



FAQ's: MITIGATION PROCESS FOR CONSERVATION PROJECTS MONTANA SAGE GROUSE HABITAT CONSERVATION PROGRAM

MITIGATION PROCESS FOR CREDIT PRODUCING PROJECTS

1. OVERVIEW OF THE MONTANA MITIGATION SYSTEM

The Montana Mitigation System for Greater Sage-Grouse (the Mitigation System) was developed by a collaborative and highly diverse team in response to the Greater Sage Grouse Stewardship Act passed by the 2015 Montana Legislature and the implementation of Executive Orders 12-2015 and 21-2015. The collaborative team consisted of the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program (the Sage Grouse Program), the Montana Mitigation Stakeholders Team (consisting of a wide diversity of perspectives, interests, and expertise), and professional collaborators (including the Willamette Partnership and SWCA Environmental Consultants). The Mitigation System is designed to balance economic growth and development with conservation of greater sage-grouse, an iconic species of the sagebrush-grassland habitats of Montana, to maintain state-authority over this sensitive wildlife species and avoid the need for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act. Montana remains a stronghold for the sage grouse population west wide. Montanans play a vital role in the Montana Mitigation System. Through their continued active participation in conservation activities, Montanans can maintain and improve the status of sage grouse in the west.

The Montana Mitigation System Policy Guidance Document for Greater Sage-Grouse (the Policy Guidance document) accompanied by the Montana Mitigation System Habitat Quantification Tool Technical Manual for Greater Sage-Grouse (the HQT Technical Manual) define the Montana Mitigation System (both documents can be found on the Sage Grouse Program's website: sagegrouse.mt.gov). These two documents outline the mitigation process for conservation and development activities. The Policy Guidance document defines the processes and information necessary to create, buy, or sell mitigation credits suitable for meeting sage grouse mitigation requirements within the State of Montana. The HQT Technical Manual provides a scientific method for measuring impacts to habitat from development and improvements to habitat from conservation activities. Ultimately, the Sage Grouse Program balances credits generated from conservation activities and debits accrued from development activities in an effort to see Montana's sage grouse population and rural economy grow.

1. The following definitions are important for understanding key concepts used in the Mitigation System:

Credit – a defined unit of trade representing the accrual or attainment of resource functions or values at a proposed project site.

Debit – a defined unit of trade representing the loss of resource functions or value at an impact or project site. The unit of measure is the same as that for a credit within a specific mitigation system.

Habitat Quantification Tool (HQT) – the scientific method used to evaluate vegetation and environmental conditions related to the quality and quantity of sage grouse habitat and to quantify and calculate the Functional Acres Gained or Lost resulting from conservation or development activities, respectively, that convert to credits and debits, respectively.

Functional Acre – a single unit of value that expresses the assessment of quantity (acreage) and quality (function) of habitat or projected habitat through the



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quantification of a set of local and landscape conditions. A functional acre is the metric for outputs from the habitat quantification tool (also expressed as the Raw HQT Score) and forms the basis for quantifying, expressing, and exchanging credits and debits. One Functional Acre Gained or Lost is equivalent to one credit or debit, respectively, in the mitigation marketplace.

Raw HQT Score – Final project score produced by the HQT that considers changes made to the Montana HQT Basemap as a result of conservation or development activities. The Raw HQT Score reflects the total Functional Acres Lost for a development project and Functional Acres Gained for a conservation project.

Visit <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov> for general information about the Program and to read the Executive Orders, the Policy Guidance Document, and the HQT Technical Manual.

2. WHAT IS A CREDIT PROJECT?

A Credit Producing Project is a conservation action taken by an entity that creates credits through 1) the preservation of existing sage grouse habitat, 2) the enhancement of existing sage grouse habitat, or 3) the restoration of habitat that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed. A credit is a unit of trade that represents conservation actions in the mitigation system. Credits that are created through a Credit Producing Project can be sold to developers who need credits to offset their impacts of development (represented by the accrual of debits).

3. IS YOUR CREDIT PROJECT LOCATED WITHIN DESIGNATED SAGE GROUSE HABITAT?

For conservation projects to generate credits and participate in the Mitigation System, the projects must be located within designated sage grouse habitat (e.g., Core Areas, General Habitat, Connectivity Area), defined in the Executive Order 21-2015. To determine if your project is located within designated sage grouse habitat, you use the interactive web map on the Program's website (<https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/ProgramMap>).

The interactive web map allows you to zoom in to your area of interest using the "+" or "-" buttons located in the upper left side of the map (similar to a Google Map application). Use the cursor and hover over each button to see a pop-up window with a description of the button's function. You can search for your proposed project area by using the "Location" feature button (🔍) located above the zoom buttons. The Location feature allows for searching by area name, such as "Glasgow, MT", or by using the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) to locate Township and Range. The PLSS format is "2S 4W", for example. To search by latitude or longitude, enter latitude, longitude (.

Other map features can be found by hovering your mouse over the "Layers" feature button (📁), which opens a menu bar with additional geospatial data layers to view, including additional base map views. The base maps include Aerial, Street (which is the default), and Terrain views. Also in the Layers menu, you can turn on and off the following map layers: Sage Grouse Executive Order (EO) Habitat Classification, BLM Habitat Management Areas (including Priority, General, and Restoration), Counties, Management Zones, Exempt Community Boundaries, Lek No Surface Occupancy Areas (NSOAs), Lek Two and Four Mile Buffers, USFS Priority Habitat Management Area, Township & Range (PLSS), Land Ownership, Service Areas, HQT Basemap, Conservation Easements and Leases, Mile-Posts, USFS Core Priority Habitat, and Existing Disturbances.



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4. ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Certain eligibility requirements must be met for a project to qualify for credits. For credits to be used to meet mitigation requirements in the State of Montana, they must meet the standards and processes outlined in the Policy Guidance document, including approval, verification, and tracking requirements and have been estimated using the state's HQT

5. SUBMIT YOUR CREDIT PROJECT TO THE SAGE GROUSE PROGRAM FOR REVIEW

If your conservation project is within designated sage grouse habitat (Core Area, General Habitat, or Connectivity Area), please submit your project to the Sage Grouse Program for review. To submit your project, you will need to complete a conservation project through the sage grouse web-application. From the Sage Grouse Program's home page (<https://sagegrouse.mt.gov>), click "login" button on the top right of the webpage. If you have not created an account, click "Create an Account" and follow the subsequent steps. Once you have logged into your Okta account, click "New Project" located in the upper right corner of the menu bar. Once you have submitted your project, the program will determine whether your project meets the criteria for an Enhancement, Preservation or Restoration Project. See Table 1. For additional help on how to enter a conservation project, please refer to our "Quick Start Guide for the Mitigation Process for Credit Producing Projects" located here: <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov>

COMPLETING THE PROJECT INSTRUCTIONS

The Instructions page will help guide you through the submission process. Consult the information on this page to make sure your project is located within designated sage grouse habitat or for more information including about the Montana Mitigation HQT Basemap.

BASICS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

On the Basics page, applicants will need to create a Project Name and provide a description of their intended conservation project. The system will automatically create a unique Project ID Number once your project is saved. Please provide a description of your conservation project in the "Project Description" box. In the Contact Information section, please provide your complete contact information so that the Sage Grouse Program staff can contact you to continue the review process. Include contact information for the credit owner and responsible party, as well.

ACTIVITY TYPE

The Activities page is intended for applicants to accurately provide spatial data of their conservation project to the Program for review. It is critical that the spatial data correctly depicts the area where the proposed project will take place. Please select the most appropriate Activity Type for each activity you plan on conducting for the conservation project you are submitting (see Table 1 for a list of associated Activity Types for Conservation, Restoration and Enhancement Activities). Here you will either draw the boundaries of your activity using our web map or you can upload spatial data. Accepted GIS file types that can be uploaded include Geodatabase, Keyhole Markup Language, or Shapefile.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Questionnaire page has questions related to the activity type you chose. If you are applying for Stewardship Fund Grants you will be asked a series of questions specific to grants. If you are applying for credits without, use of Stewardship Funds you will need to answer additional screening



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questions for credit generating eligibility requirements.

ATTACHMENTS

Applicants should include documents which may be helpful for understanding your project. This may include a management plan, maps or pictures.

Once you have finished entering all your proposed activities, click the "Submit" button to officially submit your form to the Sage Grouse Program for review. ***NOTE:** once you click the "Submit" button, you will not be able to edit any information you have entered without assistance from the Program.*

6. WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

After you have submitted your conservation project to the Sage Grouse Program web application, the Sage Grouse Program will contact you to begin the consultation process. If your project meets the eligibility requirements the Sage Grouse Program will calculate the number of Credits generated as a result of your proposed conservation project by running your Credit Project through the HQT model and applying applicable Policy Guidance multipliers. Lastly, the Sage Grouse Program will work with you to ensure you have all the documents necessary to enter your newly generated Credits into the Montana Mitigation System and properly maintain those Credits for the agreed upon time frame.

7. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS?

If you have additional questions or need assistance with the conservation project web application, please contact the Sage Grouse Program at 406-444-6340 or email us at sagegrouse@mt.gov.



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Table 1. The list of associated activity types for each of the 3 options for a Conservation Project.

Project Type	Associated Activities
Preservation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation Easement or Lease
Restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal of anthropogenic structures (e.g., power lines, roads) • Permanent Plug and abandon oil/gas mines • Eradication of invasive plant species • Removal of encroaching conifers • Convert cropland to rangeland with sagebrush component • Wet meadow restoration (e.g., restore proper hydrology & plant communities) • Fence Marking • Reclaim abandon mine site • Bury or remove existing pipeline • New grazing water pipeline
Enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aquatic habitat restoration • Maintain or improve sagebrush habitat • Mesic habitat restoration

Figure 1. Overview of the review process for Credit and Debit Projects in the Montana Mitigation System.

