHP goals oversaw spending of approximately **\$7,082,000** of WGFD regular maintenance and operating funds, State Wildlife Grants from US Fish and Wildlife Service and WGFD Trust Fund monies. This figure includes wages, benefits, equipment operation expenses, supplies and on-the-ground improvement material expenses allocated as follows: approximately **57%** for personnel, which includes habitat inventories, monitoring, project contract oversight, project design and implementation and promoting collaborative habitat management efforts with the general public, conservation partners, private landowners and land management agencies. Without the dedication and passion of field personnel, none of these habitat projects would happen. The remainder of the funding was allocated as follows: **5%** for vehicles and heavy equipment and **38%** for materials and supplies.

Personnel overseeing the WGFD Education, Information and Publications Programs spent approximately 12.5% of their time in 2014 on SHP goal 4 “habitat” activities totaling approximately **\$235,000** of regular WGFD maintenance and operating funds. Information and education efforts are critical for maintaining current and future, social, political and financial support for wildlife habitat program related efforts.

Lastly, personnel within the Lands Administration Branch conduct annual WGFC property rights monitoring, property right acquisition and disposal, payment of WGFC property taxes in each county and lease payments to the Office of State Lands and Investments (OSLI). Property taxes paid to counties by

the WGFD in 2014 totaled approximately **\$509,000**. These taxes include WGFC owned state offices, fish hatcheries, bird farms, houses and Wildlife Habitat Management Areas (WHMA) and Public Access Areas (PAA). During 2014, WGFD costs for leases totaled approximately **\$131,000**. The majority of lease payments were made to the OSLI involving State Land leases associated with WHMAs and PAAs.

Habitat Program Accomplishments: The Numbers

Those activities resulting in on-the-ground accomplishments, promotion of collaborative habitat efforts and information and education efforts directed towards the habitat program during calendar year 2014 are summarized below, these accomplishments are shared with our many partners:

Activity	2014 Accomplishments	5 Year Average Accomplishments
Detailed stream assessments	12 streams totaling 17,833 ft	8 streams totaling 12,730 ft
Watershed stream assessments	10 on 24 miles	19 on 68 miles
Stream bank enhancements	10 totaling 10,682 ft	17 totaling 8,552 ft
Instream structures	18 installed	65 installed
Instream flow segments	6 on 24.2 stream miles	5 on 19 stream miles
Fish screens installed	5	3
Fish passage structures installed	1	6
Fish passage upstream miles	4.5 miles connected	146 miles connected
Fish passage structures monitored, maintained	9 monitored, 5 maintained	10 monitored, 6 maintained
Fish tracking or entrainment investigations	4	5
Project monitoring - detailed stream channel	7 totaling 4,600 ft	4 totaling 8,278 ft
Management monitoring - detailed riparian	7 totaling 3,518 ft	22 totaling 7,718 ft
Stream habitat monitoring sites	72	62
Project monitoring - photo, other (sites/streams/segments)	44 on 43 sites or stream miles	34 on 20 sites or stream miles
Aspen/cottonwood browse monitoring	48 sites	39 sites
Beaver transplanted	6	10
Riparian assessment	2 on 1.5 miles	8 on 45 miles
Riparian protection, enhancement, management	14 on 309 acres	18 on 763 acres
Private landowner contacts	324 yielding 93 projects	278 yielding 108 projects
Technical assistance requests	85	222
Conservation easements in process and coordinated with partners	7 easements totaling 26,245 acres	14 easements totaling 35,258 acres
BLM RMP or USFS Cooperator Status	3	6
Trees or shrubs planted	5,595	8,220
Herbicide weed treatments	26,143 acres	33,296 acres
Herbicide vegetation to thin sagebrush	1,500 acres	1,900 acres

Activity	2014 Accomplishments	5 Year Average Accomplishments
Mechanical tree removal	3,235 acres	4,005 acres
Mowing, chopping, and Lawson aerator treatments	4,526 acres	1,705 acres
Upland grass, forb and food plot seeding	1,419 acres	1,822 acres
Water wells drilled	1	4
Water guzzlers or water tanks installed	8	15
Water pipelines installed	22,000 ft	32,263 ft
Spring developments	1	4
Water wells converted to solar pumps	0	1
Fences installed	75 miles	52 miles
Wetland development or major renovation	6 totaling 29 acres	7 totaling 55 acres
Prescribed burns	783 acres	5,805 acres
USDA Farm Bill contract involvement	2 contracts	181 contracts
Livestock Grazing Management Plans	5 plans, 20,525 acres	13 plans, 223,239 acres
Wildlife Habitat Stewardship Plans	1 plan	3 plans
Upland habitat inventory, landscape evaluation scale	249,842 acres	901,458 acres
Upland and rangeland inventories, intensive scale	9 acres	103,554 acres
Upland vegetation/habitat treatment monitoring sites	229	147
Annual vegetation production/utilization sites	116	129
Field cooperative research projects	2	8
WGFC managed lands intensive livestock/forage reserve/meadow rejuvenation and grazing administered	12 on 44,146 acres	11 on 48,703 acres
WGFC managed lands fence maintained	586 miles	619 miles
WGFC managed lands irrigated	4,757 acres	4,167 acres
WGFC managed lands noxious weed control	1,542 acres	1,782 acres
WGFC managed lands meadow mowed/farmed	1,782 acres	797 acres
WGFC managed lands farming contracts	2,931 acres	2,383 acres
Public Fish Access projects	9 projects on 1.5 miles	11 projects on 8 miles
Public Hunting Access projects	3 projects	4 projects on 1,250 acres
WGFC property right monitoring	128 on 167,045 acres	116 on 117,365 acres
Funding sources/contracts/grants administered	97	129
Funding applications prepared for other entities	42	42
Tree material placed in headcuts	79,680 lbs	
Yellowtail fire mitigation	1	
Fontenelle Wildfire rested from grazing	64,000 acres	
Fence removed or modified on Anadarko for migration	10 miles	
Points of diversion inventoried for passage	122	
Public land permittees contacted	31	

Kudos to Our Partners!

WGFD believes habitat is one of the keys to maintaining and sustaining wild and healthy populations of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife. Without the support and partnerships from private landowners, public land managers, conservation groups, elected officials and the public, these habitat management and enhancement projects would not be possible. WGFD greatly appreciates this financial assistance and project support and looks forward to continuing to work with partners to ‘Conserve Wildlife and Serve People’ in the years ahead.

The following lists major funding partners and approximate amounts the WGFD received in 2014. Additionally, habitat projects where WGFD personnel were heavily involved or provided oversight or verification of expenditures are also listed. This is not a complete list, and may not reflect all partner contributions, we apologize for any partners who may have been inadvertently missed.

Funding Partner	Approximate amount for 2014 (rounded to nearest \$100)
Access Midstream	\$8,800
Bighorn County Weed and Pest District	\$5,000
Bowhunters of Wyoming	\$3,000
Bureau of Land Management	\$32,000
Bureau of Reclamation	\$17,500
Central Utah Project	\$5,000
Denbury Mitigation	\$1,100
Federal USDA Farm Bill Program Funds (NRCS and FSA)	\$79,000
Hot Springs County Weed and Pest District	\$13,700
Jonah Interagency Office	\$4,900
Lower Wind River Conservation District	\$5,700
Mule Deer Foundation	\$11,400
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	\$12,700
National Wild Turkey Federation	\$5,000
Pinedale Anticline Project Office (BLM)	\$31,200
Private Landowners	\$109,500
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation	\$79,000

Funding Partner	Approximate amount for 2014 (rounded to nearest \$100)
Sage Grouse Local Working Group – State of Wyoming Funds	\$74,500
Saratoga-Encampment-Rawlins Conservation District	\$4,500
Teton County Conservation District	\$7,500
Trout Unlimited	\$20,100
US Fish and Wildlife Service - Fish Passage	\$7,600
US Forest Service	\$76,200
Washakie County Weed and Pest District	\$18,700
Wyoming DEQ 319 Funds from EPA	\$40,000
Wyoming Governor’s Big Game Coalition	\$74,500
Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative	\$251,900
Wyoming Wild Sheep Foundation	\$6,000
Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust Board	\$580,300
Weston County Weed and Pest	\$13,100
WY Department of Agriculture Water Quality	\$1,200
Grand Total	\$1,600,700

For additional information please contact any of the personnel listed at the end of this document. Also, please share this report with anyone who may be interested in the WGFD and the Commission’s habitat efforts.

This report can be viewed on the WGFD website at: <https://wgfd.wyo.gov/web2011/wildlife-1000651.aspx>.

Aquatic Habitat Program

The aquatic habitat program works to protect, restore and enhance Wyoming's water, watersheds, and waterways. The program consists of 12 permanent full-time employees: six regional Aquatic Habitat Biologists (AHABs), a Statewide Fish Passage Coordinator, a Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) Coordinator, an Aquatic Habitat Supervisor, an Aquatic Habitat Program Manager, a Water Management Supervisor and a Water Management Instream Flow Biologist. Two At-Will-Contract Employees worked for the section in 2014: one in Cody assisted the Fish Passage Coordinator primarily collecting and compiling information about passage obstructions; and one in Casper addressed channel head cuts in the Bates Hole area southwest of Casper. Finally, seasonal biologist technicians assisted the Water Management Crew and biologists in the Laramie and Jackson regions.

During calendar year 2014, the aquatic habitat section was involved in 38 projects involving funding from the Game and Fish Trust Fund, WGFD fish passage budget, the Wyoming Wildlife Natural Resource Trust (WWNRT), USFWS, Landowner Incentive Program (LIP), Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) and other sources. These partners provided over \$627,000 toward aquatic projects. WGFD aquatic habitat dollars spent on contracts or grants in calendar year 2014 totaled over \$196,000. The various partners and their contributions toward these projects are highlighted in the regional sections of this report.

Section personnel spend tremendous time planning, coordinating and developing habitat project funding applications throughout the year for efforts that may be led by the WGFD or by a partner. Regional AHABs and statewide personnel also work on SHP actions not directly related to funded projects including habitat protection, inventory and assessment, monitoring project function and habitat response, and providing habitat education and training.

The number of on-going aquatic habitat projects involving significant funding (38) was the same in 2014 and 2013 and higher in 2012 (50). The reduction can be attributed to reduced funding in FY14-15 combined with an ongoing lack of personnel capacity in Casper and Cody. Renewed funding from the WGFD Trust Fund in FY16 is anticipated and will translate into more aquatic habitat achievements on the ground.

Water Management

Instream Flow Water Rights (Goal 1) - Mike Robertson and Tom Annear

Six new filings for instream flow water rights were made in 2014 on streams in the Bighorn Mountains. Applications were prepared using data collected from study sites on Buckskin Ed Creek (3.9 miles), Cedar Creek (4.3 miles), Lodge Grass Creek (3.3 miles), the West Fork Little Bighorn River (4.4 miles), Soldier Creek (5.4 miles), and Trout Creek (2.9 miles). All six filings have a priority date of October 16, 2014.



Figure 1. *Instream flow study site on Muddy Creek.*

Three new instream flow studies were focused on native Yellowstone cutthroat trout habitat in the Clarks Fork River drainage in Sunlight basin including Muddy Creek (Figure 1), Dead Indian Creek and Crandall Creek.

Water Management (Goal 1) - Tom Annear

Actions were taken to help manage water rights associated with recently leased and purchased water rights in Bump Sullivan Reservoir near Yoder. Two stream gauges were installed in the Hughes and Goshen ditches per order of the State Engineer and data were provided to the Board of Control. A final agreement was signed with Johnson County commissioners for a 99-year lease of 66,024 acre feet of storage water in DeSmet Reservoir for fisheries and recreation. The Water Rights Management Team met twice in 2014 to discuss the status of various water right related issues. A draft letter was written for the Director's Office to proceed with removing the dam at Douglas Fishing Lake near Douglas but no action was taken by the end of the year. Programmatic flow monitoring was done for the third year in a row at several locations on the East Fork Wind River and Bear Creek and associated irrigation delivery systems on the Spence Moriarty WHA. Flow data collection began on May 1 and was terminated on October 9. A data summary from the three-year study will be written in 2015 and presented in an administrative report.

Fish Passage

Harmony Ditch Diversion, Phase 1 (Goal 2) - Lewis Stahl and Erin Sobel

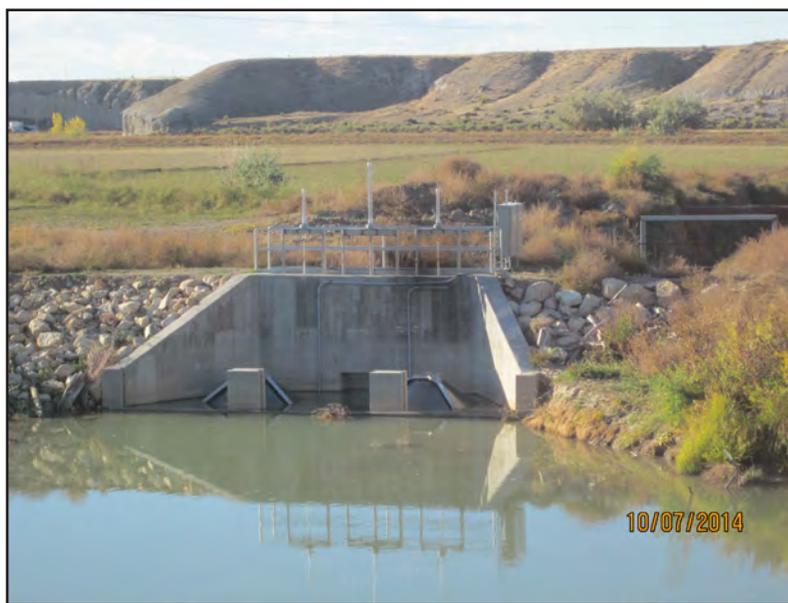


Figure 2. *Harmony Ditch Diversion with new concrete headworks, new headgates and two cone fish screens.*

The Harmony Ditch Diversion screening project is located on the Nowood River near the town of Manderson, WY in Bighorn County. Studies completed in 2006 and 2007, found 16 species of fish being entrained at an estimated rate of 55,415 fish annually. Entrained fish included four Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN): burbot, flathead chub, mountain sucker and sauger. The first phase of construction involved a new irrigation headgate structure and two cone fish screens to prevent entrainment of fish into the irrigation canal (Figure 2). Phase 1 was completed during winter 2014 and the diversion was used during the 2014 irrigation season. The 2014 runoff year demonstrated that a log boom needed

to be placed in the river to divert large debris downstream, otherwise the debris gets stuck in the headgate structure causing the cone screens to not operate properly. This project was projected to be two phases of construction, but Phase 2 was postponed until a proper fish passage design can be developed.

Thunderhead Irrigation Diversion (Goal 2) - Lewis Stahl and Erin Sobel



Figure 3. Bear Creek looking downstream with the head-gate on the left and four completed boulder cross-vanes in the channel below.



Figure 4. Vertical flat plate wiping screen that will prevent fish moving into the irrigation canal. The brushes move side to side wiping debris off the screen.

The Thunderhead Irrigation Diversion is located on Bear Creek within the Spence and Moriarity WMA near Dubois in Fremont County. Construction of the project was completed in December 2014. The completed construction consists of a new diversion dam made up of boulder cross-vanes that will provide upstream fish passage, a new irrigation headgate sized correctly for the irrigation system (Figure 3), and a vertical flat plate wiping fish screen (Figure 4) to prevent entrainment loss to the irrigation canal. Solar power will be set up in spring 2015 to run the brushes on the fish screen, so that debris and sediment do not clog the screen.

Upper Green River Watershed Fish Passage Inventory (Goal 2) - Erin Sobel and Lewis Stahl



Figure 5. An instream diversion dam in the Cottonwood Creek drainage that is a fish passage barrier.

The Upper Green River Watershed is located in western Sublette County and northern Lincoln County encompassing the towns of Daniel, Big Piney and La Barge with land ownership consisting of 46% state, 31% federal, and 23% private land. The 1,880,330 acre watershed was selected for inventory because it contains Tier 1 and 2 priority species listed in the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) and houses multiple WGFD Strategic Habitat Plan (SHP) crucial and enhancement priority areas. At the start of the inventory in 2013, 166 known points of water diversion were known, but another 130 unknown sites were identified during the 2013 and 2014 years combined. Data collected at these sites will allow prioritization of fish passage improvement projects in order to obtain the highest number of miles of reconnected habitat in key areas while

benefiting willing landowners. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Trout Unlimited (TU) are also undertaking fish passage projects within the watershed to eliminate barriers (Figure 5). Access was obtained and 122 points of diversion were inventoried in 2014 within the Cottonwood Creek, Horse Creek, Piney Creek, LaBarge Creek, Fontenelle Creek and Lower and Middle Green River drainages. Landowner contacts were made for an additional 12 points of diversion where no access was permitted and 33 points of diversions could not be completed due to various reasons. To date, 231 points of diversion have been inventoried within the Upper Green River Watershed (Figure 6).

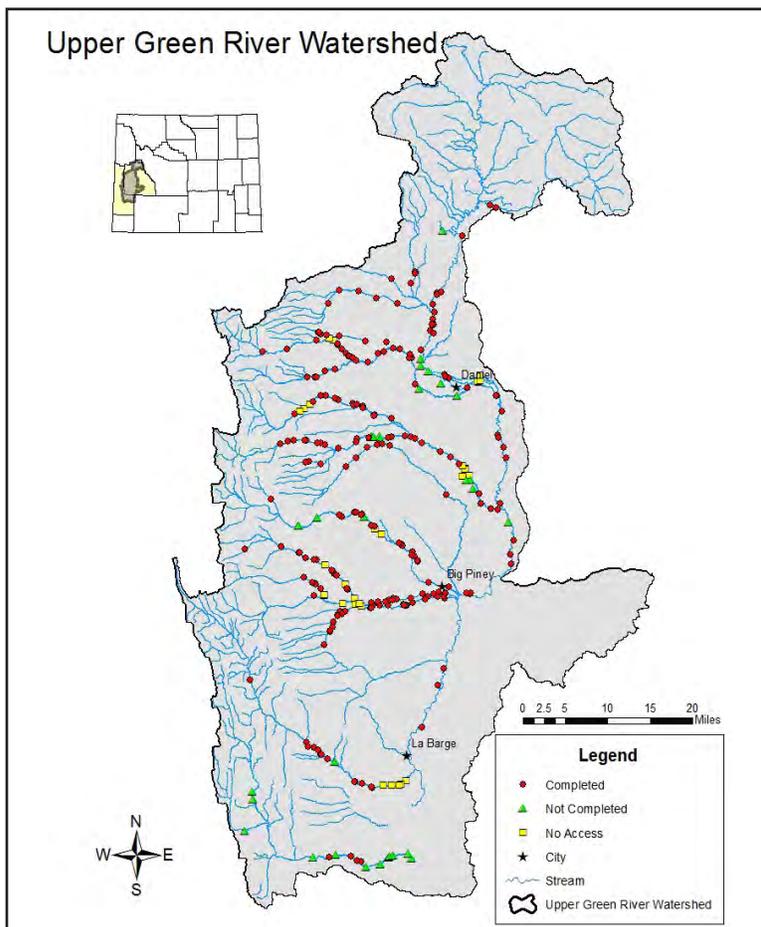


Figure 6. Points of diversion in the Upper Green River drainage completed during 2013 and 2014 field seasons to evaluate if they block fish movement or entrain fish into a ditch.

Fish Passage Grants (Goal 2) - Lewis Stahl

The Green Ditch Diversion project is located on the Wind River in the Lander Region. The project involves design of a fish screen. A \$14,944 contract was developed with One Fish Engineering to design the fish screen.

TU was awarded a \$10,000 fish passage grant to screen two irrigation diversions; one on East Dunoir Creek and one on West Dunoir Creek. East and West Dunoir creeks are tributaries to the Dunoir River in the Lander Region.

The Shafer Creek culvert replacement project is within the LaBarge Creek drainage in the Pinedale Region where extensive Colorado River Cutthroat Trout (CRC) restoration has occurred. The project involves replacing old perched culverts with a new bottomless arch culvert to allow for fish passage. The Bridger Teton National Forest was awarded a \$19,931 fish passage grant to assist with completing the project.

Habitat and Access Branch

The Habitat and Access Branch is responsible for the management of Wyoming Game and Fish Commission (WGFC) owned lands. Our mission is to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat, serve the Public. The Habitat and Access Branch in 2014 consisted of a branch chief located in Cheyenne, four regional supervisors located in Lander, Cody, Pinedale and Laramie, one statewide crew supervisor located in Cheyenne, four coordinators located in Sheridan, Casper, Cheyenne and Jackson, twelve biologists located in Jackson, Dubois, Lander, Yoder, Cody, Lovell, Laramie and Saratoga, and eight contract employees stationed across the state.

The Habitat and Access Branch manages 37 Wildlife Habitat Management Areas (WHMA), 196 Public Access Areas (PAA) and maintenance of 22 feedgrounds. In addition, there is a statewide crew that assists with habitat development projects across the state. The WHMAs are managed for specific wildlife habitat purposes and are included within the SHP. The Habitat and Access Branch incorporates specific objectives and strategies from the SHP into regional work schedules.

As part of the SHP, the branch manages and maintains approximately 410,000 acres, 95 wetlands, 140 miles of ditches/drains, 5,100 acres of irrigated meadows, 2,400 acres of farmland, 250 acres of food plots and more than 1,000 miles of fence for wildlife habitat purposes. To assist hunters and fisherman, another 1,100 miles of road, 395 parking areas, 67 boat ramps, 25 docks, 198 outhouses, and more than 6,000 signs are maintained.

During 2014, the branch also worked on other habitat development projects, including Mule Deer Initiative projects, aeration, meadow improvements, wetland developments and riparian projects. Grants provided \$440,000 for on-the-ground expenditures. These projects are highlighted in the regional sections of this report.

Lands Administration Branch

The Lands Administration Branch works within the Services Division to acquire, monitor, and help manage property rights around the state. During calendar year 2014, the Branch consisted of three full-time employees located in Cheyenne, and one full-time employee stationed in Lander. Branch personnel completed numerous projects involving habitat conservation, public access, and property rights monitoring. Branch personnel also spent a large portion of 2014 working toward completion of a GIS based property right inventory system called the “Uniform Real Property Reporting System” and on a federal aid audit of past years acquisitions.

Uniform Real Property Reporting System (URPRS) – Property Rights Inventory **Brian Rognon, Butch Parks, Judith Hosafros**

The URPRS inventory continued to be a primary focus of Lands Branch efforts during the year. The project was initiated during the Governor’s first term to bring all state of Wyoming property rights into compliance with state law which requires all lands records to be kept by the Office of State Lands and Investments. The inventory will eventually progress to a format that will allow WGFD personnel quick access to lands records, and to a GIS format for additional ease of use.

Property Monitoring (Goal 1) - Butch Parks, Kerry Olson, Brian Rognon

Property rights monitoring remains one of the most important functions of the Lands Administration Branch. Personnel spend a great deal of time monitoring wildlife habitat management areas for trespass threats from surrounding lands. In addition, conservation easements and public access areas are monitored for compliance with easement terms and conditions. During the recent calendar year, 20 conservation easements, 20 WHMA's, and numerous access areas were monitored by Lands personnel.



Figure 7. Blacks Fork Public Access Area Monitoring.



Figure 8. Salt River Public Access Area Monitoring.



Figure 9. Chrisman Green River Public Access Area Monitoring.



Figure 10. Chrisman Green River Public Access Area Monitoring.

Ongoing Projects (Goals 1 and 3) - Kerry Olson and Brian Rognon

Lands Branch personnel continue to move forward with several fee title, water rights, conservation easement and public access projects. Communication and coordination with other Services Division personnel, and with other WGFD divisions continue to be a high priority as several regional meetings were attended, and various committee assignments were completed.

Horse Creek WHMA Access (Goal 3) - Butch Parks

After years of negotiation and consideration of several landowner proposals, Lands personnel completed easement projects on 12 different parcels of private lands to improve administrative access to the Horse Creek WHMA. The project also included acquisition of approximately 40 acres of private lands for elk management purposes. Access to Horse Creek was limited to a relatively steep and unsafe roadway for years, while use of a more direct and safe route was denied by several landowners. The new access route will improve operation of the WHMA.

Packer Lake Public Access (Goal 3) - Kerry Olson

Public access to Packer Lake, located just west of the Nebraska state line near Torrington, was compromised by a local landowner's representative claiming ownership of the primary access road. The landowner initiated road closures without prior approval from the WGFD. Ownership of the road was determined to be held by the Village of Lyman, Nebraska. An agreement was prepared that will allow road maintenance and uninterrupted access to the lake and surrounding habitat for fishing and hunting.

Muddy Creek Feedground Access (Goal 1 and 3) - Brian Rognon

A recent survey of the access road to the Muddy Creek Feedground revealed the road crosses private lands not under easement. Access to the feedground and surrounding areas has been important for facility maintenance and operation, and for managing and monitoring local elk populations. Lands Administration secured a new easement which allows administrative access, as well as limited access for antler collecting and for fall hunting.

Wick WHMA Exchange (Goal 1) - Butch Parks and Kerry Olson

Lands administration completed a land exchange at the Wick WHMA that should improve management on Commission owned lands, and improve access to thousands of acres of public lands. Two similar sized parcels (160 acres), with equal appraised values were exchanged. The commission owned parcel was located well outside of the boundaries of the WHMA, and it could not be managed with the rest of WHMA lands. The private land parcel acquired was located immediately adjacent to the WHMA and to several thousand acres of public lands.

Terrestrial Habitat

In March of 2014 the Terrestrial Habitat Section was restructured: The Habitat and Biological Services Section(s) were combined into the Statewide Wildlife and Habitat Management Section (SWAHM). The three Habitat Extension Biologists (HEBs) working in Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Offices were transferred to vacant Terrestrial Habitat Biologist (THB) positions in the Lander, Sheridan and Casper Regions. The Wheatland HEB position was re-structured to serve as the WGFD's first Statewide Habitat Biologist. The assistant manager position was restructured into an office manager position for the SWAHM section. The Terrestrial Habitat Program Manager position remains in Cheyenne and retains similar form. Tracking of grants, contracts, agreements and expenditures for all terrestrial habitat projects statewide remains a primary function of the Terrestrial Habitat Program in Cheyenne.

During calendar year 2014, Terrestrial Habitat Program personnel were heavily involved with on-the-ground implementation, oversight or verification of expenditures on 54 projects concerning Game and Fish trust funds and funds granted to the WGFD from sources such as, Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust (WNNRT), various conservation organizations, USDA Farm Bill Programs, local, county, state and federal agencies, conservation districts, weed and pest districts and private landowners, and others. These sources provided over \$918,000 toward on-the-ground expenditures for terrestrial projects. The various partners and their contributions toward these projects are highlighted in the regional sections of this report. In addition, regional THBs and HEBs worked on other SHP actions not directly related to funded projects or projects funded through the standard maintenance and operational budgets. These actions included habitat protection, inventory and assessment work, monitoring previous project function and habitat response, habitat related education efforts, and training. Lastly, personnel spent a considerable amount of time throughout the year planning, coordinating and developing future projects with a multitude of partners and preparing funding applications for the WGFD and other entities.

Statewide, THBs closely coordinated with Wildlife Division personnel to address habitat presentations at the season setting meetings. They also conducted, coordinated and collated information collected by Wildlife Division personnel from 116 established annual vegetation production and utilization transects. Another important task performed by section personnel was collecting vegetation and habitat monitoring data on 229 permanent transects associated with past habitat enhancements. Terrestrial habitat personnel are also responsible for coordinating annual meetings with federal land management agencies relative to wildlife habitat enhancement projects and larger federal projects that may affect wildlife habitat. They provided assistance at hunter check stations to collect tissues for chronic wasting disease analysis and other biological information from harvested animals and participated in sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse lek surveys. Most habitat personnel also serve on one or more WGFD species working groups (moose, bighorn sheep, sage grouse, turkey, pronghorn and mule deer) and routinely serve on various habitat-related committees.

Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative

The Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI) is a long-term science based effort to assess and enhance habitats in southwest Wyoming. In 2014, WLCI allocated \$726,327 to 30 projects and WLCI's partners contributed \$2,452,478. These projects and associated activities were accomplished through numerous coordination meetings, field trips, and work sessions. The WLCI Coordination Team members met with non-governmental organizations, permittees, landowners, other agencies and entities to coordinate WLCI activities. The 30 projects encompassed all of WLCI's focus communities: aspen (2 projects), aquatic (5 projects), mountain shrub (1 project), riparian (6 projects) and sagebrush (7 projects). Eleven projects addressed control of invasive species while reducing barriers to migration corridors was the objective of six other projects. One WLCI funded effort was the Red Desert to Hoback Mule Deer Migration Assessment which utilized GPS collars on mule deer to discover one of the world's longest migration corridors while identifying migration barriers. The WLCI anticipates new projects will be developed to reduce impediments to this mule deer migration.

The WGFD's coordinator to WLCI traveled to Washington D.C. to inform the National Workshop on Large Landscape Conservation (NWLLC) of the many aspects of WLCI. The NWLLC was a forum to "share ideas on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in implementing large landscape conservation, as well as the most effective tools, strategies and science available to inform large landscape initiatives."

WLCI received funding from El Paso Corp, to improve and assess sage-grouse and pygmy rabbit habitats in the vicinity of the Ruby Pipeline. The Ruby Pipeline Focus Group was established to fund projects for the pipeline under the direction of WLCI. In 2014, this group approved funding for four assessments and one project aimed to improve riparian vegetation around springs, seeps, and reservoirs. The assessment of seeps, springs, and reservoirs involves mapping springs and reservoirs and assessing them for potential sage-grouse brood rearing habitat. Results are driving the establishment of riparian enclosures to provide brood rearing habitats. A study to understand sage-grouse geophagic (dirt eating) tendencies was funded by Ruby. Two objectives are to analyze soil and sagebrush samples found at the sites the birds frequent compared to random samples to understand if there is a nutritional difference that sage-grouse are preferring. The other objective is to locate other sites sage-grouse are selecting. Two pygmy rabbit assessments were conducted; the first uses remote sensing equipment to photo-document the presence or absence of pygmy rabbits. The other relates pygmy rabbit distributions with variations in habitat, including gas field infrastructure. The data will improve a USGS model predicting current distribution, and information on levels of gas field development that are compatible with continued pygmy rabbit site occupancy. In 2014, these four projects received \$250,569 out of the Ruby funds.