QUICK START GUIDE FOR THE 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.

1.1. 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

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 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 Credit Projects 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 Credit 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 can review the Sage Grouse Core Areas and General Habitat Map on the home page of the Program's website (https://sagegrouse.mt.gov).

From the home page, click on "Check if you are in habitat" link under the small map icon on the right side of the page to access the Program's interactive web map: the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Map. 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 zoon 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, the format is: Longitude first, then Latitude (-109.3773; 46.8174).

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), USFS Priority Habitat Management Area, Township & Range (PLSS), Land Ownership, USFS Core Priority Habitat, and Existing Disturbances.

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

If your credit 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 secure form online. From the Sage Grouse Program's home page (https://sagegrouse.mt.gov), click on the "Credit Project" link on the right side of the page under the small map icon. From there, click on the "Submit a Project" button on the right side of the page under the "Submitting Projects" panel to be redirected to a secure online form.

5. COMPLETING THE SECURE ONLINE FORM

PROJECT INFORMATION
The Project Information section of the form allows you to provide a meaningful and identifying name for your project (Project Name). The system will automatically create a unique Project ID Number once you submit the form. In this section, you will also be able to select which Project Type that your Credit Project is considered. Options include Preservation, Restoration, or Enhancement. If your Credit Project includes more than one Project Type, please enter those activities as separate Projects by completing a form for each Project Type included in your Credit Project. Additionally, please provide a description of your Credit Project in the "Project Description" box. Finally, please provide the number of physical acres included in the project.

PROJECT LOCATION
The Project Location section of the form allows you to identify various location-related aspects of your project. These include identifying 1) the sage grouse designated habitat type (Core Area, General Habitat, Connectivity Area), 2) the Service Area, 3) the county, and 4) the land owner type in which your project is located.

FUNDING
The Funding section of the form is where you may identify which funding sources (if any) are being applied for or used to generate the credits. You may also answer additional screening questions for credit generating eligibility requirements. At the end of this section is a list of documents which you may need to complete during the review process with the Sage Grouse Program once you submit your project. In some cases, you may already have some of the documents completed, if so, please check which documents you have completed.

CONTACT INFORMATION
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.

For Preservation Credit Projects: this will be the final section you will need to complete in order to submit your project to the Sage Grouse Program for review. Once you have completed all required fields on the form, please click the "Submit" button at the bottom of the form to officially submit your form to the Sage Grouse Program. *NOTE: once you click the "Submit" button, you will not be able to edit any information you have entered.*

For Restoration and Enhancement Credit Projects, once you have completed this form, please click the "Submit" button at the bottom of the form to proceed to the second page of the form where you will enter activity-specific information.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES INFORMATION (on the second page)
This section is only available and applicable for Restoration or Enhancement Credit Projects; it will not be visible for Preservation Credit Projects.

On this second page of the form, please provide a descriptive name and select the most appropriate activity type for each activity you plan on conducting to generate credits for the Credit Project you are submitting (see Table 1 for a list of associated activity types for Restoration and Enhancement project types). If you have an activity that does not fit well within any of the pre-defined activity types, please select the "Other" option and provide additional information. To add more than 1 activity, please click the "✚" button. You may delete an activity by clicking the "━" button. 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.*

THANK YOU PAGE
Upon completing and submitting the form, a "Thank You" page will appear that provides a summary of all the information you submitted to the Sage Grouse Program on the form. On this page you will also see your Project ID number. This Project ID number will travel with your Credit Project throughout the review process and serve as *the* unique identifier for your project. Please record the Project ID number for your records and save a copy of the "Thank You" page for your records.

6. WHAT TO EXPECT NEXT

After you have submitted your Credit Project form to the Sage Grouse Program for review, the Sage Grouse Program will contact you to begin the consultation process. This will include collecting geospatial data from you about your Credit Project (and your proposed project activities). The Sage Grouse Program will calculate the number of Credits generated as a result of your proposed Credit 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 Credit Project online form, please contact the Sage Grouse Program at 406-444-1467 or 406-444-2613 or email us at sagegrouse@mt.gov.
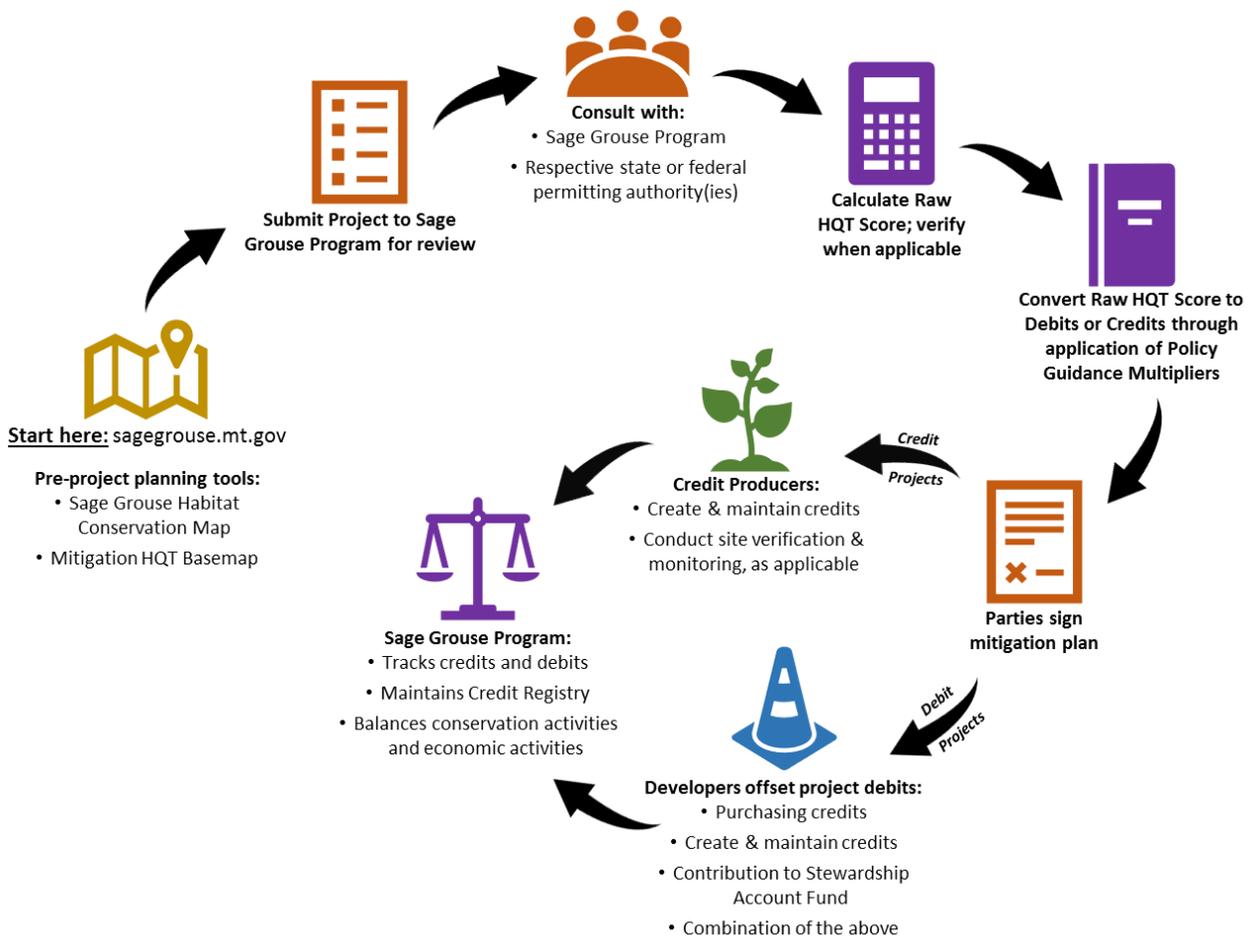
Table 1. The list of associated activity types for each of the 3 options for a Credit Project Type.

Project Type	Associated Activities
Preservation	• Conservation Easement or Lease
Restoration	• Removal of anthropogenic structures (e.g., power lines, roads) • 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) • Other (provide additional information)
Enhancement	• Adding sagebrush to existing native grasslands • Increasing native forb abundance/diversity in mesic areas • Other (provide additional information)

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