



Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement Candidate Conservation Agreement • Issue 4 • November 2023

Incorporating the Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) through Collaboration in the Preferred Alternative

In the Gunnison Basin, conservation and management actions for the locally recognized, charismatic bird, Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) (GUSG), have been driven by the community, local stakeholders, and state and federal agencies through continued collaboration for nearly three decades. Not surprisingly, this species holds a special place for many in the community, since it was first described as a distinct species from Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) in 2000, by local researcher Dr. Jessica Young at Western Colorado University. Stakeholders in the Gunnison Basin have shown a long-standing commitment to preserving, improving, and managing GUSG habitat for the largest population across the range. To this day, local conservation efforts for the species continues through the Gunnison Basin Sage-Grouse Strategic Committee, which was formed in 2005. The committee is composed of agency officials, elected officials, commercial stakeholders, conservation organizations, and members of the local community.

Prior to listing of the species in 2014 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and, given the popularity of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances established with private landowners, the Strategic Committee began preparing a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA), in close coordination with the USFWS, BLM, Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Gunnison County, and others on the committee. Goals were to (1) address threats to sage-grouse from activities on federal lands, and (2) participate in laying the foundation for how such activities could continue subsequent to a listing decision for the grouse. Development of the CCA began in 2010 and the document was finalized with signatories in 2013. The BLM recognizes the collaboration, commitment, and many partnerships that helped build the CCA. As such, there are several goals outlined within the CCA that are complimentary to the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan (RMP) Amendment. In this newsletter, we will highlight some of the cross-cutting issues, commonalities, and how the spirit of the CCA was incorporated into the Preferred Alternative (Alternative D) through collaboration with specialists, cooperating agencies, and stakeholders.

The CCA and the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) are not directly comparable because they are different types of management documents. A RMP is developed to make decisions on allowable uses (land use allocation), such as where the BLM may allocate areas open or closed to oil and gas leasing. In addition, management actions are established to achieve desired outcomes (goals and objectives). Specific management actions include proactive measures or criteria that would be applied to resource activities or uses on public lands in order to meet identified objectives. While the CCA includes goals, objectives, and management actions, it does not make land use allocation level decisions. In addition, many of the management actions in the CCA provide site-specific implementation guidance that serves as a screening tool to determine if a proposal for a particular site can be authorized as submitted or might require additional analysis or criteria to reduce impacts to GUSG and their habitat. In an RMP, land use allocation decisions act as a similar screening tool by making decisions on where certain resource uses are available or unavailable.

Goals & Objectives

Similar to BLM RMPs, the CCA outlined several goals and objectives to guide implementation of management actions. Below is a table comparing select goals and objectives from the CCA with similar goals, objectives, and management actions from the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS.



Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) 2013	BLM GUSG RMP Amendment Preferred Alternative 2023
<p><i>Engage key stakeholders in the Gunnison Basin community in a collaborative planning and review process to support sage-grouse conservation. (section 1.3 CCA)</i></p>	<p>The BLM has the following similar objective under the Special Status Species section in the alternatives table:</p> <p><i>SSS Objective 1, Coordination:</i></p> <p><i>Conserve existing habitats by collaborating with State and local governments and private landowners to improve public awareness, incentives, and resources for conservation.</i></p> <p><i>Participate in local GUSG conservation efforts and working groups to implement landscape-scale habitat conservation, support consistent management to benefit GUSG, and to gather and use local research and monitoring to inform and promote the conservation and recovery of GUSG.</i></p>
<p><i>Build upon the Rangewide Conservation Plan (RCP) to make conservation measures actionable. (section 1.3 CCA)</i></p>	<p>The BLM used relevant information and management guidelines from the Gunnison Sage-Grouse RCP to inform applicable management actions. In particular, the GUSG Habitat Objectives Table presented in Appendix F is from the RCP. However, since the publication of the RCP in 2005, the USFWS has published the Final Recovery Plan and Recovery Implementation Strategy for Gunnison Sage-Grouse. With this more recent guidance now available, the BLM focused on conservation measures and actions outlined by the USFWS, in conjunction with research from the RCP. In many cases, the RIS was more appropriate to build actionable measures from.</p>
<p><i>Stratify occupied habitat to prioritize conservation measures.</i></p> <p>The CCA accomplished this by implementing a mapping tool to identify Tier 1 Habitat, characterized by minimal development, and Tier 2 Habitat, characterized by more fragmented areas on the landscape. (section 1.3 CCA)</p>	<p>The BLM has the following similar objective under the Special Status Species section in the alternatives table:</p> <p><i>Reduce existing fragmentation in OHMA from anthropogenic disturbances that will reduce distribution or abundance of GUSG and their habitat, subject to valid existing rights. Avoid additional fragmentation, through application of minimization criteria (SSS Management Action 12), from anthropogenic disturbances in UHMA that will reduce distribution, movement, and/or abundance of GUSG and their habitat.</i></p> <p>One way the RMP accomplishes stratifying habitat is through land use allocation decisions. These decisions help deter or restrict development in certain habitat areas. In addition, designation of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) is another tool similar to the stratification of habitat into Tier 1 and Tier 2 in the CCA because the ACECs create a designated boundary where an additional level of special management is applied to protect GUSG and their habitat. See the ACEC section of the alternatives table in the Draft EIS for specifics.</p>
<p><i>Account for cumulative impacts of habitat fragmentation.</i></p> <p>Under this objective in the CCA there is also mention of a <i>disturbance cap</i> as new research and agency policy become available and viable. (section 1.3 CCA)</p>	<p>In addition to the above objective addressing habitat fragmentation, the Special Status Species section in the alternatives table analyzes a <i>Surface Disturbance Cap</i> under <i>Management Action 4.3</i>. Under the preferred alternative the BLM would:</p> <p><i>Manage OHMA and UHMA, by population, so that discrete anthropogenic disturbances, regardless of ownership, (whether temporary or permanent) cover less than 2% of OHMA and 3% of UHMA independently (i.e., cap for each HMA by population). Application of the disturbance cap would only apply to BLM-administered lands.</i></p>

Conservation Measures & Management Actions

The CCA developed conservation measures for future and existing activities to address three resource uses: (1) recreation, (2) lands and realty actions (e.g., roads, utility lines, small-scale infrastructure), and (3) livestock grazing. In addition, the CCA outlined standard minimization measures and seasonal timing restrictions and closures. Similarly, the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS analyzes management actions (complimentary to the conservation measures in the CCA), however the scope has been broadened to include all resources and resource uses. Below is a table comparing select conservation measures from the CCA with similar management actions in the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS Preferred Alternative.

Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) 2013	BLM GUSG RMP Amendment Preferred Alternative 2023
<p><i>Seasonal restrictions on construction, maintenance, and access in seasonal grouse habitat (excepting emergency maintenance), including public access implemented from approximately March 15 – May 15. (section 6.2.1 CCA)</i></p>	<p>The BLM has updated the seasonal timing limitations (restrictions) for GUSG to reflect current research and recommendations to avoid disturbance during critical breeding and nesting periods. The similar management action can be found in the Special Status Species section of the alternatives table under Management Action 11.</p> <p><i>At a minimum, prohibit surface-disturbing activities in Occupied Habitat Management Areas (OHMA) during lekking, nesting, or early brood-rearing from March 1 – July 15.</i></p>
<p>Under section 6.2.2 <i>Siting & Construction</i> of the CCA, conservation measures are outlined for the siting and construction of infrastructure. These include measures such as co-location, avoidance of leks, minimize impacts to riparian areas, weed prevention practices, and site-specific recommendations to avoid fragmentation and high-quality habitat areas.</p>	<p>The BLM outlined a similar management action in the Special Status Species section of the alternatives table under Management Action 12 called <i>Minimization Criteria</i>. These criteria are similar to the CCA because during site-scale implementation they require evaluation of co-location, applicable lek buffers, sensitive habitat areas, topology, timing limitations, and disturbance caps. In addition, Best Management Practices and Required Design Features would be applied (Appendix H of the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS).</p>
<p>Under section 6.4.4 <i>Additional Small-Scale Infrastructure</i> of the CCA, recreational developments such as signs, kiosks, vault toilets, parking areas are not permitted if disturbance exceeds 0.25 acre and will be sited at least 0.6 miles from active leks within Tier I Habitat.</p>	<p>The BLM outlined similar management actions for small scale recreational developments, however the actions fall under two sections within the alternatives table. Firstly, lek buffer distances have been expanded based on current research and low structures, such as fences and kiosks, would not be located within 1.2 miles of leks (see <i>Management Action 8</i> under the <i>Special Status Species</i> Section. Additionally, under the Recreation section of the alternatives table, <i>Management Action 5</i> would include small scale recreation-related infrastructure in the disturbance cap when greater than 0.25 acre and further prohibit additional infrastructure if the cap is exceeded. This management action is similar to the CCA in that it would encourage disturbance/development not to exceed 0.25 acre in size.</p>
<p>Under Appendix B <i>Urban Interface Recreation Areas</i> of the CCA, preferred locations for concentrated recreation areas are outlined. These areas are referred to as <i>Urban Interface</i> and provide an outline for long-term planning of recreation expansion to balance the needs of a</p>	<p>Within the existing Gunnison Field Office RMP, the Hartman Rocks area is designated as a Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). However, under the preferred alternative, in the Recreation section of the alternatives table, <i>Management Action 1</i>, the BLM proposes to also designate Signal Peak as a SRMA which would be in alignment with the CCA. This would allow recreational activities to expand and continue as outlined under specific outcomes and management within the management</p>

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growing population and maintaining GUSG habitat. Three recreation areas were identified in the CCA: (1) Hartman Rocks (2) Signal Peak and (3) Van Tuyl Ranch. These identified recreation areas prevent the expansion of recreational trails and developments throughout occupied habitat within the Gunnison Basin by concentrating recreation to designated areas.	framework (see Appendix L of the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS).
Livestock grazing management guidelines are presented in Appendix D <i>Grazing Management Guidelines for GUSG</i> of the CCA. The objective for livestock grazing is to <i>maintain and improve sage-grouse seasonal habitat</i> . In particular, this includes using grazing systems, such as rest-rotation, deferred rotation, or low intensity/longer duration to ensure GUSG Structural Habitat Guidelines are met.	<p>The livestock grazing management objective is similar to the CCA and states: <i>manage permitted livestock grazing to maintain and/or enhance GUSG habitat to meet or make significant progress toward meeting GUSG seasonal habitat objectives and guidelines, based on ecological site potential.</i></p> <p>Within the preferred alternative utilization levels, monitoring, and duration of use requirements that are compatible with meeting GUSG habitat suitability would be incorporated.</p> <p>In addition, thresholds specific to GUSG habitat guidelines will be developed to maintain or move toward providing suitable habitat. These habitat guidelines are the same as those referenced in the CCA and come from the 2005 RCP.</p>

Summary

Although the CCA and Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS are two different types of documents, there are still many commonalities between the conservation measures in the CCA and the management actions in the preferred alternative (Alternative D). The RMP is a land use planning document, while the CCA was used to guide implementation of site-specific decisions or resource uses. While the RMP Amendment will not specifically outline implementation-level guidance, as the CCA does, it will provide management actions to help guide future site-specific decisions. The BLM’s identification of issues and management approaches under the preferred alternative for energy development, livestock grazing, recreation, and other program areas was informed by public scoping comments, guidance outlined in the USFWS Final Recovery Plan for Gunnison Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) and associated Recovery Implementation Strategy for Gunnison Sage-Grouse (2020), as well as related management direction from the BLM Greater Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment. In the Gunnison Basin, public comments focused on incorporating appropriate measures from the CCA. The BLM has worked closely with cooperating agencies to ensure elements of the CCA and the USFWS documents were captured throughout the preferred alternative.

If you would like to learn more about the CCA or read it in detail, you can find a full copy of the document in Appendix K of the Draft Gunnison Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment/EIS. If you would like to read the USFWS Final Recovery Plan for Gunnison Sage-Grouse or the Recovery Implementation Strategy for Gunnison Sage-Grouse, then visit our ePlanning website here: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2019031/510> Both documents are posted under Associated Documents in the Documents tab on the left.

