Greater Sage-grouse Resource Management Plan amendments

You may have heard or read some information about the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) changes to its plans to help conserve the Greater Sage-grouse habitat and ensure the species' conservation. These plans provide the structure and direction for public land management. So, why change them?

In March 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined the Greater Sage-grouse deserved protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because there weren't adequate safeguards to prevent further sagebrush habitat destruction. Without adequate habitat, the bird could eventually be in danger of extinction.

With the shared goal of avoiding the need to list the bird, an unprecedented proactive coordination effort took shape between the BLM (which manages about two-thirds of the remaining Sage grouse habitat); State of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (which make decisions affecting state and private lands and currently manage the Sage-grouse); the Natural Resource Conservation Service (which provides technical assistance and financial support for conservation on private lands); and the FWS (who will determine whether the conservation efforts are enough to avoid listing the sage-grouse).

Together, these agencies, local partners, and private landowners worked for the better part of three years to devise an overall plan for Oregon that provides a management approach for conservation. The highest habitat protections will be in "Sagebrush Focal Areas", or more simply -- landscape blocks with high breeding populations and existing quality habitat. The next step down, Priority Habitat Management Areas, are managed to avoid and minimize further disturbance. The final type of protections, General Habitat Management Areas, provides greater flexibility for land use activities.

In October 2015, following the development and release of Oregon's plan and many others, the FWS determined that protection for the Greater Sage-grouse under the ESA was no longer warranted. The decision was primarily because of conservation partnerships across the western United States that significantly reduced threats across 90 percent of the species' breeding habitat.

The BLM is currently working on soon-to-be released direction that will better define how to implement the new plans. BLM is also planning for the Department of the Interior's proposal to withdraw acreage within Sagebrush Focal Areas from any new mineral location or entry of any new mining claims. The FWS identified habitat disturbance and fragmentation caused by certain hardrock mining operations as a significant threat to sage-grouse habitat.

Confused? You're not alone. In the near future, the local BLM is planning public sessions to help with the understanding of these efforts to best serve Harney County. Watch this section of the Burns Times Herald for announcements. For maps and more information on all things Sage-grouse, go to: www.blm.gov/sagegrouse.

BLM
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