

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation

The greater sage-grouse is an icon of western sagebrush ecosystems. It is a large, rounded-winged, spike-tailed, ground-dwelling bird, about two feet tall and weighing from two to seven pounds. Females are a mottled brown, black and white. Males are larger and have a large white ruff around their neck and bright yellow air sacks on their chest, which they inflate during their elaborate mating displays. The birds are found at elevations ranging to 9,000 feet and are highly dependent on sagebrush for cover and feed.

Greater sage-grouse conservation is urgent. Once seen in great numbers across sagebrush landscapes of the West, sage-grouse have declined in number over the past one hundred years because of the loss, degradation, and fragmentation of sagebrush habitats essential for their survival. Greater sage-grouse now occupy only about 56% of the habitat that was available to them before the arrival of settlers of European descent.

Sagebrush ecosystems are home to a surprisingly abundant number of wildlife species that depend on this complex and often fragile ecosystem type. If sage grouse populations are in trouble, it means other sagebrush-dependent species are, too. We consider our work critical to help all species that depend on sagebrush habitat.

States manage all resident wildlife, including sage-grouse, through their respective wildlife management divisions or departments. Federal agencies such as the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service are responsible for managing habitat on the lands under their respective jurisdictions. The sage grouse are culturally significant to American Indian Tribes; many of which have traditional ceremonies, treaty rights, and conservation activities associated with the bird. Local governments and private landowners or administrators may also have responsibilities related to wildlife and habitat.

Sage-grouse benefit from and make use of suitable habitat regardless of its ownership and management responsibility, so it is important that all stakeholders be engaged in any conservation effort.

As the steward of more than half of all remaining sagebrush habitat in the United States the BLM is playing a leading role in developing and implementing land management actions to conserve the sage-grouse and its habitat.

Maintaining and restoring sagebrush landscapes on public lands is the BLM's primary means of conserving sage-grouse populations. The BLM is working in partnership with its sister agencies and the Western states to develop new or revised approaches to sage-grouse conservation through land-use plans. Working with our partners, we will use these land use plans to implement actions range-wide so we can conserve and restore the greater sage-grouse and its habitat on BLM lands over the short- and the long-term.

Planning for Conservation Success

In March 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) ruled that listing the species for protection under the Endangered Species Act was “warranted but precluded.” FWS said that it had other, higher priority species it needed to address first, but that it would address the greater sage-grouse in three years and

determine if it needed to be listed at that time. Now is the best time to restore and conserve habitat to avoid future actions that could limit everyone's ability to manage sagebrush habitat.

In its finding, FWS said BLM is not "fully implementing the regulatory mechanisms available" to ensure species conservation. BLM is addressing the FWS concerns through its planning system. This will require us to create formal plan "amendments" reflecting these new conservation measures for BLM's basic land-use plans, called "Resource Management Plans," (RMPs). As many as 98 BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) address greater sage-grouse, while the USFS expects to evaluate conservation measures into 9 Land and Resource Management Plans (LMPs). Success in the BLM's planning process lies in the involvement of multiple Federal, State and Tribal agencies; organizations; educational and research institutions and committed individuals.

Here's how the BLM is implementing this effort:

- BLM will issue national policy and direction, based on local needs and information, to consistently guide our sagebrush conservation actions and habitat restoration measures in the multiple RMPs that address greater sage-grouse habitat, including those already underway, where sage-grouse are located.
- Sagebrush conservation and restoration will be guided by a National Policy Team; a National Technical Team; Regional Management Teams; and Regional and Sub-Regional interdisciplinary teams. Most of these teams include representatives from other federal and state agencies.
- The effort will also involve dividing the greater Sage-grouse's range into an Eastern and Western Region. Having two regions will allow for closer cooperation, partnerships, and tailoring of region-specific conservation and habitat restoration measures.
 - The Eastern Region will include Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, northeastern Utah, and Wyoming, where major sage-grouse threats include habitat loss and fragmentation due to energy development—both from oil and gas and renewable energy projects.
 - The Western Region will include northeastern California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and most of Utah, with a small portion of southwestern Montana, where major sage-grouse threats include wildfire, habitat loss due to invasive plant species, and habitat fragmentation.
- We need the help of our partners and the public as we move forward. In early 2012, we'll begin asking people and organizations, interested in greater sage-grouse and the health of sagebrush ecosystems in the West for their thoughts and opinions.
- We continue to build on the steps BLM and our partners have already taken to conserve sagebrush habitat. The BLM, FWS, U.S. Geological Survey, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA), Tribal governments, local working groups and others have made progress by working jointly over the last decade to preserve and restore some sagebrush habitat.

Among our many accomplishments, we have:

- Mapped, for the first time, crucial breeding areas for sage-grouse all across the West
- Used those maps to help protect sage-grouse habitat in fire-prone areas West-wide. As the FWS considers wildland fire one of the most serious threats to sage-grouse habitat, this is an important step forward.

- Employed a suite of high-tech tools to locate and track sage-grouse use of the public lands to refine our understanding of sage-grouse habitats.

While this extensive planning process is underway, the BLM also is developing conservation measures and policy recommendations for the interim protection of sagebrush habitat. These measures will help BLM offices determine whether to authorize or continue certain activities in greater sage-grouse habitat. They are designed to ensure that greater sage-grouse populations and habitats are maintained or improved and that habitat loss is minimized. BLM intends to issue that interim guidance before the end of calendar year 2011.

All of these efforts will culminate with revised or amended RMPs and publication of several Final Environmental Impact Statements in 2014. Working each step of the way with our partners, we aim to maintain and restore high-quality habitat and flourishing populations of greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species.