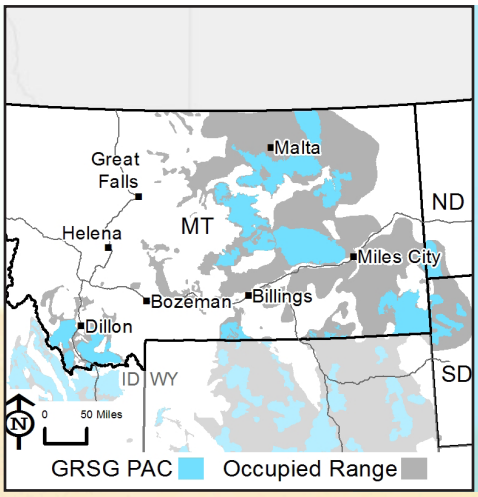
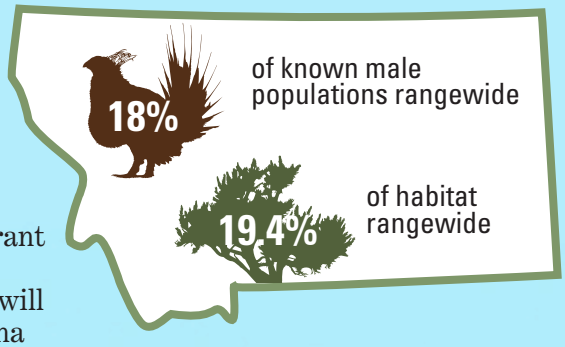
Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation in Montana



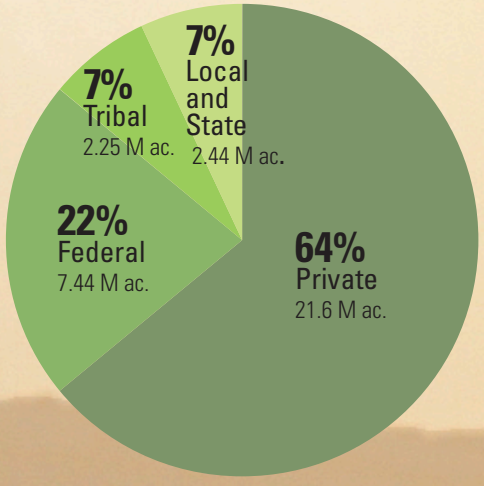
Important Conservation Areas and Occupied Range for Greater Sage-Grouse in Montana

Montana has been an active partner in the collaborative, science-based conservation campaign to protect the greater sage-grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem. Due to the collective efforts of federal, state and private partners across the range, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has found that the greater sage-grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. Greater sage-grouse will continue to be managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.



Land Ownership

Total Occupied Range: 33.73 million acres



Greater Sage-Grouse in Montana

With nearly 1,000 leks and an estimated 18 percent of the total greater sage-grouse population, Montana is the northern-most stronghold for greater sage-grouse and is key to the species' survival. Montana overlaps with three Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) greater sage-grouse management zones, and the state's populations play an important role in connectivity with greatly reduced populations to the north (Canada) and east (the Dakotas), as well as with more robust populations to the south (Wyoming and Idaho).

Unlike some western states, about two-thirds of Montana's sage-grouse habitat is on non-federal land, and often occurs across a mixed, or "patchwork" distribution of private, state, and federal lands. Consequently, management and cooperation that accommodate this mixed ownership distribution is of particular importance in Montana.

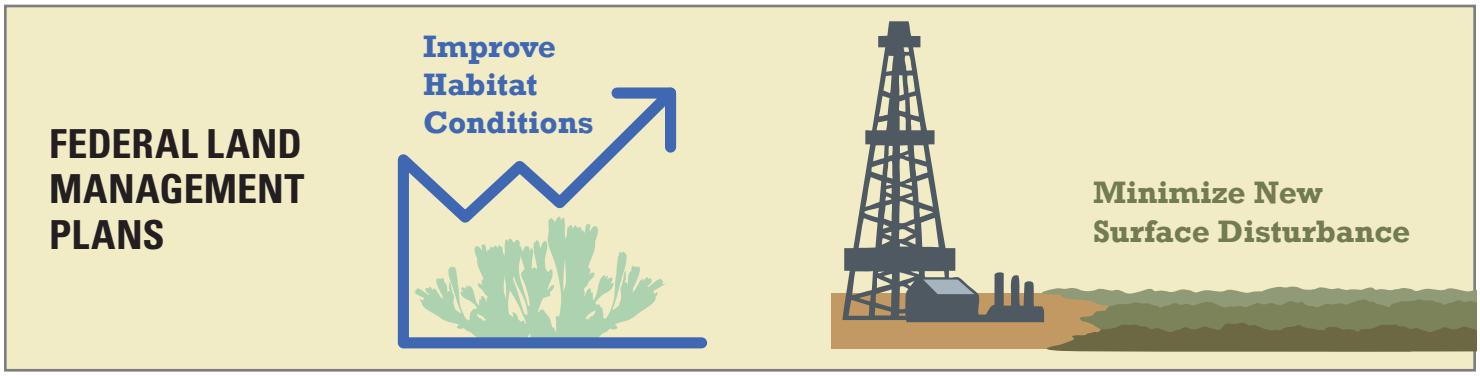
In Montana, disturbance related to energy development and infrastructure is a primary threat to greater sage-grouse.

Primary Threats

- Energy development and infrastructure
- Agricultural conversion
- Invasive annual grasses

Background photo: © Tatiana Gettelman

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy in MT



STATE AND PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

Overview of State Actions

- Montana is one of three states that have adopted state greater sage-grouse conservation plans that incorporate regulatory mechanisms.
- Montana's state plan includes disturbance caps, restrictions on density of development, industry-specific stipulations, seasonal and noise controlled surface use restrictions, prohibitions on sagebrush eradication and conversion to cropland, new sage-grouse compatible grazing standards and permanent lek buffers. The Montana Core Area approach closely parallels the Wyoming Core Area Strategy, which has a demonstrated track record of success over several years.
- Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) has been active in greater sage-grouse conservation for many years. The state has spent $4.8 million on greater sage-grouse monitoring, research and planning between 2000 and 2014. Since 1980, the agency invested $25 million in conservation easements to protect 175,000 acres in greater sage-grouse range. MFWP has also secured 30-year sagebrush conservation leases covering almost 200,000 acres of private lands.

Greater sage-grouse near Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) has been a catalyst for sagebrush conservation across the West. SGI's vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching provides win-win solutions for ranchers, sage-grouse and 350 other species. With more than 1,120 participating ranches in 11 western states, SGI and its partners have invested $424.5 million in greater sage-grouse conservation on 4.4 million acres of private ranchlands.

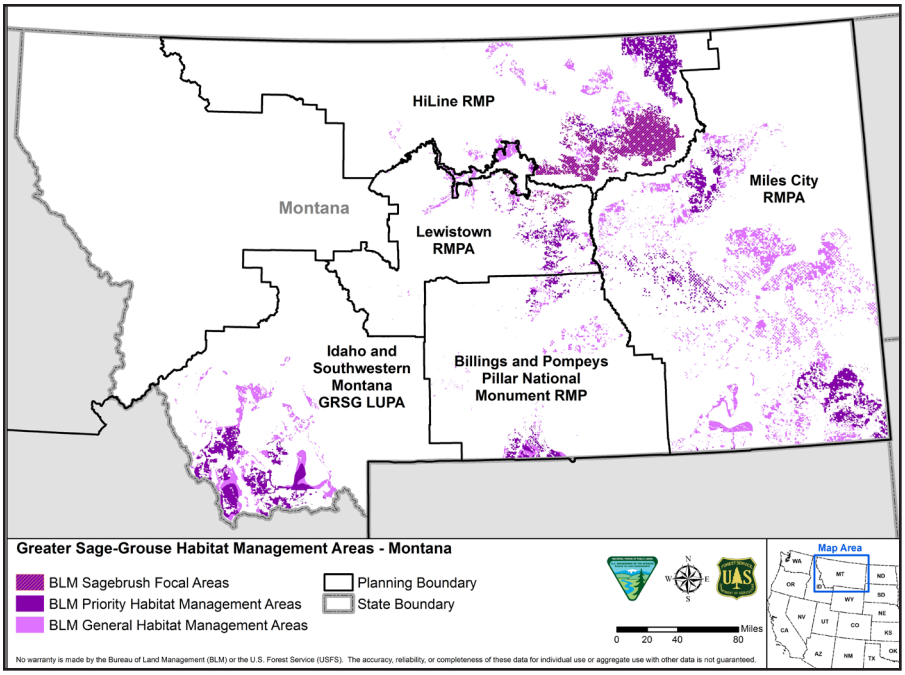
Montana is cattle country, but pressure looms to tap into high crop commodity prices by cultivating sagebrush grazing lands. Easement acreage increased 18-fold during SGI of which 15 percent or nearly 66,000 acres have reduced cropland risk. In northeast Montana, voluntary easements help maintain the longest-known greater sage-grouse migration, nearly 300 miles round-trip, by reducing cultivation risk by 34 percent.

RANGELAND FIRE STRATEGY

The Bureau of Land Management in Montana will ensure that Priority Habitat Management Areas get preference for native seeds during rehabilitation following fire activity.

BLM Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plans in MT

- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is incorporating conservation measures for greater sage-grouse through resource management plan revisions for the Billings Field Office, the HiLine District and the Miles City Field Office and resource plan amendments for the Lewistown Field Office.
- The decisions made in the Billings, HiLine and Miles City Resource Plan Revisions outline a comprehensive framework to guide future management decisions for all resource values and program areas. The Resource Management Plan for Pompey's Pillar National Monument is also being revised, under the Environmental Impact Statement for Billings.



- The BLM amended the land-use plan in Montana to address threats to the greater sage-grouse. The BLM plans provide a layered management approach that focus protections on the areas of highest importance to the species:
  - The highest levels of protections are applied to Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA), which are landscapes with high breeding population densities of sage-grouse, high-quality sagebrush habitat and a preponderance of federal ownership or protected areas that serve to anchor the conservation value of the landscape. These areas are prioritized for habitat improvement and vegetation management efforts and proposed for locatable mineral withdrawal.

SFA Acres	PHMA Acres	GHMA Acres
980,400 acres	3.9 million acres	3.2 million acres

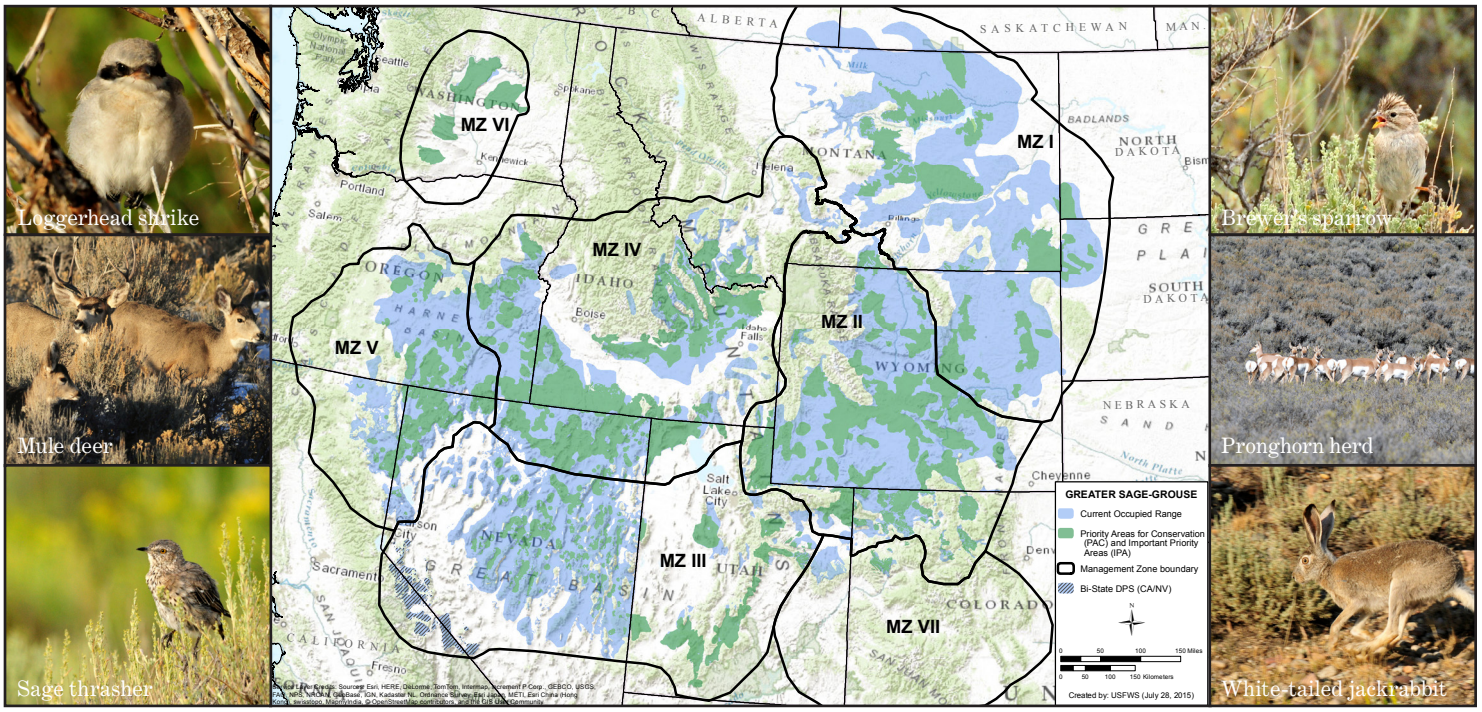
  - Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA), equivalent to Core Areas, are managed to avoid and minimize further disturbance. Surface energy and mineral development is limited in these areas. Development is capped with limits on the amount and density of disturbance allowed. All of the SFAs are incorporated within PHMA.
  - General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA) provide greater flexibility for land use activities. Mitigation and required design features ensure that impacts from development are avoided, minimized and mitigated in GHMA.
- The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals and other permitted projects.
- Grazing in Montana is not widely identified as a threat to the greater sage-grouse. Locally developed management objectives related to greater sage-grouse and rangeland health standards and will be utilized in permit modifications and renewals, consistent with ecological site potential.
- The Montana plan incorporates recommendations on addressing the threats of rangeland fire and invasive species prepared in collaboration with WAFWA.

About 90 percent of federal lands with high and medium oil and gas potential in Montana are outside of federally managed priority conservation areas.

Acres of High & Medium Oil and Gas Potential and Lease Status on Federal Lands and Minerals within PHMA

	High/Medium Oil Potential				High/Medium Gas Potential			
State	Within PHMA Already Leased	Within PHMA Subject to BLM/ USFS RMP Decisions for Priority Habitat	Outside of PHMAs	Total High/ Medium Oil Potential	Within PHMA Already Leased	Within PHMA Subject to BLM/ USFS RMP Decisions for Priority Habitat	Outside of PHMAs	Total High/ Medium Gas Potential
Montana	62,000	239,000	13,160,000	13,461,000	125,000	1,755,000	20,176,000	22,056,000

The Future for Greater Sage-Grouse in MT



Redefining the Future of Conservation

FWS is confident that the unparalleled conservation effort by federal, state, and private partners has addressed the major threats to greater sage-grouse by putting the right protections in the most important places. A sustained commitment to sagebrush conservation is needed to ensure effective conservation for greater sage-grouse and the hundreds of other wildlife that depend on sagebrush habitat.

Implementation

Partners will now begin to implement their commitments whether under state and federal plans, individual conservation agreements, or the Rangeland Fire Strategy. The BLM and USFS plans will be implemented in close coordination with state and local partners, as well as through continued collaboration with the Sage Grouse Task Force and local working groups. FWS will remain an active partner in the sagebrush conservation effort, funding new research, providing on-the-ground support for private landowners, as well as federal, state, industry and conservation partners.

Enduring Benefits for All

Restoring the greater sage-grouse will benefit hundreds of other native plants and animals and communities across the West. What's more, these conservation efforts are led and strengthened by effective partnerships – ensuring that the gains we make for the greater sage-grouse will endure.

Greater sage-grouse in Montana

All photos credit to and courtesy of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service unless specified otherwise.

Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0

Since 2010, SGI has focused on arresting habitat loss in the highest priority areas for conservation from ex-urban development and conifer encroachment, and on reducing greater sage-grouse collisions with high-risk fences.

NRCS has committed to invest another $211 million in SGI 2.0, with an expanded mission of addressing the synergistic problems of invasive weeds and wildfires, on slowing the loss of sagebrush to agricultural conversion and on protecting wet meadow habitat critical for brood-rearing. The program's goal is to bring the total amount of private land under conservation to 8 million acres.

In Montana through 2018, SGI is acquiring 40,000 more easement acres and coupling acquisitions with sustainable grazing and old crop field reclamation for native rangelands to achieve whole-watershed benefits for ranching and greater sage-grouse.