

Fact Sheet: BLM, USFS Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Effort

Overview – Effective conservation of the greater sage-grouse and its habitat requires a collaborative, landscape-scale, science-based approach that includes strong federal plans, a strong commitment to conservation on state and private lands, and a proactive strategy to reduce the risk of rangeland fires.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have finalized environmental review for proposed land use plans that will conserve key sagebrush habitat, address identified threats to the greater sage-grouse and promote sustainable economic development in the West. The plans will undergo a 60-day Governor’s Consistency Review and concurrent 30-day protest period, and will be finalized in Records of Decision by late summer. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will review the plans and other actions to determine if the combined efforts are adequate to conserve the greater sage-grouse and its habitat such that a listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is not necessary.

We have confidence that these plans will not only benefit the greater sage-grouse, but will also preserve the West’s heritage of ranching and outdoor recreation; protect hundreds of wildlife species such as elk, mule deer and golden eagles that also rely on sagebrush habitat; and promote balance between conservation and development.

We know that a healthy economy and a healthy ecosystem are inextricably linked. The sagebrush habitat supports a vibrant ranching economy, as well as over \$1 billion in economic activity from outdoor recreation. We also know that it is possible to conserve the most important sage-grouse habitat while still providing access to key resources. For example, the vast majority of areas with high potential for oil, gas and renewable energy development are outside of sage-grouse habitat.

Strong federal plans are one part of the equation. States, ranchers, sportsmen, energy developers and other partners are also implementing smart, effective conservation measures with the shared goal of ensuring the health of iconic sagebrush landscapes for years to come and reaching a ‘not warranted’ determination by the FWS. More than 1,100 ranchers and partners across the West have already worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Sage Grouse Initiative to restore more than 4.4 million acres of habitat while maintaining working landscapes.

The Federal Sage-Grouse Conservation Plans - The BLM and the USFS plans reflect more than two years of collaborative work with stakeholders. The following provides high-level information about key elements in the proposed plans.

- **Landscape-Scale** – The planning effort focuses on the remaining habitat of the greater sage-grouse on BLM and USFS lands, covering 10 western states in the Great Basin and Rocky Mountain regions. Washington State’s greater sage-grouse habitat is primarily on state and private lands so it was not included in the BLM-USFS planning effort.
- **Best Available Science** – Sage-grouse are one of the most-studied upland birds in North America. The plans are grounded in the best available science drawn from published literature and input from recognized experts, state agencies, the US Geological Survey, the FWS and other sources. Among the many reports and studies guiding the development of the plans are: a first-of-its-kind “Conservation Objectives Team” report that identifies priority conservation areas for the sage-grouse and specific threats to the birds’ survival, prepared by experts from

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both state and federal agencies; a “National Technical Team” compilation of science prepared by the BLM that provides options for dealing with the most significant threats to the sage-grouse; and a series of reports on how to address the threats of rangeland fire and invasive species prepared in collaboration with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

- **Unprecedented Coordination** – The planning involves coordination between the BLM and the USFS, which manage nearly two-thirds of the remaining sage grouse habitat; relevant state agencies, which make decisions affecting state and private lands and currently manage the sage-grouse; the NRCS, which provides technical assistance and financial support for conservation on private lands; and the FWS which has provided input into the BLM and USFS planning effort and supported conservation efforts across the range. The FWS will determine whether the cumulative conservation efforts being undertaken are such that ESA protection is not warranted.
- **Locally Led Efforts** – The plans build upon the foundation for sage-grouse conservation initiated by a number of states, including Wyoming’s core area strategy, Idaho’s three-tiered conservation approach, and Oregon’s “all lands, all threats” approach. In addition, the plans were developed in coordination with a range of stakeholders and cooperators, including farmers and ranchers, energy developers, state fish and wildlife agencies, and many others. For example, partnerships with ranchers have led to millions of acres of habitat protected and restored; mining companies have promoted efforts to improve habitat to offset impacts associated with development; and rural counties and fire protection districts have formed to reduce the risk of habitat loss due to fire across the western Great Basin.
- **Targeted, Multi-Tiered Approach** – The plans provide a layered management approach that offers the highest level of protection in the most valuable habitat, known as Priority Habitat Management Areas. Within priority habitat, the plans seek to limit or eliminate new surface disturbance, particularly in Sagebrush Focal Areas, identified by the Service as “stronghold” areas essential for the species’ survival. The plans seek to minimize disturbance in General Habitat Management Areas, which are lands that require some special management to sustain greater sage-grouse populations, but are not considered as important as priority habitat.
- **Valid, Existing Rights** – The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects.
- **Cooperative Implementation** – Once finalized through Records of Decisions, the plans will be implemented by the BLM and USFS in coordination with state and local partners through formal mechanisms, such as implementation agreements, as well as continued collaboration with the Sage Grouse Task Force and local working groups.

Three Objectives – The proposed plans are based on three objectives for conserving and protecting habitat. Individual state plans may contain variations on the elements below where different approaches or priorities were consistent with the overall sage-grouse conservation objectives:

1) **Minimize new or additional surface disturbance** – The most effective way to conserve the sage-grouse is to protect existing, intact habitat. This objective aims to reduce habitat fragmentation and

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protect key habitat areas.

- **Surface Disturbance Caps** – Research clearly shows that sage-grouse decline as the amount of nearby surface disturbance (from roads, oil and gas wells, buildings, etc.) increases. The plans balance open space and development through a disturbance cap in priority habitat that serves as a concrete backstop on how much fragmentation of habitat can occur. The caps take into account both existing disturbance and new authorized disturbance.
- **Fluid Mineral Resources (oil, gas and geothermal)** – The proposed plans will reduce surface disturbance from oil, gas and geothermal development while recognizing valid, existing rights. The BLM will work with lessees, operators and proponents of proposed fluid mineral projects on existing leases to mitigate adverse impacts to sage-grouse by avoiding, minimizing and compensating for unavoidable impacts. The plans prioritize future leasing and development outside of Priority and General Habitat Management Areas, and limit surface disturbance associated with new federal leases in Sagebrush Focal Areas and Priority Habitat Management Areas. For oil and gas, approximately 90% of lands with high to medium potential are located outside of federally managed priority habitat.
- **Surface Occupancy** – Advances in drilling technology have enabled companies to access oil and gas deposits without disturbing the surface directly above those deposits, making it possible to conserve sensitive habitats while still developing subsurface resources. In states without a demonstrated all-lands regulatory approach to managing disturbance, the BLM will require no-surface occupancy measures in new federal oil and gas leases in Sagebrush Focal Areas and, with exceptions, in Priority Habitat Management Areas in order to limit surface disturbance to protect sensitive habitats. Exceptions are limited to proposed development that will have no impact or a positive impact on sage-grouse.
- **Lek Buffers** – Leks are at the heart of the sage-grouse life-cycle, serving as sites that sage-grouse return to every year to mate. Scientific literature also suggests that other activities, including nesting, occur within a limited distance from a lek site. The plans identify minimum buffers, consistent with the distances identified in a USGS study, as areas in which disturbance should be limited or eliminated to protect sage-grouse. As the study acknowledges, there is no single distance that's appropriate for all populations and all habitats across the range, so distance variations based on local data, best available science, landscape features and existing protections will be considered during the project-specific NEPA processes.
- **Renewable Energy** – Large-scale wind and solar projects have been demonstrated to negatively impact sage-grouse populations. While allowed in general habitat, the plans steer wind and solar development projects to areas outside of priority sage-grouse habitat. These plans are consistent with the BLM's solar energy EIS which developed solar energy zones, all of which are outside sage-grouse habitat.
- **Transmission** – Large-scale wind and solar energy projects require transmission to deliver electricity to demand centers. The plans require developers seek to avoid placing transmission lines and other linear developments in sage-grouse habitat. Where important habitat cannot be avoided, mitigation measures will be required.

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- **Mining** – The plans minimize surface disturbance caused by mining activities in priority habitat. The plans ensure that sagebrush habitat will be an important consideration in the BLM review of proposed coal mines or coal mine expansions. The plans recommend that the Secretary use her authority to withdraw Sagebrush Focal Areas from hardrock mining, which must be done through a separate, public process. Through that process, the Secretary will consider information provided by states, stakeholders and others on mineral potential, including rare earths, as well as the importance of the areas as sagebrush habitat.

2) Improve habitat condition – While restoring lost sagebrush habitat can be very difficult in the short term, particularly in the most arid areas, it is often possible to enhance habitat quality through purposeful management. Doing so is one of the key objectives of the proposed plans.

- **Mitigation** – Consistent with valid existing rights and applicable law, the BLM will require and ensure mitigation that provides a net conservation gain to the species by avoiding, minimizing and compensating for unavoidable impacts from development. Compensatory mitigation will be designed to enhance and improve priority habitat.
- **Livestock Grazing** – The FWS recognizes that well-managed grazing can be compatible with long-term sage-grouse conservation. The BLM and USFS plans will use best available science and recognize the need to evaluate varied local ecological conditions and site potential when deciding where and how to apply different types of management. During grazing permit renewals and modifications on lands within sage-grouse habitat, the BLM will incorporate locally developed management objectives for sage-grouse habitat and rangeland health standards, consistent with ecological potential. The BLM and USFS will prioritize monitoring for compliance, review and processing of grazing permits in Sagebrush Focal Areas, followed by Priority Habitat Management Areas, with a focus on lands containing riparian areas and wet meadows.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation** – The plans call for coordinated monitoring and evaluation of population changes, habitat condition and mitigation efforts so that the effectiveness of voluntary and required conservation actions can be assessed.
- **Adaptive Management** – In response to the aforementioned monitoring and evaluation, the plans may be adjusted based on a series of pre-determined benchmarks and actions developed with state wildlife agencies to ensure there is an immediate, corrective response to any identified threshold declines in population or habitat.

3) Reduce threat of rangeland fire to sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat – Rangeland fire can destroy sagebrush habitat and lead to the conversion of previously healthy habitat into non-native, cheatgrass-dominated landscapes. 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.

In January 2015, Secretary Jewell issued a Secretarial Order that calls for a comprehensive, science-based strategy to address the more frequent and intense wildfires that are damaging vital sagebrush landscapes and productive rangelands. This strategy will fight the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive species, position wildland fire management resources for more effective rangeland fire response, and accelerate the restoration of fire-impacted landscapes to native grasses and sagebrush. Many elements of this strategy are implemented through the BLM plans, including:

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- **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;
- **Annual treatment and fire management programs** to be developed in coordination with interagency partners, states and other partners across jurisdictional and ownership boundaries based on priorities identified in the landscape-scale assessments;
- **Development of strategies** to check the spread of rangeland fires where they occur to protect larger intact blocks of habitat; and
- **Fire response operational enhancements**, including training for local volunteers and Rural Fire Protection Associations; increased recruitment of veterans for fire crews; improving dispatch plans and the positioning of firefighting assets; and other operational elements to better protect and conserve crucial habitat.

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