



## **Fire Management and Greater Sage Grouse** **Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q: Why was the greater sage-grouse under consideration for listing under the Endangered Species Act?**

**A:** The greater sage-grouse population has experienced a significant decline. Historically, the greater sage-grouse population is estimated at 1.6 to 16 million. Currently the greater sage-grouse population is estimated at 100,000 to 500,000.

**Q: How much greater sage-grouse habitat does the U.S. Forest Service manage?**

**A:** Approximately 64 percent of the greater sage-grouse's 165 million acres of occupied range is on federally managed lands, including approximately 4,977,082 acres managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The greater sage-grouse habitat that is managed by the U.S. Forest Service accounts for 8% of its habitat throughout its range.

**Q: Where is the greater sage-grouse habitat located that the U.S. Forest Service manages?**

**A:** The greater sage-grouse habitat that the U.S. Forest Service manages is located on over 30 National Forests (NF) including: those in Idaho (Boise, Caribou-Targhee, Sawtooth, and Salmon-Challis NFs); Nevada (Humboldt-Toiyabe NF); Montana (Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Custer, and Lewis and Clark NFs); Utah (Ashley, Dixie, Fishlake, Manti-La Sal, and Uinta-Wasatch-Cache NFs); Colorado (Routt NF); Wyoming (Bridger-Teton, Medicine Bow NFs, and Thunder Basin National Grasslands); North Dakota (Dakota Prairie Grasslands); Oregon (Deschutes, Fremont, Malheur, Ochoco, and Wallowa-Whitman NFs); and California (Modoc and Inyo NFs).

**Q: What is the Department of Interior Secretarial Order No. 3336?**

**A:** DOI Secretarial Order 3336, issued in January 2015, focuses on rangeland fire prevention, management and restoration. The purpose of the order is to set forth enhanced policies and strategies for preventing and suppressing rangeland fire and for restoring sagebrush landscapes impacted by fire across the West. These actions are essential for conserving habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse as well as other wildlife species and economic activity, such as ranching and recreation, associated with the sagebrush/steppe ecosystem in the Great Basin region. This effort will build upon the experience and success of addressing rangeland fire, and broader wildland fire prevention, suppression and restoration efforts to date, including the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and ensure improved coordination with local, state, tribal, and regional efforts to address the threat. As a result of the order, an Implementation Plan, an Initial Report, and an Integrated Strategy were developed. More

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information about the order and the products can be found at:

<http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/>

**Q: Has Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack issued a Secretarial Order similar to Secretarial Order 3336 (SO 3336) that Interior Secretary Sally Jewell issued?**

**A:** No, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has not issued a Secretarial Order.

**Q: What is in the Implementation Plan?**

**A:** The implementation plan describes a strategy for developing enhanced policies and strategies for preventing and suppressing rangeland fire, controlling cheatgrass and other invasive grasses, and restoring sagebrush landscapes impacted by fire across the West.

<http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/reports.shtml>

**Q: What actions will be taken as a result of the Secretarial Order?**

**A:** The Initial Report and the Strategy address actions outlined in Section 5 of SO 3336, including enhancing the capability and capacity of state, tribal and local government, as well as non-governmental fire management organizations through improved and expanded education and training; improving coordination among all partners involved in rangeland fire management to improve safety and effectiveness; and piloting new strategies to reduce the threat of invasive, non-native plant species and rangeland fire to sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and Greater Sage-Grouse conservation.

<http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/reports.shtml>

**Q: Why is fire management so important in Greater Sage-Grouse conservation efforts?**

**A:** The accelerated invasion of non-native annual grasses, along with drought, and the effects of climate change, created conditions that are leading to increased threat of rangeland fires to the sagebrush landscape. Experts have identified fire as one of the greatest threats to sagebrush habitat, particularly in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California. Rangeland fire can destroy sagebrush habitat and lead to the conversion of previously healthy habitat into non-native, cheatgrass-dominated, fire prone landscapes. More frequent and intense wildfires are damaging vital sagebrush landscapes and productive rangelands. Researchers have found that the number of fires and total acreage burned has increased throughout the sage-grouse range (Miller et al. 2011). A list of large fires that threatened the Greater Sage-Grouse from 2006-2014 is located at

<http://www.nifc.gov/fireandsagegrouse/firefighters.html>.

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**Q: How do fire and cheatgrass damage sagebrush landscapes?**

**A:** After wildfires, non-native invasive species, primarily highly flammable cheatgrass, spread rapidly and dominantly. This drastically shortens natural fire intervals (i.e., makes fires occur more frequently); makes rehabilitation and restorative actions (i.e., re-establishing sagebrush and more diverse plant communities) difficult; and converts large areas from diverse vegetation communities to a near monoculture. The repetitive, unbroken fire-invasives-fire cycle has severely degraded rangeland ecosystem health, particularly in the Great Basin.

**Q: What actions are the U.S. Forest Service and other federal, state, local and tribal partners taking to conserve sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and greater sage-grouse habitat?**

**A:** The U.S. Forest Service and other federal, state, local and tribal partners are placing renewed focus on hazardous fuels management, preventing human-caused fires, positioning of fire crews and equipment, and a full integration of emerging science of ecological resilience into the design of habitat management, fuels management, and restoration projects. These actions are designed to reduce the occurrence, size and impacts of rangeland fires; address the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive species; and position wildland fire management resources for more effective rangeland fire response.

The goal is to develop a science-based strategy to reduce the threat of large-scale rangeland fire to habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse and the sagebrush/steppe ecosystem through effective rangeland management, fire prevention, fire suppression, and post fire restoration efforts at a landscape scale.

Landscape level fuels reduction and treatments that lead to restoration and conservation of sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and Greater Sage-Grouse habitat; resource allocation and prioritization; better use of science; more effective emergency stabilization and burned area rehabilitation; sagebrush/steppe ecosystem restoration; better science and research are opportunities to protect sage-grouse habitat.

**Q: Has the U.S. Forest Service taken any actions in the past to protect sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and sage-grouse habitat from wildfires?**

**A:** Yes. In July, 2013 the U.S. Forest Service issued direction outlining expectations that fire managers and wildlife biologists work together and consider sage-grouse best management practices while conducting fire operations and fuels management in sage-grouse habitat. Best management practices for fuels management and restoration include using burning prescriptions that minimize undesirable effects on vegetation or soils, such as minimize mortality of desirable perennial plant species and reduce risk of annual grass invasion; ensuring that treatments are configured in a manner that promotes use by sage-grouse; and power

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washing all vehicles and equipment involved in fuels management activities, prior to entering the area, to minimize the introduction of undesirable and/or invasive plant species. Best management practices for fire operations include assigning a resource advisor with sage-grouse expertise, or with access to sage-grouse expertise, to all extended attack fires in or near sage-grouse habitat areas; on critical fire weather days, pre-positioning additional fire suppression resources to optimize a quick and efficient response in sage-grouse habitat areas; and to the extent possible, locating wildfire suppression facilities (i.e. base camps, spike camps, drop points, staging areas, heli-bases, etc.) in areas where physical disturbance to sage-grouse habitat can be minimized. Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service has conducted fuel treatments to prevent fire growth and restore sagebrush ecosystems.

**Q: What actions are the U.S. Forest Service and other federal, state, local and tribal partners taking to reduce the occurrence, size, severity and impacts of rangeland fire across the Great Basin for the 2016 fire season?**

**A:** The FS and other federal, state, local and tribal partners are taking actions to:

- Prevent fires in high priority sage-grouse habitat
- Limit the size of fires in sagebrush/steppe ecosystems, particularly sage-grouse habitat through fire response.
  - Discussions are ongoing with local, geographic and national level Multi-Agency Coordination groups to relay the importance of protecting sagebrush habitat. Fires occurring in sage grouse habitat will be considered a high priority for protection of natural resources. Fire managers and agency administrators will use this information when prioritizing fires and allocating of suppression resources both pre and during fire events.
- Limit the size of fires in sagebrush/steppe ecosystems, particularly sage-grouse habitat through fuel treatments, such as enhanced fuel breaks adjacent to roads, exotic plant removal and reducing encroachment of pinyon/juniper into sagebrush/steppe ecosystems.
- Restore sagebrush/steppe ecosystems following fire particularly to limit the spread of non-native invasive species such as cheatgrass.

**Q: What kinds of fuel treatments will the U.S. Forest Service be conducting to conserve sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and how many acres does the agency expect to treat each year?**

**A:** The Forest Plan Amendments have vegetation treatment objectives identified for each National Forest. Forests are currently in the process of conducting Fire and Invasive Assessments (FIAT) to take a high level look at sage grouse habitat risk and vulnerability plus to identify priority treatment opportunities. In FY 15, conifer removal and fuel treatments were

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conducted in high priority sage grouse habitat areas in the Great Basin. In FY 16 and 17, habitat improvements will be completed on more than 30,000 acres.

**Q: Is science available that shows the impact of fire on sagebrush/steppe ecosystems and/or Greater Sage-Grouse?**

**A:** The U.S. Forest Service has significant science related to sagebrush/steppe ecosystem management that can support this effort. For additional information, contact Monica Tomosy, National Wildlife Research Program Leader, U.S. Forest Service, Washington Office, Research and Development, 703-605-5258, [mstomosy@fs.fed.us](mailto:mstomosy@fs.fed.us).

**Q: How is the U.S. Forest Service participating with the U.S. Department of the Interior?**

**A:** In response to SO 3336, U.S. Forest Service representatives worked with the U.S. Department of the Interior on preparation of the Implementation Plan, which was signed on January 30, 2015 and two reports outlining immediate work and ongoing work to protect, conserve and restore sagebrush ecosystems. The implementation plan and two reports are available at: <http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/reports.shtml>. U.S. Forest Service representatives are currently participating on nine task groups to address the topics identified in Section 7(b) of SO 3336: fire response plans; prioritization and allocation of fire management resources and assets; fuels reduction; incorporating science on resistance and resilience in habitat management, fuels management, and restoration; update emergency stabilization programs to incorporate long-term restoration; multi-year investments in restoration of sagebrush-steppe ecosystems; cheatgrass and other invasive species removal; science and research; plant materials acquisition, storage, and distribution.

**Q: What is the U.S. Forest Service doing in the short-term to protect sagebrush/steppe ecosystems, particularly greater sage grouse habitat?**

**A:** The U.S. Forest Service has been removing pinyon and juniper trees in areas where they are moving into sagebrush ecosystems and has been conducting fuel treatments to protect sagebrush ecosystems, particularly sage-grouse habitat. The U.S. Forest Service participated with the U.S. Department of the Interior to complete a number of actions prior to the 2015 western fire season including: addressing fire response plans; prioritization and allocation of fire management resources; updating emergency stabilization programs; and finalizing the National Seed Strategy have been identified and are available at <http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/reports.shtml>.

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**Q: What is the U.S. Forest Service doing in the long-term to protect sagebrush steppe ecosystems, particularly greater sage grouse habitat?**

**A:** The U.S. Forest Service is conducting forest level fire and FIAT on all Greater Sage-Grouse habitat in each of the 21 National Forests whose plans are being amended. These will inform decisions on priorities for fire preparedness, fire response, fuel treatments and post-fire restoration.

The U.S. Forest Service participated with the U.S. Department of the Interior to develop an integrated strategy to rangeland fire prevention, suppression, and restoration and to identify programs and actions that support those being identified in the action plans to implement in 2015 and beyond. "An Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy" is available at [http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/documents/IntegratedRangelandFireManagementStrategy\\_FinalReportMay2015.pdf](http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/rangeland/documents/IntegratedRangelandFireManagementStrategy_FinalReportMay2015.pdf).

**Q: Are fire management related actions included in the land management plan amendments?**

**A:** Yes, the land management plan amendments include: 1) Interagency landscape-scale assessments to prioritize at-risk habitat and identify priorities for wildland fire fuels management, preparedness, suppression and restoration based on the quality of habitat at risk from loss to fire; 2) annual treatment and fire management programs to be developed in coordination with interagency partners and across jurisdictional and ownership boundaries based on priorities identified in the landscape-scale assessments; 3) development of a system of fuel breaks to protect larger intact blocks of habitat; and 4) fire response operational enhancements regarding the location and positioning of crews, dispatch plans, and other operational elements to better protect and conserve crucial habitat.

**Q: How will you be using the Fire and Invasives Assessments Team or Tool? (FIAT)?**

**A:** The U.S. Forest Service is conducting fire and invasive assessments for all national forests with sage-grouse habitat. The assessments will focus on sage-grouse habitat and help identify priority areas for fuels management, fire response, fire prevention and post-fire restoration.

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