

Interim Framework for Evaluating Proposed Activities Within Greater Sage-grouse Preliminary Priority and Preliminary General Habitats on BLM Lands in Idaho

June 28, 2013 Version

Purpose:

The delineation of Preliminary Priority and Preliminary General Habitat (PPH/PGH) for the greater sage-grouse (GSG) in Idaho was completed in April 2012, by the Idaho Bureau of Land Management (BLM) State Office Branch of Resources and Science. As defined by the BLM Washington Office Instruction Memorandum 2012-043, PPH “*comprises areas that have been identified as having the highest conservation value to maintaining sustainable Greater Sage-Grouse populations*” and PGH “*comprises areas of occupied seasonal or year-round habitat outside of priority habitat.*” Instruction Memorandum 2012-043 also provides specific direction to the BLM programs relative to new proposals or authorizations in PPH while land use plans are being amended or revised in conjunction with the GSG Conservation Strategy currently underway. In general, the expectation with most programs is that the proposed activity, along with associated mitigation measures, must cumulatively maintain or enhance PPH or the proposed decision must be forwarded to the State Director, State Wildlife Agency Director and the Fish & Wildlife Service representative for review; Sage-grouse National Policy Team; or BLM Director, as appropriate. Field Offices retain the discretion to reject or deny an application where appropriate, or to defer a final decision until completion of Land Use Plan Amendments described in the National Greater Sage-grouse Planning Strategy. Activities in PGH should be designed to reduce and mitigate adverse effects on GSG to the extent practical.

Background:

Prior mapping of sage-grouse habitat in Idaho focused on mapping “key habitat” and “potential restoration areas”, derived primarily by expert local opinion and refined annually using wildfire perimeter and vegetation treatment data, or other refinements based on more localized mapping or modeling. While this approach led to a broad-scale map accepted by conservation partners in Idaho (Idaho Sage-grouse Advisory Committee 2006; Sather-Blair et al. 2000), it lacked a sage-grouse population component, making it difficult to ascertain areas of “priority.” Other habitat or vegetation mapping efforts in the state have been more localized, such as for Resource Management Plan revisions, or by sage-grouse local working groups. Since some of these efforts have used differing approaches and scales, and are incomplete across the distribution of sage-grouse in Idaho, it was not possible to “roll up” site-specific data to create PPH or PGH.

Consequently, the BLM applied a modeling approach for mapping PPH and PGH that incorporated a number of factors including broad-scale habitat information, sage-grouse lek density and connectivity models, known seasonal habitats, and other factors. Complete details are described in an unpublished Idaho BLM white paper (Makela and Major 2012). In general, PPH/PGH designations should be considered appropriate for use at the scale of agency land use plans or similar spatial extents. However additional information is needed to inform implementation level decisions at more local scales. It is important to recognize that PPH and PGH both encompass areas of suitable sage-grouse habitat as well as areas or inclusions of marginal or non-habitat at more local, site-specific scales. This is due to the inherent assumptions in the PPH/PGH model, statewide scale of the analysis, and buffers needed to account for the landscape-scale nature of sage-grouse habitat use and lek connectivity.

While Idaho BLM will be exploring options to refine and update PPH/PGH during the Subregional planning effort, an interim approach, shown below, was developed to aid local decision makers in

consistently evaluating new proposals, renewals or other proposed activities that are within or near PPH or PGH. The framework uses a consistent set of “criteria” in the form of questions that are to be informed with local data and/or expertise. It is based on the assumption that answering a consistent suite of questions related to local sage-grouse habitat quality, habitat use and other factors can help streamline the preliminary evaluation process and facilitate the most appropriate course of action. Additional factors or questions may be added to the framework as deemed appropriate locally. The level of detail needed to address each question in the framework is left to the local manager’s discretion, since not all potential proposals necessarily warrant the same level of analysis. In complex proposals, the collection of additional field data may be desirable; in other situations, the use of existing data and/or professional judgment may be sufficient. Field managers are encouraged to engage with the State Office early on in the process, as needed. As noted in IM 2012-043, BLM must engage Idaho Department of Fish and Game in the evaluation process and in determining whether a proposal would “cumulatively maintain or enhance PPH” or whether it would “reduce and mitigate adverse effects on GSG” within PGH. Upon completion of the evaluation and preliminary conclusion, the appropriate BLM line officer should, in accordance with Washington IM 2012-043, then make a determination to move forward with appropriate NEPA, defer or deny the proposal, or seek additional review from the Idaho BLM State Office.

Field Office Evaluation Framework for Proposals on Idaho BLM Lands Within Sage-grouse Preliminary Priority and Preliminary General Habitat

June 28, 2013 Version

Project Name:		Field Office:		
Location:		Habitat Mapping Status of Proposed Project Impact Area (circle): 1) PPH 2) PGH 3) OVERLAPS BOTH		
Evaluators and Titles:				
CRITERIA NO.	CRITERIA DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS	DATA to CONSIDER	EVALUATION NOTES
1	Is there documented evidence of sage-grouse use in the general area of the project and/or likely movements of sage-grouse across the project area between or within seasonal habitats?	<p>Local areas of high value seasonal habitat as well as areas of limited value to or use by sage-grouse may occur within PPH and PGH.</p> <p>Sage-grouse movement corridors may occur in PPH/PGH.</p> <p>New projects or related activities could impact sage-grouse use locally.</p> <p>Some projects or activities may be acceptable, depending on the type of project and nature of associated disturbances.</p>	<p>Lek data</p> <p>Telemetry data</p> <p>Observation records</p> <p>Seasonal habitat maps</p> <p>Expert knowledge</p> <p>Local research studies</p> <p>Field exam for birds, sign of birds etc.</p>	
2	Could the general area of the proposal be considered important to local sage-grouse populations?	<p>Some areas of PPH or PGH could be essential to local sage-grouse, especially if suitable seasonal habitat is otherwise limited on the landscape (e.g., some areas of wintering or nesting habitat).</p> <p>Some types of new activities/projects may or may not be compatible with sage-grouse conservation, depending on scale, noise, nature of structures, timing, etc.</p>	<p>Lek data</p> <p>Telemetry data</p> <p>Observation records</p> <p>Expert knowledge</p> <p>Local research</p> <p>Idaho GSG Landscape Importance Model (LIM)</p>	

CRITERIA NO.	CRITERIA DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS	DATA to CONSIDER	EVALUATION NOTES
3	<p>Is the sage-grouse habitat in the project area generally suitable, marginal unsuitable or non-habitat? Are there concerns with connectivity with other habitat areas? See the GSG Habitat Assessment Framework (Stiver et al. 2010 or as revised) for suitability criteria.</p> <p>Is the proposal likely to compromise past, current, or future habitat restoration efforts?</p>	<p>Suitable habitat (especially higher quality native understory) is important to maintain, and may also be more limited on the landscape.</p> <p>Marginal or unsuitable habitats may still have restoration potential.</p> <p>Some areas may serve as connectivity corridors for GSG that may be easily compromised by some activities.</p> <p>Certain activities may be compatible with past, current or future restoration activities.</p> <p>Certain activities may compromise or nullify past, current or future habitat restoration activities through direct habitat loss, or indirectly due to likely future avoidance by or disturbance to sage-grouse.</p>	<p>Completed GSG Habitat Assessments, if available^a</p> <p>Consider new GSG Habitat Assessment transects, or other evaluation, including professional judgment, as appropriate^a</p> <p>Idaho PPH/PGH map</p> <p>Idaho Sage-grouse Habitat Planning Map</p> <p>RMP vegetation maps</p> <p>Appropriate imagery</p>	
4	<p>Is the project proposal in a deep canyon or other situation (e.g., behind a hill, below a plateau etc.) that is out of the line of sight of sage-grouse breeding or winter habitat? If so, would it likely serve to eliminate or reduce impacts to GSG satisfactorily?</p>	<p>Depending on the nature and scale of the proposal, intervening topography may serve to buffer noise and other disturbances to sage-grouse.</p>	<p>Digital Elevation Model</p> <p>Topographic map</p> <p>Field visit</p> <p>Local expertise</p>	

CRITERIA NO.	CRITERIA DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS	DATA to CONSIDER	EVALUATION NOTES
5	Does the proposal occur largely within or near an existing right-of-way or anthropogenic disturbance?	Co-locating new projects or disturbances within or near existing disturbances may be more desirable than locating them in undisturbed habitats. Co-locating may also lead to cumulative increases in disturbances beyond a threshold acceptable to local to sage-grouse.	Literature ^d Existing GIS data (i.e., infrastructure) NAIP or other imagery	
6	Can seasonal restrictions be applied to the project during construction and/or operations that would eliminate or substantially reduce the likelihood of disturbance or other impacts to sage-grouse?	The effects of some projects or activities may be minimal if disturbance to important seasonal use areas is avoided (e.g., leks, nesting, winter areas).	Local expertise Local sage-grouse seasonal use chronology Nature of proposal Duration of impacts Likely noise, other disturbances Project footprint	
7	If the project is implemented, will there be a risk that sage-grouse will collide with new structures, avoid the area or otherwise be adversely affected, or will it contribute cumulatively to collision risk on the landscape?	New, tall anthropogenic structures may lead to mortality, injury, or avoidance by sage-grouse. Some structures can be sited elsewhere to reduce potential impacts to sage-grouse. Fences and guy wires can be marked with collision diverters to reduce collision risk.	Literature ^d Fence collision risk model ^b	
8	If the project is implemented, will habitat quality be maintained or improved locally or will there likely be a net loss of habitat physically or functionally due to direct or indirect impacts?	Certain activities may be compatible with maintaining existing habitat conditions. Certain activities may lead to a net, direct loss of habitat due to loss of sagebrush or indirectly due to avoidance by or disturbance to sage-grouse.	Local expert opinion Literature ^d	

CRITERIA NO.	CRITERIA DESCRIPTION	CONSIDERATIONS	DATA to CONSIDER	EVALUATION NOTES
9	Are there opportunities to mitigate or compensate for impacts to sage-grouse?	In some cases, offsite mitigation efforts may be able to compensate for undesirable effects, especially if implemented on a sufficient scale.	Local expert opinion	
10	Additional factors- describe as appropriate.			

WRITTEN SUMMARY: Based on the evaluation, summarize notes and observations below or prepare a separate written report, as appropriate. Include or incorporate by reference relevant maps, photographs or other supporting materials, as needed.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION^c: Based on an evaluation by BLM and Idaho Department of Fish and Game representatives, the proposal, including appropriate mitigation measures as appropriate, is likely to (circle one):

1. **Cumulatively maintain or enhance greater sage-grouse habitat in PPH.**
2. **Not cumulatively maintain or enhance sage-grouse habitat in PPH.**
3. **Reduce or mitigate impacts to the extent practical in PGH.**
4. **Not likely to reduce or mitigate impacts in PGH**

^a Past Sage-grouse Habitat Assessments may have been completed in some areas following the protocol in Sather-Blair et al. (2000) or Stiver et al. (2010). The latter, or subsequent revisions, should be used in future assessments.

^b See Stevens et al. (2012) collision risk model available on the Idaho BLM corporate drive.

^c Per Washington Office IM 2012-043, this evaluation must be made by BLM in cooperation with the state wildlife agency (i.e., Idaho Department of Fish and Game).

^d Idaho State Office wildlife biologists can assist with locating literature.

Literature Cited:

Idaho Sage-grouse Advisory Committee. 2006. Conservation Plan for the Greater Sage-grouse in Idaho. Unpublished Report. Idaho Department of Fish and Game. Boise, Idaho.

Makela, P., and D. Major. 2012. A Framework to Identify Greater Sage-grouse Preliminary Priority Habitat and Preliminary General Habitat for Idaho. Unpublished report, April 2012. U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Idaho State Office Branch of Resources and Science. Boise, Idaho.

Sather-Blair, S., P. Makela, T. Carrigan and L. Anderson. 2000. A framework to assist in making sensitive species habitat assessments for BLM-administered public lands in Idaho-Sage-grouse. Unpublished report. U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Idaho State Office Branch of Resources and Science. Boise, Idaho.

Stevens, B., D.E. Naugle, B. Dennis, J.W. Connelly, T. Griffiths, K.P. Reese. 2012. Mapping Sage-Grouse Fence-Collision Risk: Spatially-Explicit Models for Targeting Conservation Implementation. GIS dataset provided by USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.