

Greater Sage-Grouse – Common Questions & Answers

What action is the BLM and USFS taking today?

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) are releasing Final Environmental Impact Statements (FEISs) and the proposed plans for 14 planning areas in 10 states across the West: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

The plans seek to conserve important sagebrush habitat, address threats to the greater sage-grouse, and support sustainable economic development across the West.

What are the next steps?

The 14 proposed plans will now undergo a Governor’s Consistency Review for a 60-day period, as well as a concurrent 30-day protest period. The Records of Decision to finalize the land management plans will be signed in late summer.

By September 30, 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will review the final BLM-USFS plans and other conservation actions to determine whether sufficient action has been taken to conserve the greater sage-grouse and its habitat such that a listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is no longer necessary.

Why was this planning effort needed?

In March 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) found that the [greater sage-grouse](#) was warranted for protection under the ESA. Higher priorities precluded the FWS from proposing a listing rule, so it has been a “candidate” species for the past five years. In its 2010 petition finding, the FWS identified the primary threat as the loss and fragmentation of sagebrush habitat, coupled with a lack of regulatory mechanisms to protect habitat across the bird’s range.

Sixty-four percent of important habitat for the greater sage-grouse is on federal public land. The principal regulatory mechanisms for BLM are Resource Management Plans (RMPs), and for the USFS, Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs).

What is the BLM National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy?

The BLM developed the National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy in response to the FWS 2010 petition determination and commitment to make a listing determination by the end of Fiscal Year 2015. The BLM and USFS committed to amend 98 land use plans through a coordinated, cooperative approach to incorporate regionally appropriate, science-based conservation measures throughout the range of the greater sage-grouse. The planning strategy illustrates the BLM’s continued commitment to long-term, range-wide greater sage-grouse conservation and habitat restoration.

Where does the BLM-USFS effort fit in the bigger picture?

Effective conservation of the greater sage-grouse and its habitat requires a collaborative, 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 planning effort 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; USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, 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 by the end of Fiscal Year 2015 whether the ESA protection is still warranted based on the status of the bird and cumulative conservation efforts being undertaken.

How were the proposed BLM and USFS land use plans developed?

The BLM-USFS 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. The plans also reflect guidance developed collaboratively by the BLM, USFS and FWS to reflect feedback on the draft plans from the FWS.

The proposed 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.

Draft EISs were released for public comment and review in 2013. The final EISs are the result of a robust, multi-year public process, including public scoping sessions, public meetings and a public comment period on the draft EISs.

What are the major changes in the EISs from Draft to Final?

This answer varies from state to state. In most cases, the changes include updated land allocations and design features and refinements to the adaptive management strategy and monitoring framework. In addition, the final EISs identify and incorporate Sagebrush Focal Areas and guidance for considering lek buffer distances during project implementation.

The Final EISs reflect comments received on the draft plans, including feedback from the FWS on what measures would provide certainty that the plans address major threats to the greater sage-grouse across its range.

What science or outside reports were used to develop the plans?

The plans are grounded in the best available science, drawn from published literature and input from recognized experts, state agencies, the U.S. 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 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.

How extensive is the greater sage-grouse's range? Why is its habitat declining?

Currently, greater sage-grouse habitat covers 165 million acres across 11 states in the West, representing a loss of 56 percent of the species' historic range. The primary threat to the habitat is loss and fragmentation due to increasingly intense rangeland fires, invasive species and development.

Who manages greater sage-grouse habitat?

The federal government manages 64 percent of greater sage-grouse habitat, primarily through the BLM and USFS. Private landowners own 31 percent and states manage 5 percent.

How many greater sage-grouse exist?

At one time, the greater sage-grouse population likely numbered in the millions, but today is estimated to have dwindled to 200,000 to 500,000 birds range-wide. There has been an estimated 30 percent decline in population since 1985, according to the FWS. Greater sage-grouse are monitored by state agencies, primarily by counting males at leks.

How many states are involved in the greater sage-grouse conservation effort?

There are 11 western states with greater sage-grouse habitat that are taking conservation actions: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, Utah, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming. However, Washington State's greater sage-grouse habitat is primarily on state and private lands, so it is not included in the BLM-USFS planning effort. The BLM-USFS greater sage-grouse conservation strategy is designed to support the bird in the 10 other states.

What alternatives were considered in the Environmental Impact Statements?

The BLM and the Forest Service developed a range of alternatives for the EISs that were specifically structured to identify and incorporate appropriate conservation measures to conserve, enhance or restore greater sage-grouse habitat by reducing, eliminating, or minimizing threats to that habitat. Each regional effort developed and analyzed its own set of alternatives.

In many cases, various parts of the separate alternatives analyzed in the draft incorporated into the preferred alternative to develop the proposed plan.

Are the two sub-populations of the greater sage-grouse, the Washington State Distinct Population Segment and “Bi-State” Distinct Population Segment, addressed in this planning effort?

No. Greater sage-grouse in Washington have been managed under a specific Washington Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan since 2004. The BLM and USFS have limited involvement in the Washington State Distinct Population Segment and only manage about 5 percent of the remaining habitat for this population.

In April 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the Bi-State population does not require the protection of the ESA due, in large part, to the development of the Bi-State Action Plan, a conservation plan developed by partners in California and Nevada over the past 15 years and secured with \$45 million in funding.

Is the Gunnison sage-grouse a part of this planning strategy?

No. The Gunnison sage-grouse is a separate species and not included in this National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy.

What are the BLM and USFS doing to address wildland fire?

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, fueled by invasive species, as one of the greatest threats to sagebrush habitat, particularly in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California.

The Department of the Interior has issued 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.

What are the categories of land that the proposed plans identify?

The categories most common to the BLM-USFS plans are:

- *General Habitat Management Areas* (GHMA): BLM or USFS-administered lands that require some special management to sustain greater sage-grouse populations, but are not considered as important as priority habitat.
- *Priority Habitat Management Areas* (PHMA): BLM or USFS-administered lands identified as having the highest value to maintaining sustainable greater sage-grouse populations. These areas align closely with Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) identified by state wildlife agencies and included in the Conservation Objectives Team report.

- *Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA)*: BLM or USFS-administered lands that are a subset of Priority Habitat and align with FWS-identified important landscape blocks with high breeding population densities of sage-grouse, existing high quality sagebrush habitat, and a preponderance of federal ownership or protected area that serves to anchor the conservation value of the landscape.

Due to differences in state approaches and ecological considerations, some plans may contain additional habitat categories. In addition, some plans do not contain Sagebrush Focal Areas.

What do the BLM-USFS plans propose?

The plans will 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. Additional information on the proposed plans is available [here](#).

Are the plans uniform in every state?

No. The plans include common elements across the range to address threats to the bird, while also allowing for state-based variations where different approaches or priorities were consistent with the overall conservation objectives. The federal plans build upon the foundation for sage-grouse conservation initiated by a number of states, including Idaho’s three-tiered conservation approach, Wyoming’s Core Area Strategy, and Oregon’s “All lands, All Threats” approach. The plans also reflect guidance developed collaboratively by the BLM and USFS to reflect feedback on the draft plans from the FWS.

Will the plans apply to state or private lands?

The plans will only apply to activities on federal public lands and federal subsurface minerals.

How do the plans affect existing oil and gas leases or rights-of-way?

The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects.

Will oil and gas development be allowed under the proposed plans?

Yes. The plans seek to 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 will

prioritize future leasing and development outside of Priority and General Habitat Management Areas, and restrict surface disturbance associated with new federal leases in Sagebrush Focal Areas and Priority Habitat Management Areas.

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 will be limited to proposed development that will have no impact or a positive impact on sage-grouse.

The BLM estimates that for oil and gas, approximately 90 percent of lands with high to medium potential are located outside of federally managed priority habitat.

How will the proposed plans impact coal development?

The plans will seek to minimize surface disturbance caused by mining activities in Sagebrush Focal Areas and other priority habitat. The plans will ensure that greater sage-grouse habitat will be an important consideration in the BLM review of proposed coal mines or coal mine expansions.

What do the proposed plans recommend regarding hardrock mining?

The FWS has identified development from certain hardrock mining operations in highly important sage-grouse habitat as a threat. As a result, the BLM-USFS land use management plans recommend that the Secretary exercise her authority, through a separate, public process, to safeguard those most highly important landscapes identified by the Service – called Sagebrush Focal Areas in the plans -- through mineral withdrawals. During 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. The Secretary intends to act promptly on the BLM-USFS recommendations to ensure Sagebrush Focal Areas that anchor the range-wide conservation strategy for greater sage-grouse are protected from the threat posed by hardrock mining.

How will the proposed plans impact grazing? Will there be a range-wide stubble height requirement?

The plans recognize – as does the FWS – that well-managed grazing can be compatible with long-term sage-grouse conservation. The plans put no lands off limits to grazing, nor do they require a one-size-fits-all approach to grazing allotments.

The BLM-USFS plans will use the 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.

Will the plans allow transmission lines to cross greater sage-grouse habitat?

The proposed plans will require that developers seek to avoid placing new transmission lines and other linear developments in sage-grouse habitat. Where important habitat cannot be avoided, mitigation measures will be required.

Will the conservation efforts impact military readiness?

The BLM-USFS land use plans will have no effect on military lands or installations. Related to the separate FWS determination, the Department of Defense has officially stated that it does not anticipate any significant adverse impacts to its mission from the pending listing decision, whatever its outcome. Over the 40+ year history of the ESA, hundreds of threatened or endangered species have successfully co-existed with military installations and facilities. Since 1978, the law has allowed the Secretary of Defense to obtain an exemption of any action from the requirements of the ESA for reasons of national security. In the ensuing 37 years, this exemption has never been used.

There are multiple military installations or facilities with confirmed populations of greater sage-grouse. Each installation has voluntarily undertaken conservation actions to benefit the sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat.

How will the Service consider these actions in their ESA determination?

The FWS is committed to using the best available science to determine whether threats to the species have been adequately addressed through federal, state and local actions. The Service has worked closely with the BLM and the USFS to help them develop plans with regulatory mechanisms that implement science-based methods to adequately address identified threats.

To ensure all conservation efforts are considered in the listing determination, the FWS established an unprecedented conservation efforts database open to all parties, including states.

Outside of regulatory measures, will the plans address habitat restoration and fire management?

The plans build on habitat restoration and improved fire management that federal, state and local partners have been investing in for years. The plans incorporate management actions to help reduce the threat of rangeland fire and to restore fire-impacted landscapes, consistent with the Secretary’s recently released “Integrated Rangeland Fire Strategy.” Additional new actions to support those activities are the President’s \$60 million budget request for sage-grouse conservation and the President’s proposed fire budget fix.

Does hunting greater sage-grouse pose a threat to the species?

In its March 2010 listing determination, the FWS did not find hunting, which is managed by states, to be a significant threat to the species: “We have no evidence suggesting that gun and bow sport hunting has been a primary cause of range-wide declines of the greater sage-grouse in the past, or that it currently is at a level that poses a significant threat to the species. ... continued close attention will be needed by States and tribes to carefully manage hunting mortality, including adjusting seasons and allowable harvest levels, and imposing emergency closures if needed.”

How will the plans be implemented? Will there be involvement from the states?

The BLM and the USFS will continue to look for ways to engage states and counties during plan implementation through mechanisms such as formal implementation agreements with states and collaboration with the Sage Grouse Task Force. The BLM and USFS will also continue to engage local partners on site and project specific issues.

Why is Wyoming’s plan different than other states? Is it consistent with the National Technical Team (NTT) report?

Wyoming has the most sage-grouse habitat and largest sage-grouse population in the United States. In 2008, Wyoming implemented a core area strategy, the first "all lands" regulatory mechanism developed by state or federal officials to conserve the greater sage-grouse and its habitat. To date, Wyoming’s proactive, landscape-level approach has proven to be an effective management strategy for conserving important greater sage-grouse habitat and encouraging robust development elsewhere.

The NTT report is a compilation of science prepared by the BLM that provides options for dealing with the most significant threats to the sage-grouse. In coordination with the FWS, the BLM considered and analyzed the NTT conservation measures, as well as the Wyoming Governor’s 2011 Executive Order on the management of greater sage-grouse core areas, in order to develop plans for Wyoming federal public lands that meet the conservation objectives of the planning effort.