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# News Release

Idaho NRCS Release No: 15-03

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## **NATIONAL AWARD HONORS IDAHO'S PIONEERS ALLIANCE FOR SAGE GROUSE CONSERVATION**

**Boise, Idaho – Nov. 6, 2014** – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today that the Pioneers Alliance of Carey, Idaho, was a recipient of the Secretary's Honor Award for External Partnerships. The Honor Awards recognize groups and individuals who have made outstanding contributions that support USDA's mission and goals.

The Pioneers Alliance led a local effort to protect 65,412 acres (with another 13,000 acres in the final stages of protection) of working ranches and core sage grouse habitat between the Pioneer Mountains and Craters of the Moon National Monument area near Sun Valley, Idaho. Referred to as the Pioneers-Craters region, the area encompasses a large expanse of sagebrush ecosystem that is vitally important to sage grouse and other wildlife.

The award recognizes Mike Stevens, (then president of Lava Lake Land and Livestock), the community of Carey, Idaho Conservation League, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and Wood River Land Trust.

The Alliance worked with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to promote the agency's Sage Grouse Initiative with landowners in the Carey area. Launched in 2010, the Initiative uses Farm Bill dollars to fund voluntary conservation projects in sage grouse strongholds across 11 western states. The Alliance showed how voluntary conservation easements could benefit ranching operations.

"My father homesteaded this land and we are leaving it in better shape than how we got it. That's the purpose," says Ray Baird, a Carey landowner with a conservation easement on his property. "It's a win-win situation. This easement helped us do what we wanted to do for over 20 years: get a grazing plan together, provide appropriate fencing and water development. At the same time, it has been good for the sage grouse. Since 1982 I've noticed a real decline in the hens and working with Pioneers Alliance and Fish & Game, this year is one of the best hatches we've had."

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement that commits private landowners to conserve natural values on their properties by limiting certain types of development. Landowners receive compensation for the value of their land while retaining private property rights.

Helping People Help the Land

It works for both the bird and ranchers. So far, 25 landowners have enrolled working farms and ranches in conservation easements, supported with Sage Grouse Initiative dollars. These easements protect more than one-third of the private acres in the Pioneers-Craters region and connect wildlife habitat in almost 2.4 million acres of public lands.

Prior to the Sage Grouse Initiative, the Idaho NRCS conservation easement program received an average of \$1 million per year. With Pioneers Alliance involvement, landowner participation doubled and funding increased by more than 500 percent.

“The Pioneers Alliance realized the potential of bringing conservation funding into their community to strengthen the economic and cultural viability of ranching in the region,” said Jeff Burwell, Idaho State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, who nominated the group. “It also protects and improves existing sage grouse habitat.”

The Pioneers Alliance is a coalition of ranchers, residents, conservationists, public land managers, and elected officials. They formed in 2007 aiming to conserve the working lands and wildlands of the Pioneers-Craters region of south central Idaho.

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