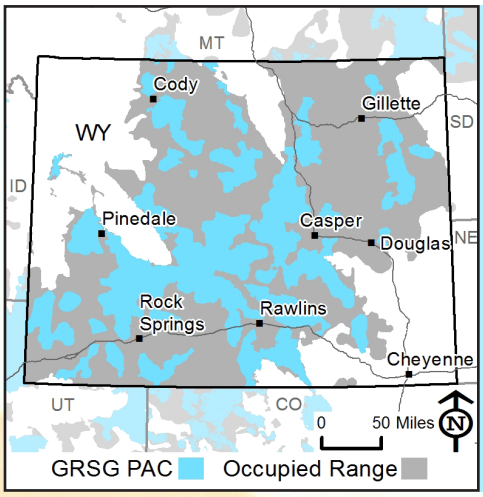
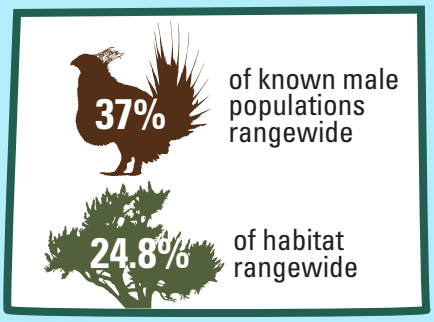
Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation in Wyoming



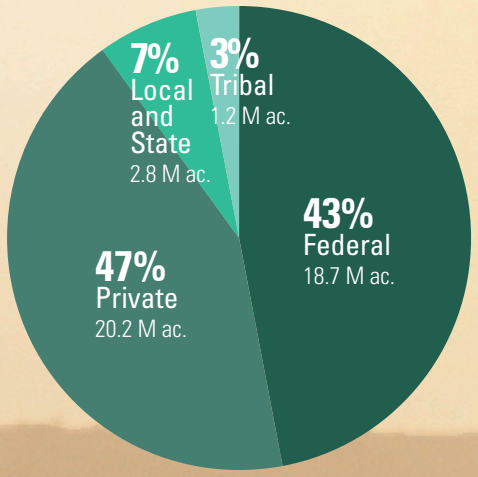
Important Conservation Areas and Occupied Range for Greater Sage-Grouse in Wyoming

Wyoming 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 its 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 the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.



Land Ownership

Total Occupied Range: 43 million acres



Greater Sage-grouse in Wyoming

Wyoming is a stronghold for greater sage-grouse, with the most birds and the most sagebrush of any state. The state is home to 43 million acres of sagebrush, an estimated 37 percent of the greater sage-grouse population and more leks than any other state. Wyoming was the first to adopt a comprehensive statewide greater sage-grouse strategy and is generally recognized for its conservation leadership in the heart of greater sage-grouse country. Energy development and associated infrastructure is a predominant threat, along with invasive species in northeastern Wyoming. Fire and ex-urban development also pose localized challenges.

Primary Threats

Loss and fragmentation of sagebrush habitat can be caused by:

- Non-renewable and renewable energy development;
- Infrastructure: transmission towers, pipelines, roads and fences;
- Ex-urban residential development;
- Invasive plants such as cheatgrass and medusahead rye; and
- Wildfire (amplified by cheatgrass): local issue in northeast Wyoming, predominately grasslands areas.

The Origin of Modern Greater Sage-Grouse Research

Wyoming Game and Fish Biologist Robert Patterson devoted himself to understanding greater sage-grouse and their habitats. His exhaustive research resulted in the 1952 publication "*Sage Grouse in Wyoming*", considered the seminal work which inspired many researchers and wildlife managers to devote themselves to the conservation of the sagebrush ecosystem.

Background photo © Tatiana Gettelman

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy in WY

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT PLANS

STATE AND PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

Overview of State Actions

- Wyoming is one of three states that have adopted state greater sage-grouse conservation plans that incorporate regulatory mechanisms.
- The State of Wyoming's Core Population Area strategy covers the largest populations and most productive habitats that meet all life history requirements for the species.
- The key component of the Wyoming Strategy is the application of state regulatory measures on all 15 million acres of greater sage-grouse habitat in Wyoming. Any project requiring a state permit must meet the conditions of the strategy regardless of land ownership.
- One of the most important elements of Wyoming's Core Area Strategy is the Sage Grouse Implementation Team, which includes representatives of state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations and industries and makes recommendations to the Governor for greater sage-grouse conservation.
- Since implementation of the Wyoming Core Area Strategy in 2008, the number of new non-renewable energy wells in greater sage-grouse habitats declined by 80 percent in some of the highest density areas for the species.
- Wyoming landowners have enrolled or committed almost 500,000 acres of private land in Wyoming to greater sage-grouse conservation through Candidate Conservation agreements.

Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA)						
Name	Location	Covered Area Size	Acres Enrolled	Acres Committed	Land Uses	Date of Completion
Wyoming Statewide Umbrella CCAA	WY	Entire State of Wyoming	302,472	142,871	Ranch management (ranch operations and development, rangeland treatments, recreation)	11/8/2013
Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCA)						
WY Statewide CCA with BLM	WY	Entire State of Wyoming	854,580		Range management on BLM land	11/8/2013

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.

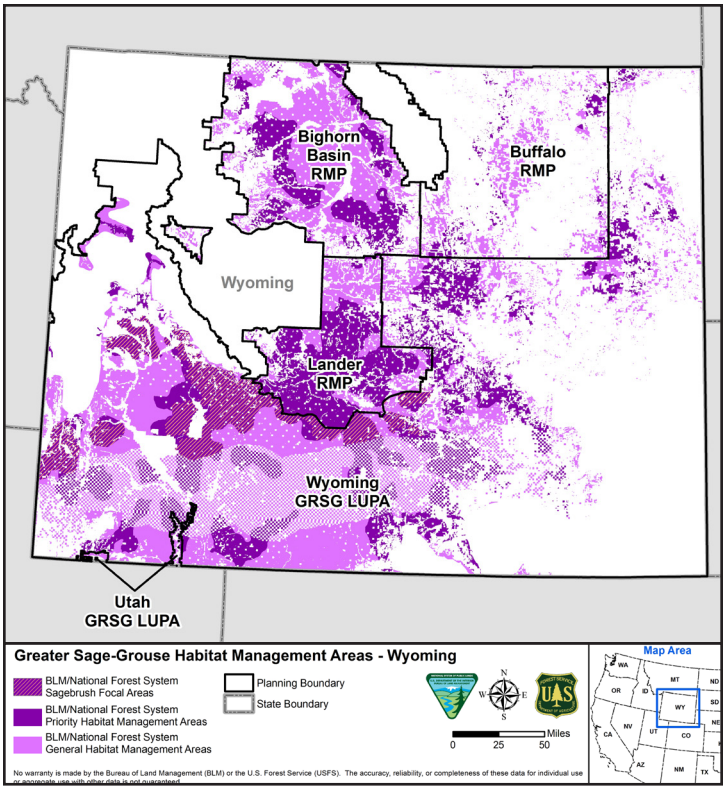
In Wyoming, range-wide, conservation easements have increased 18-fold during SGI, reducing subdivision threat on 375,000 acres. The Governor's energy policy and subdivision-halting easements together reduced by two-thirds anticipated bird losses. Proactive measures for greater sage-grouse in the Cowboy State also conserved 75% of habitats for migratory mule deer.

RANGELAND FIRE STRATEGY

The Bureau of Land Management in Wyoming has hosted three Single Engine Air Tankers for the majority of the 2015 fire season to expedite initial attack on wildfires in sagebrush habitat.

BLM-USFS Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plans in WY

- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) amended nine land-use plans and revised the Buffalo and Bighorn Basin plans to address threats to the greater sage-grouse in 2015.
- The Lander Land Use Plan was revised in 2014.
- The BLM-USFS plans were developed consistent with the Wyoming Core Area Strategy. Wyoming's Core Area Strategy was formally approved by the FWS.
- The BLM-USFS land-use plan amendments take 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.
  - ➤ 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.
  - ➤ 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.



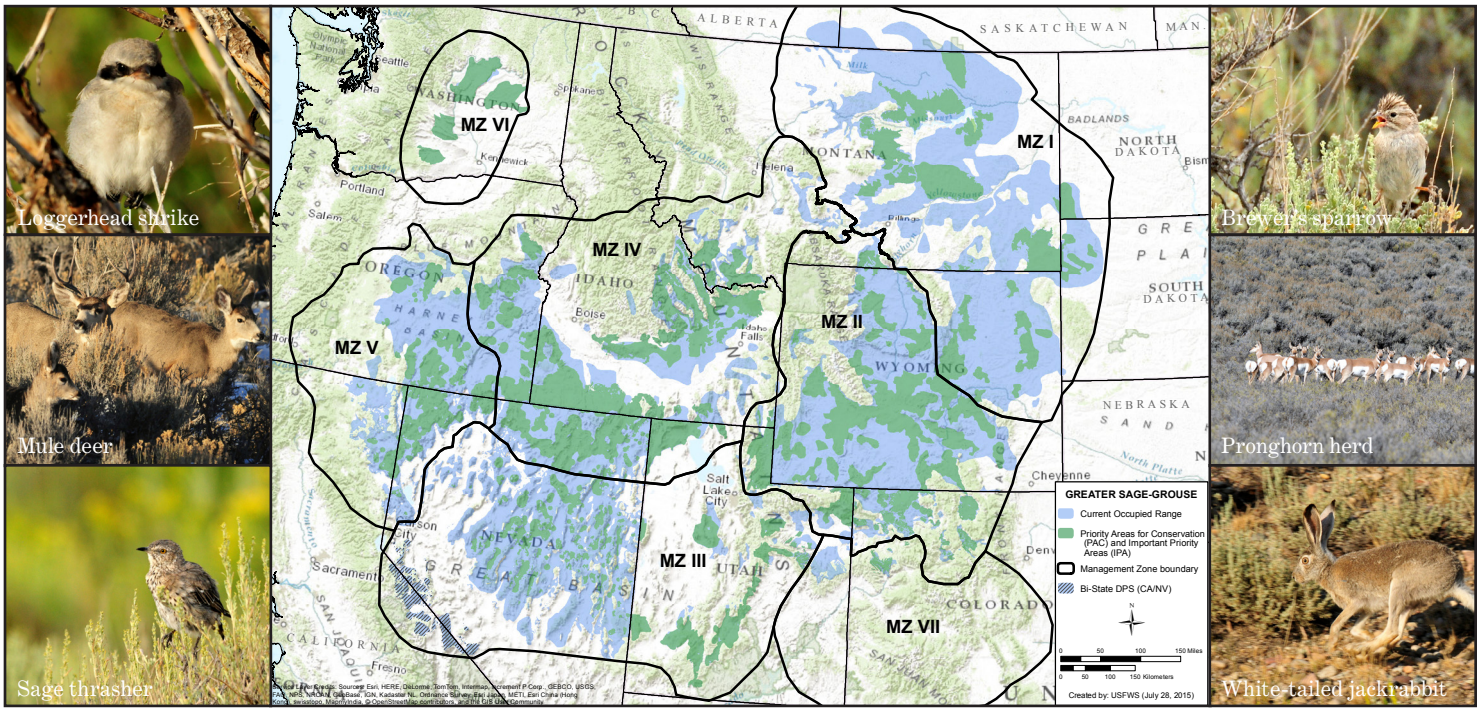
SFA Acres	PHMA Acres	GHMA Acres
1.2 million acres	8.3 million acres	8.6 million acres

- The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects.
- During grazing permit renewals and modifications on lands within greater sage-grouse habitat, the BLM will incorporate locally developed management objectives for sage-grouse habitat and rangeland health standards, consistent with ecological potential. The BLM and USFS will prioritize monitoring for compliance, review and processing of grazing permits in the areas most important for greater sage-grouse first, SFA, followed by PHMA, with a focus on lands containing riparian areas and wet meadows.

About 72 percent of federal lands with high and medium oil and gas potential in Wyoming 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
Wyoming	2,229,000	3,773,000	22,246,000	28,248,000	1,634,000	3,094,000	16,238,000	20,966,000

The Future for Greater Sage-Grouse in WY



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.

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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.

SGI 2.0 is aiming to protect an additional 105,000 acres in Wyoming with easement by 2018. This would meet 87 percent of SGI's goal of $250 million, with this campaign complete by 2020.