

## GREATER SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION IN MONTANA AND THE DAKOTAS

### PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

This briefing paper outlines the major ongoing efforts toward greater sage-grouse conservation in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, beyond the specific measures developed as part of the BLM's project-planning processes.

### ISSUES:

**Planning:** The BLM and its partners are working on resource management plan (RMP) revisions that will cover most of the BLM-managed sage-grouse habitat in the three states. The Montana/Dakotas organization views this as a prime opportunity to update our approaches to sage-grouse conservation. When updated, these RMPs will guide important on-the-ground decisions for habitat conservation and restoration.

As part of these RMP revisions, we held workshops with planning staff, biologists and specialists from oil and gas and range to address objectives and develop alternatives that are creative, achievable and address the new research findings. We continued to develop these ideas with a smaller committee which developed a template for field offices to consider when developing their RMP alternatives. This template complements the 'Core Areas' identified by the state agencies and will build on these areas for management of sage-grouse. The main premise of this template is to identify and analyze three types of management areas in an RMP.

1. Priority Protection areas – areas that contain good sage-grouse habitat and other resources and have limited disturbances.
2. Restoration Priority areas – areas that have the potential to have good sage-grouse habitat and other resources but already have existing disturbances (energy development, fire, old fields, etc.). The emphasis within these areas will be to restore the habitat or reduce existing disturbances using new mitigation measures, offsite mitigation, or other program dollars while maintaining populations for potential future larger restoration efforts.
3. General Habitat Areas – sage-grouse habitat outside the priority areas. Management will maintain habitat.

Management in all these areas will have common management guidelines for all uses. There will not be separate stipulations for energy development and timing and disturbance restrictions will apply to all uses.

We have retained Dr. Dave Naugle as the BLM science and planning advisor for Montana/Dakotas.

**Research:** The BLM has contracted the University of Montana to conduct a population viability analysis (PVA) for the sage-grouse in southeast Montana and the Dakotas. The Buffalo Field Office has also agreed to participate in this effort. The PVA will address issues such as the adequacy of the proposed protected areas, and what impacts or benefits will be expected by changing resource management for grazing, oil and gas development, power line development, and transportation design.

We have also cooperated with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), University of Montana, Forest Service Genetics Lab, World Wildlife Fund, Audubon Society and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to develop a system to collect sage-grouse feathers from across the state and analyze them for genetic connectivity between the populations. The analysis will be conducted by students at the University of Montana during the school year as part of the economic stimulus funding (ARRA). The data will be analyzed by the university and forest research staff.

The BLM is also conducting two management studies of sage-grouse to detect habitat usage and migration movements. The first study, in the Dillon office, involves radio tracking 25 sage-grouse biweekly with aerial methods to find how and when these birds migrate to Idaho for wintering and also where potential conflicts may occur with the proposed development of a major transmission line. The second study, in southeastern Montana, involves radio collaring up to 100 birds and monitoring habitat usage in proposed protection areas and identified high importance areas. Most of the radio tracking will be conducted with aerial flights.

The BLM is also cooperating on a new study, using satellite collars, to track habitat usage of migratory sage-grouse populations. Other cooperators are Parks Canada, World Wildlife Fund, and other players to be named later. The plan is to capture and radio birds in spring of 2010 and have a BLM graduate SCEP student monitor the birds and identify the habitat.

**Implementation:** The BLM has worked closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to refine management techniques and to include private land management in the sage-grouse management effort. We both want to work more closely with adjacent landowners and permittees. We have cooperated on projects to reduce conifer encroachment and invasive/non-native species. We have also prioritized areas where we can work more closely and identified specific projects where we can cooperate.

The BLM also participates in three greater sage-grouse local working groups (LWGs) (Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow) that were established under the final *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-grouse in Montana* (hereafter *Management Plan*), led by FWP. The BLM also partners with the NRCS to fund a coordinator position to enhance the function of LWGs and to find new ways to achieve greater sage-grouse conservation across ownerships.

Yearly lek monitoring and data sharing is a high priority for all offices. Data protocols have been developed with local FWP offices to facilitate information sharing, and the BLM coordinates inventory and monitoring efforts with FWP, industry, and NGOs.

In an effort to minimize habitat loss to wildland fire, the BLM also made habitat mapping for wildland fire suppression use a top priority in 2009. Fire and fuels specialists continue to identify opportunities to reduce the threat of wildfire and areas where they can help reduce conifer encroachment and improve connectivity.

The BLM Washington Office is working on a draft IM to update the BLM National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy. This IM will cover Gunnison and greater sage-grouse management considerations for energy development in order to minimize the likelihood of listing either species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Actions are intended to minimize fragmentation of sage-grouse habitat and maintain viable populations of sage-grouse with a focus on high priority (core habitat) areas. The Wyoming BLM State Office is also working on an IM to align BLM project and planning actions with the Wyoming Governor's Sage-Grouse Implementation Team's Core Population Area strategy.

**MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:**

The BLM will use an adaptive management approach that applies the best available science/information to ensure that the public lands continue to be available for the BLM's multiple uses while conserving greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. These efforts are especially important in light of the pending listing decision for sage-grouse by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

**BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:**

The director recognizes the BLM's role in sagebrush habitat management and greater sage-grouse conservation. As a good steward of the land, the BLM will continue to focus resources and efforts on conserving sagebrush and greater sage-grouse on BLM-managed lands. Environmentally responsible management actions towards energy development are intended to preserve sustainable sage-grouse populations. All these efforts will feed into future conservation and restoration opportunities under the director's Healthy Lands emphasis.

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