

# MONTANA SAGE GROUSE HABITAT CONSERVATION PROGRAM



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## Public Scoping Notice

### Sage Grouse Stewardship Account Grant Application

### Proposed Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement

June 6, 2019

Dear Interested Party:

The Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program (Program) is soliciting public scoping comments on a grant application submitted to the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) for funding from the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Account.

The purpose of the Stewardship Account grants is to provide competitive grant funding and establish ongoing free-market mechanisms for voluntary, incentive-based conservation measures that maintain, enhance, restore, expand, and benefit sage grouse habitat and populations on private lands. The majority of Stewardship Account funds must be awarded to projects that generate mitigation credits, which MSGOT makes available to developers to offset the residual impacts of development through compensatory mitigation after developers have already implemented avoidance, minimization, and reclamation efforts.

The Program invited submission of complete applications by May 13, 2019. The Montana Land Reliance (MLR) submitted a grant application request for funding to support the purchase of a perpetual conservation easement on the Sauerbier Ranch. MLR is an IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and is qualified private organization. MCA § 76-6-204.

The Sauerbier Ranch is located in the Sweetwater area of Beaverhead and Madison counties in the Ruby Valley near Alder and Dillon, Montana. The easement would be placed on three separate parcels, all of which are located within a designated Core Area. The proposed easement would encompass 7,697 physical acres.

The property consists of primarily grassland and rangeland. It is located between two large blocks of U.S. Bureau of Land Management land, and the ranch also adjoins two State School Trust Land



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Director's Office: (406) 444-2074



sections. The lands are managed primarily for livestock production. The proposed easement area has eight sage grouse leks located within 12 miles, five of which are located within four miles. Three leks are within the project boundary. See figures below.

The Sauerbier Ranch owners have actively participated in habitat improvement projects in conjunction with the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Sage Grouse Initiative in recent years. Projects have included conifer reduction, fence marking, and implementation of a livestock management plan that considers sage grouse seasonal habitat needs. The ranch also supports variety of habitat types which support myriad other wildlife species.

MSGOT and the Program are required to apply the current designated Habitat Quantification Tool (HQT) to any project that is selected for funding from the Stewardship Account. MCA § 76-6-109(4). The HQT is the scientific method used to evaluate vegetation and environmental conditions related to quality and quantity of sage grouse habitat and to quantify and calculate the number of credits created by a conservation project. MCA § 76-6-103(9). MSGOT approved the current version of the HQT and accompanying Policy Guidance Document in October, 2018.

The HQT considers the many biophysical attributes of Greater sage-grouse seasonal habitats to estimate habitat functionality across multiple spatial and temporal scales. The HQT also accounts for existing human disturbances (e.g. roads, cropland, energy development, etc.). These measures of habitat, expressed as functional acres, are used for calculating conservation benefits (i.e., credits) from mitigation projects. Using habitat quality, expressed as functional acres, provides a common "habitat currency" that can be used for both credit and debit projects to ensure accurate accounting of habitat gains and losses and allows comparisons across projects using a common metric that is calculated in the exact same way.

The HQT starts with a baseline map of habitat quality, or presently existing functional acres on the landscape. Next, the HQT calculates the number of functional acres that would be created (or gained) because of the proposed conservation easement. Applicable policy modifiers are applied, based on the number of functional acres gained and calculated by the HQT. Once a conservation project is implemented, the total functional acres created (after application of policy modifiers) is converted to credits at a 1:1 ratio.

High HQT scores correspond to areas of high quality sage grouse habitat and are shown in warm red colors on HQT maps. These will typically be areas with high levels of intact sagebrush, good brood-rearing habitat, high densities of breeding male sage grouse (i.e., many leks with strong numbers of males displaying on them), and low levels of human disturbance. Higher numbers of functional acres gained translates to more credits created per physical acre of conservation.

For purposes of considering the number of credits that might be created by each conservation project proposed for funding from the Stewardship Account, the Program has run the HQT using the spatial data provided by MLR (the grant applicant) for the proposed conservation easement on the Sauerbier Ranch. Results do not include non-deed lands within the perimeter of the proposed



easement (i.e. federal, state, and private land inholdings owned by entities other than the Sauerbier Ranch are excluded from results and also from the easement itself).

The HQT results show that the proposed easement would conserve high quality habitat. The functional acres gained per physical acre of the project per year is 0.66. Higher numbers indicate more functional acres would be conserved and the habitat is of higher quality for the physical acres included in the proposed project. See the HQT figures below.

The project would generate 204,422 total credits after the 40% baseline. This equates to 0.266 credits created per physical acre of the project per year. Higher numbers indicate more credits are created per year for each physical acre included in the proposed project. Higher numbers are more favorable, and more credits would be created per dollar expended from the Stewardship Account.

The estimated market value of the proposed easement is \$3,850,000. MLR is requesting \$962,500 from the Stewardship Account to put towards purchasing the easement. State funds would be matched with \$2,887,500 from the NRCS Agricultural Lands Easement Program.

MLR is also requesting an additional \$51,000 in project costs that are directly related to the purpose of the grant to create mitigation credits. Additional project costs include a market appraisal, the resource documentation report, title commitment, the mineral remoteness report, recording costs and a contribution to MLR's stewardship account to pay for monitoring and long term site stewardship. MLR's total request from the Stewardship Account is \$1,013,500.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the following threats of habitat loss and fragmentation in this part of Montana: conversion of sagebrush grassland to cropland, exurban development, mechanical or chemical sagebrush control, and improper livestock management.

The terms of the conservation easement are expected to permit the following activities, consistent with the conservation values protected by the easement: current agricultural practices and production of livestock, haying and cultivation of previously cultivated land, and retention of the existing building area and their maintenance.

The terms of the conservation easement are expected to prohibit the following: subdivision, industrial and commercial surface uses for wind or solar development, surface mining other than small scale use to maintain existing roads on the ranch, new road construction, land conversion to crops, new buildings outside the building envelope.

If selected for funding, MSGOT would own the credits, but MLR would hold the easement. The requirements for mitigation credit sites would be fulfilled through the combined actions of the landowner, MLR and MSGOT. MLR would monitor the property independently and will work with land owners to monitor the easement annually into perpetuity. MLR will provide annual monitoring reports to the Program. MLR's stewardship account would provide the financial assurances necessary for the credit site. These funds would be available to restore impaired



habitat due to breach of the easement terms. MSGOT's reserve account would be used to replace credits due to unforeseen events. Additionality would be met by protection of the habitat in perpetuity and avoiding loss of habitat that might not otherwise be protected. Duration and durability would be met because the proposed project would protect habitat in perpetuity through the terms of the conservation easement. The site is appropriate given its location in a Core Area and the high HQT results. The site provides suitable breeding, nesting, and brood-rearing habitat.

In accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, public comment and concerns about the project and potential environmental impacts must be considered and analyzed in an environmental assessment. The assessment will be available for public review and comment in the summer of 2019. MSGOT is expected to select grant recipients in the fall of 2019.

Interested parties have until June 24, 2019 to submit concerns or comments relating to this project. Mail written comments to Carolyn Sime, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, 1539 11th Ave, Helena, MT 59620. Written comments must be received on or before June 24, 2019.

Submit comments electronically and attach documents through the public comment web application tool located on the MSGOT webpage at <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/Team>. Electronic comments must be received by 8:00 a.m. on June 24, 2019.



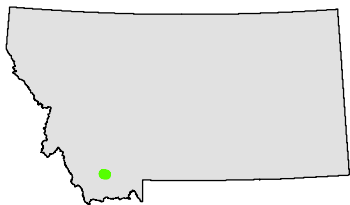


# Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement - Surrounding Public Lands



**MONTANA SAGE GROUSE**  
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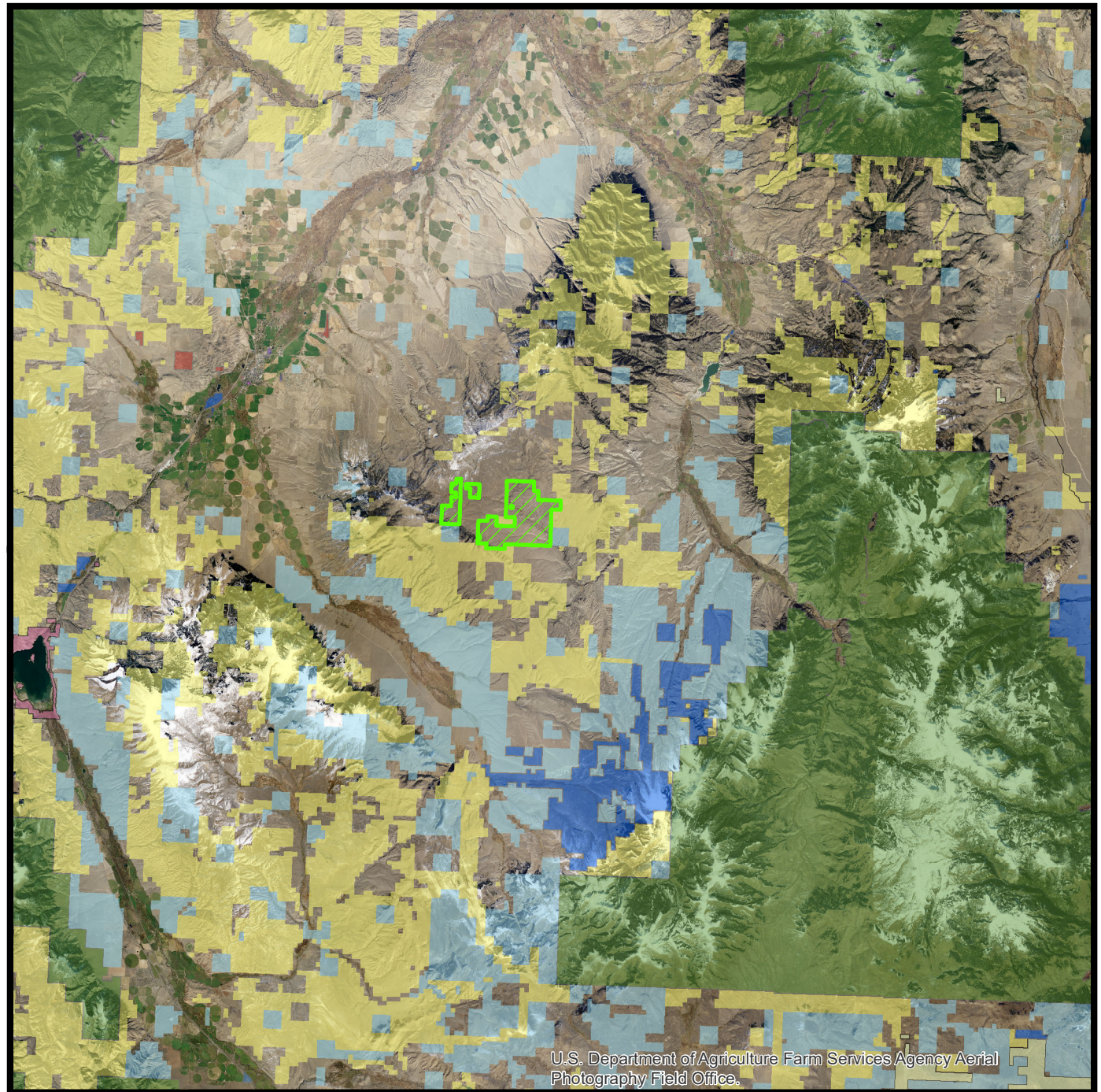
-  **Project Area**
-  **US Bureau of Land Management**
-  **US Forest Service**
-  **US Fish and Wildlife Service**
-  **US Bureau of Reclamation**
-  **Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks**
-  **Montana State Trust Lands**
-  **County Government**



## Project Information:

Map Date: 28 May 2019  
Path File: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse HCP\  
Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete  
Applications due May 13\ArcMapFiles

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency  
Aerial Photography Field Office.



U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency Aerial  
Photography Field Office.

0 10 20 Miles



# Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement - Aerial Imagery of Project Area



**MONTANA SAGE GROUSE**  
Habitat Conservation Program



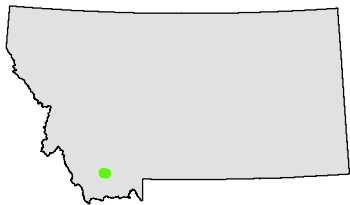
**Project Area**



**US Bureau of Land Management**



**Montana State Trust Lands**

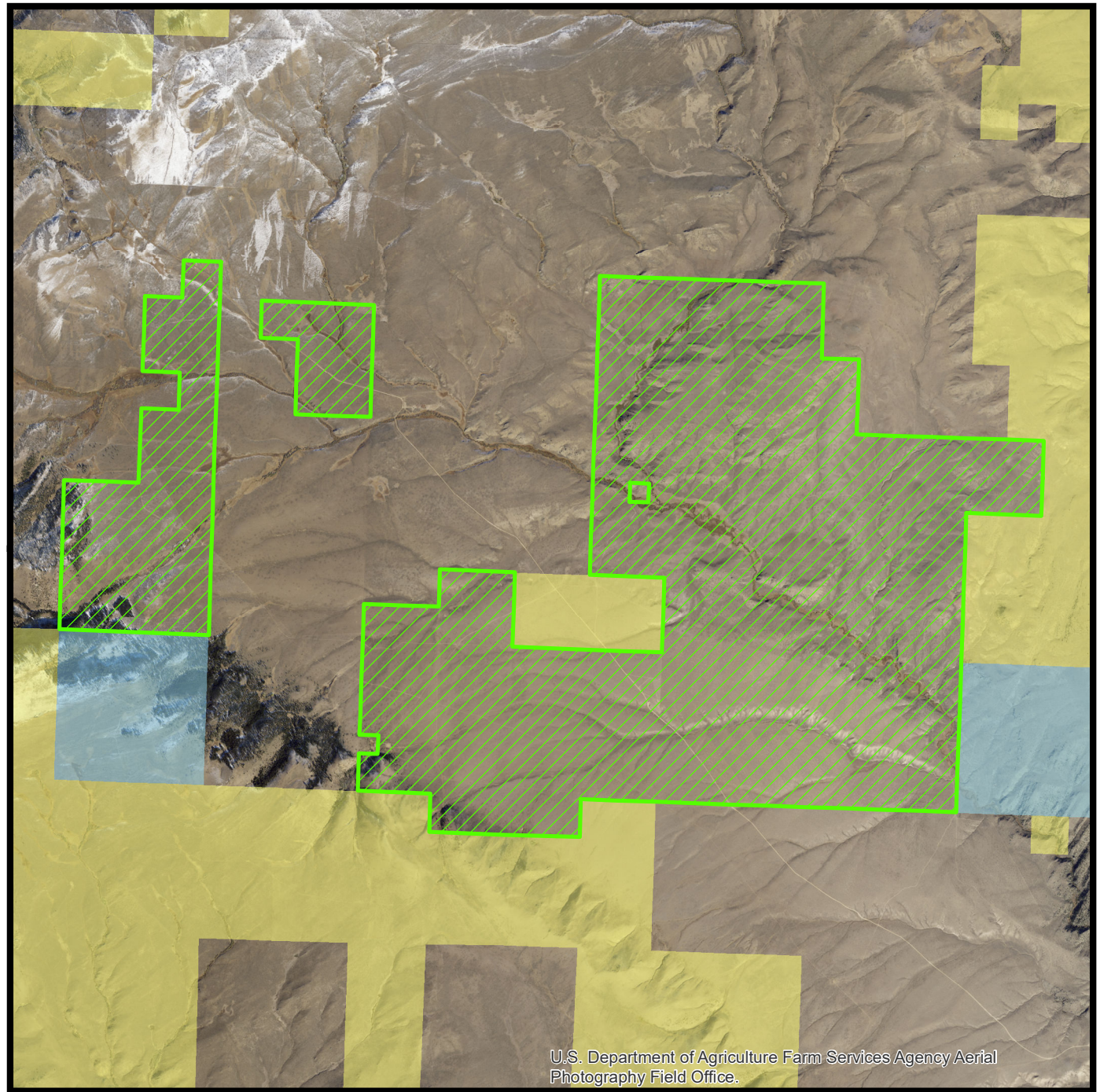


## Project Information:

Map Date: 28 May 2019

Path File: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse HCP\  
Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete  
Applications due May 13\ArcMapFiles

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency  
Aerial Photography Field Office.



U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency Aerial  
Photography Field Office.

0 1.5 3 Miles

# Percentage Conserved Lands within 4 Miles of the Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement (Montana Land Reliance)













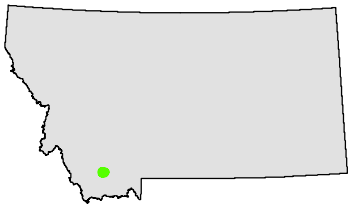
MONTANA SAGE GROUSE  
Habitat Conservation Program

## Project Information

-  Direct Project Footprint
-  Conserved Lands

## Percent of Conserved Lands within 4 Miles of Project Area

-  0% - 10%
-  10.1% - 20%
-  20.1% - 30%
-  30.1% - 40%
-  40.1% - 50%
-  50.1% - 60%
-  60.1% - 70%
-  70.1% - 80%
-  80.1% - 90%
-  90.1% - 100%

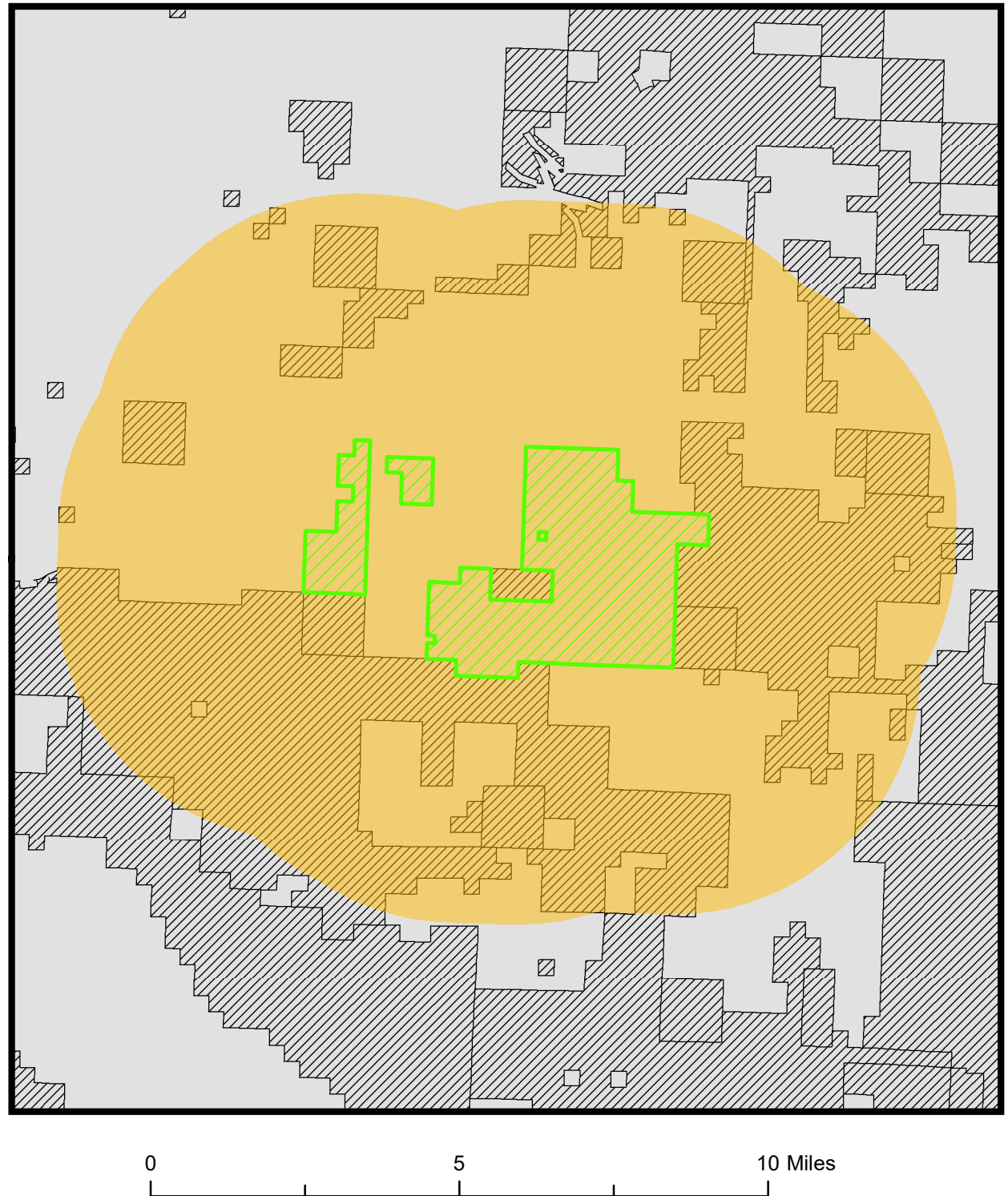


## Map Information:

Map Date: 5 June 2019

File Path: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse HCP\  
Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete  
Applications due May13\ArcMap  
\_Scratch\_Folder\4MileConservedLands

Land Management Dataset from: <http://mtnhp.org/stew.asp>

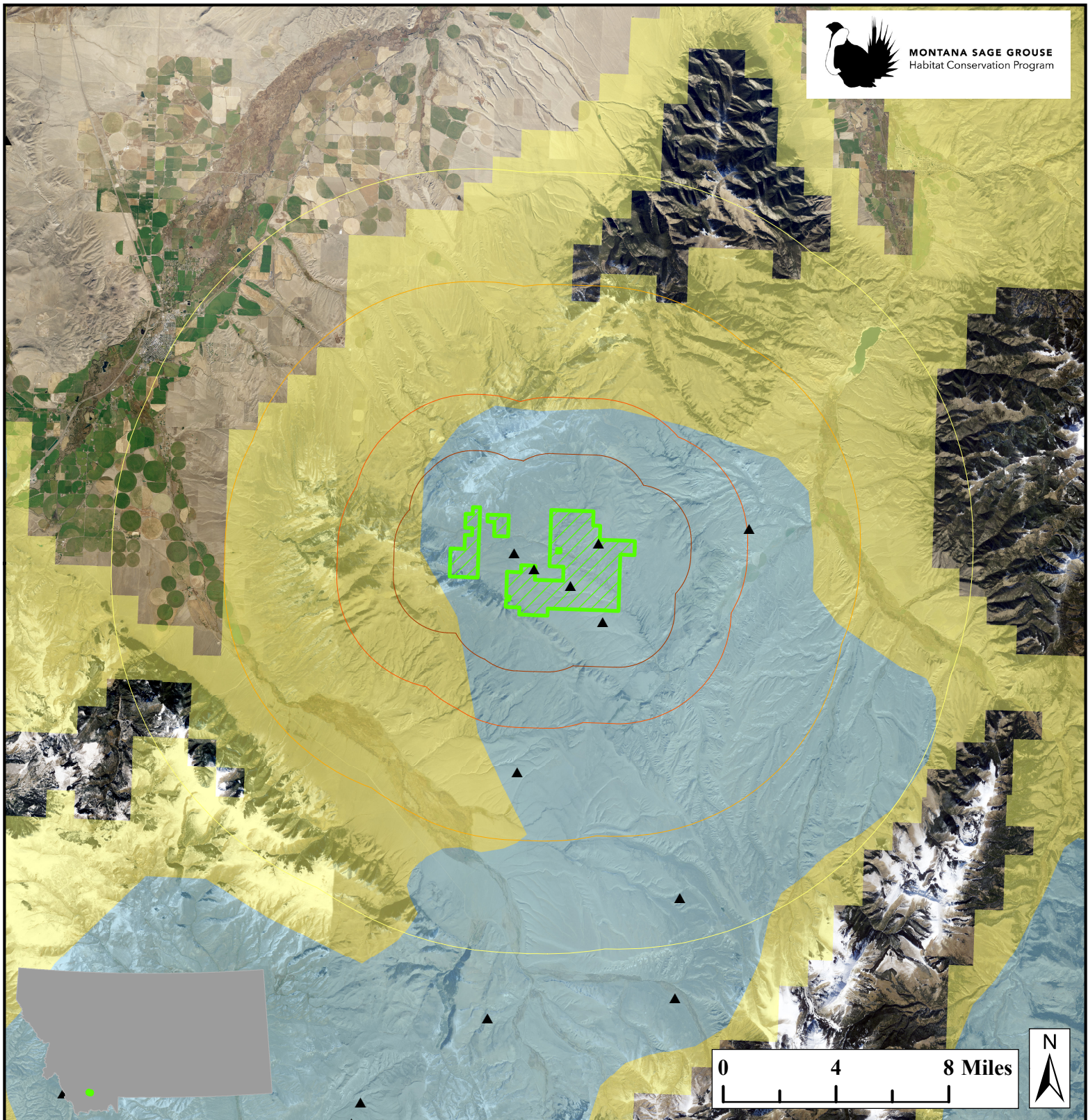




# Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement - Lek Proximity



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## Project Information:

Map Date: 06 June 2019  
PathFile: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse  
HCP\Grant Program\Second Cycle  
2019\Complete Applications due May  
13\ArcMapFiles\ProximityToSGLeks

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services  
Agency Aerial Photography Field Office.



**Project Footprint**



**2 Mile Buffer**



**4 Mile Buffer**



**8 Mile Buffer**



**12 Mile Buffer**



**Core Area**



**General Habitat**



**Connectivity Area**



**Sage Grouse Leks**

## # Leks Within Buffer

2 Mile: 5

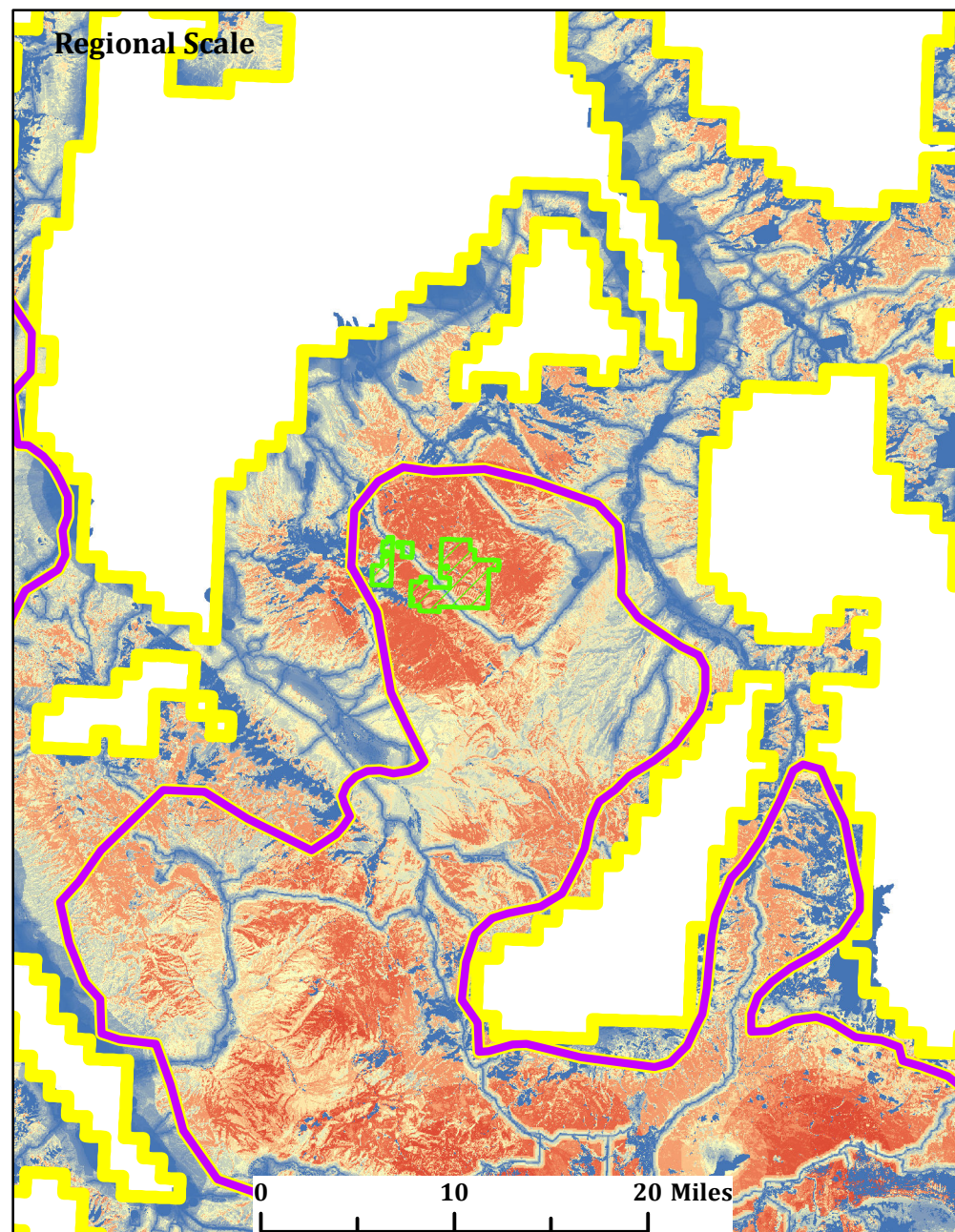
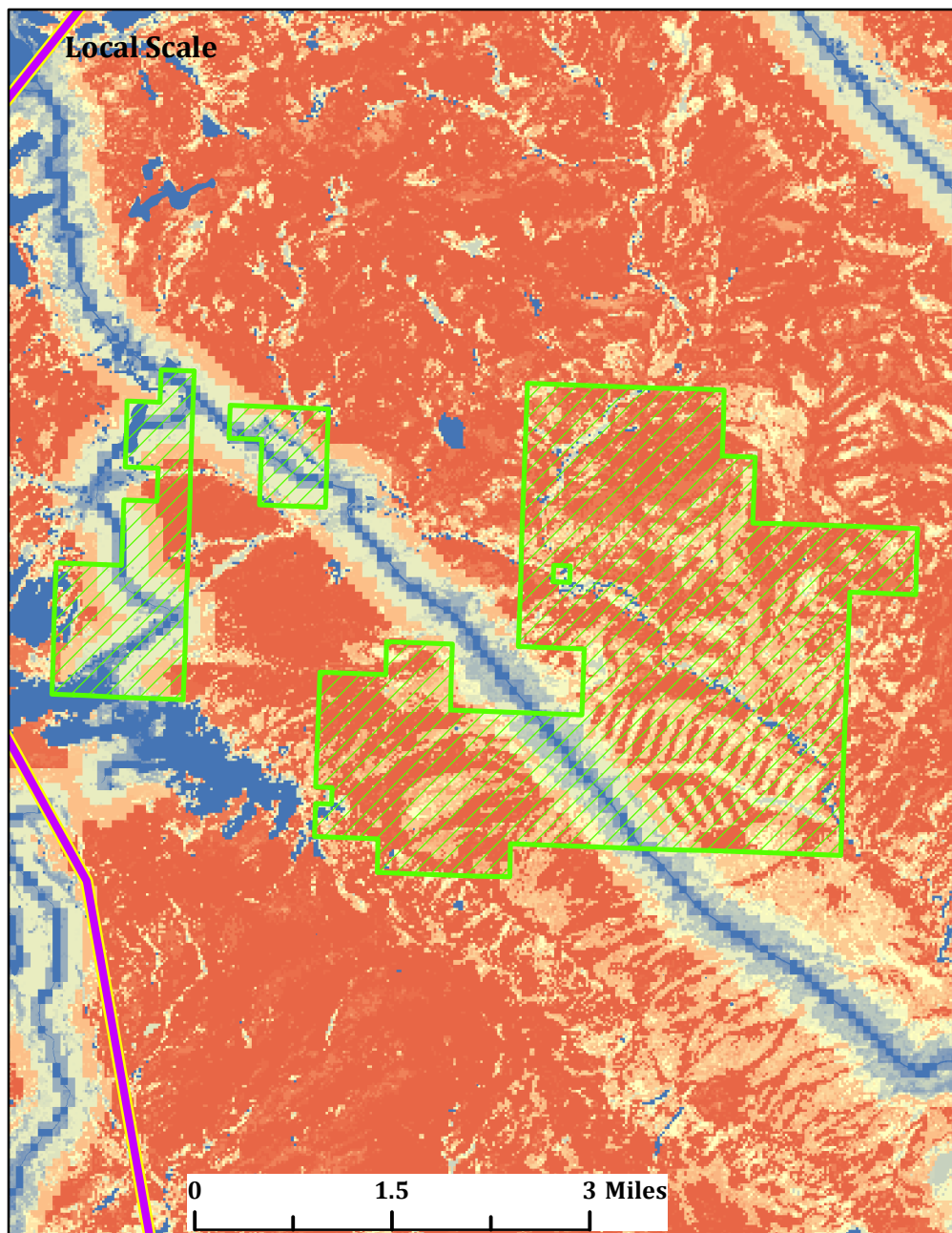
4 Mile: 5

8 Mile: 7

12 Mile: 8



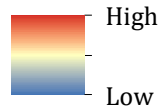
# HQT Results: Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement






## Project HQT Metadata

HQT Date: 28 May 2019  
# Years Maintained: 100 Years

## HQT Pixel Value



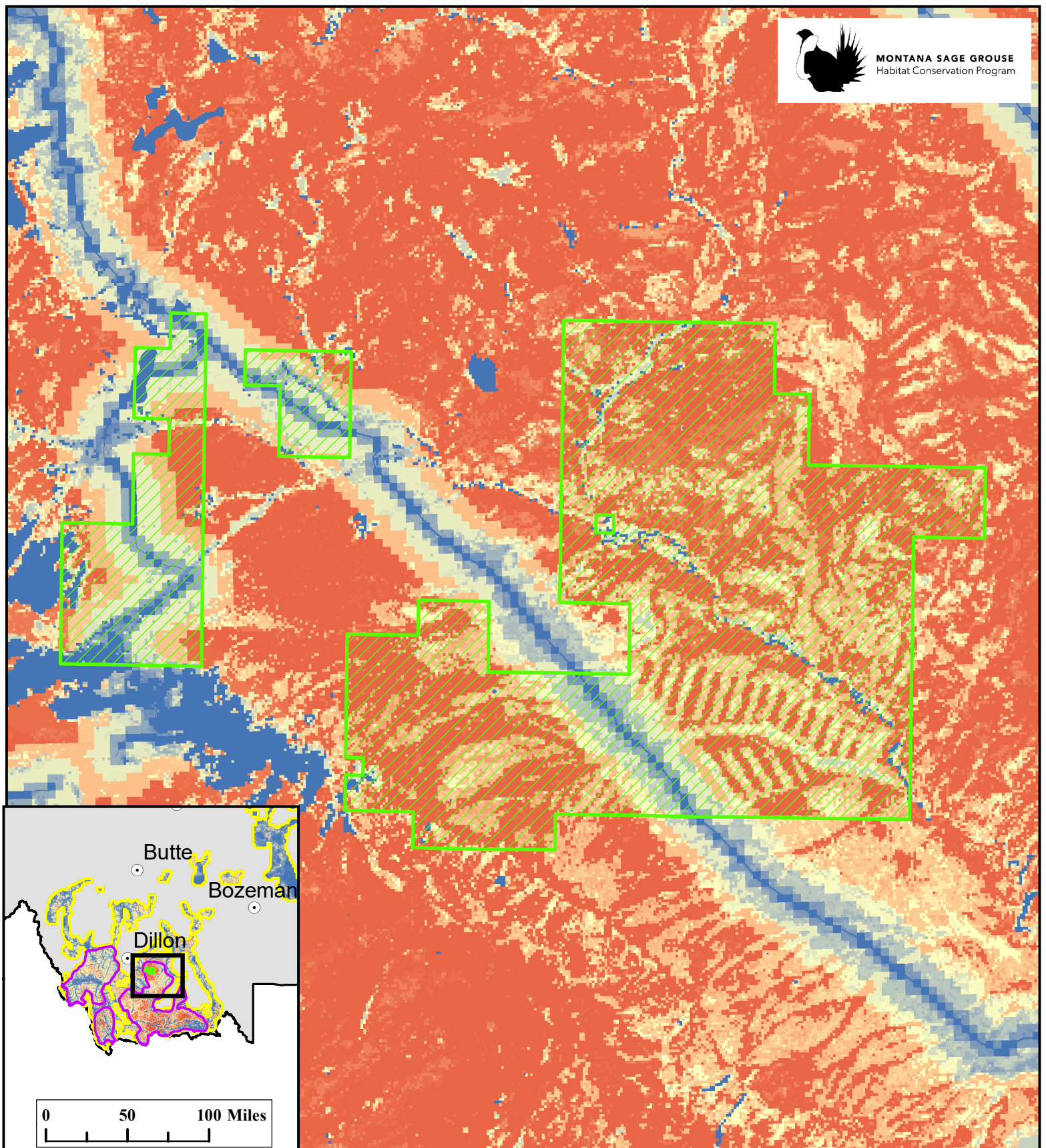
-  Project Direct Impact Footprint
-  Core Area
-  General Habitat



MONTANA SAGE GROUSE  
Habitat Conservation Program



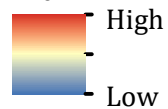
# HQT Results: Sauerbier Ranch Conservation Easement



## Project & HQT Information

Date of HQT Results: 22 May 2019  
Number of Years: 100 Years

### HQT Value



Project Direct Footprint



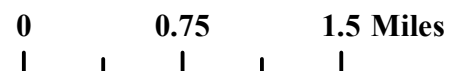
Core Area



General Habitat



Major Towns





Project Information						Raw HQT Score		Applicable Policy			Metrics			
Project Name	Project Type	Service Area	# of Years	Price per Credit for Lease Duration	Physical Acres	1 Year	Total (all years)	# of Credits awarded for newly created Fx-A		Baseline at 40%	Total Credits Available / Generated	Fx-A / PA / Yr	Credits / PA / Yr	Request Amount
								Core Area (10%)	General Habitat (5%)					
Sauerbier Ranch Property	Preservation (Perpetual)	Southwestern Service Area	100	NA	7,696.70	5,110.57	511,056.54	N/A	N/A	204,422.62	204,422.62	0.664	0.266	\$1,013,500

Credit results do not include non-deeded lands within the perimeter of the project area (i.e. State Trust Lands other public lands not included). Integrated

6/4/2019