

Myths v. Facts - Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy

Thanks to an unprecedented, science-based, landscape-scale conservation effort across the western United States, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded that the greater sage-grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. A key factor in the FWS analysis is the federal land management plans developed by the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service, who manage roughly half of the sage-grouse habitat. The collaborative state, federal and private efforts are unequalled in the history of wildlife and landscape conservation in the United States.

BIG PICTURE

Myth: *Federal involvement is unnecessary because states are undertaking adequate measures that address the threats.*

Fact: Because greater sage-grouse habitat crosses all ownership jurisdictions in 11 states, federal and state management plans are important for addressing threats to the species. No one state or federal agency can by itself conserve the sage-grouse. States have primary management authority for wildlife within their borders. However, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the US Forest Service (USFS) manage roughly half of the remaining sage-grouse habitat; therefore, it is critical that both federal and state partners proactively and collaboratively take conservation actions.

- In the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) 2010 'warranted but precluded' decision, the FWS identified the bird as at risk of extinction, in large part due to the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms on federal and other lands to prevent further habitat loss and fragmentation.

Myth: *The conservation actions will be insufficient to protect the bird.*

Fact: The unprecedented conservation actions have significantly reduced threats to the greater sage-grouse across 90 percent of the species' breeding habitat. The conservation actions include: regulatory protections on over 67 million acres of BLM and USFS public lands; millions of acres of private and state land in conservation; and an aggressive strategy to combat rangeland fire and restore impacted landscapes. After a thorough analysis of the best available scientific information that takes into account the key ongoing conservation efforts and their projected benefits, the FWS has determined that the species does not face the risk of extinction in all or a significant portion of its range now or in the foreseeable future.

Myth: *The plans will be worse than an ESA listing would have been.*

Fact: The plans provide immediate, up-front certainty to communities, developers, ranchers and private landowners. By contrast, under a listing, every major project or permit affecting the sage-grouse on federal lands, such as oil and gas development or a new transmission line, would need to undergo consultation with the FWS. Private landowners and states could be required to get permits from the FWS if their actions could harm the bird or its habitat. Important ESA procedural requirements would add time and uncertainty to the decision-making process.

- The plans are balanced – protecting important sagebrush habitat while allowing for continued uses and sustainable development. The plans were critical in the FWS determination that the species no longer warrants protection, which ensures private

landowners and state land users will not be subject to further federal requirements under the Endangered Species Act.

Myth: *The FWS's determination means the conservation work is done.*

Fact: In fact, we're now starting an incredibly important phase: implementing the conservation actions outlined in the federal and state plans and the comprehensive rangeland fire management strategy. The federal plans will be implemented by the Interior Department and USDA in coordination with state and local partners, as well as continued collaboration with the Western Governors' Association Sage-Grouse Task Force and local working groups. Resources to support those activities are included in the President's \$60 million 2016 budget request for sage-grouse conservation and the President's fire budget fix.

Myth: *The planning effort or a listing will put military readiness at risk.*

Fact: The plans deal only with BLM and USFS land and have no effect upon military lands. The DOD has officially stated that it did not anticipate any significant adverse impacts to its mission from the FWS listing decision, whatever its outcome. There are multiple military installations or facilities with confirmed populations of greater sage-grouse. Each installation has voluntarily undertaken conservation actions to benefit the sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat which the Service considered in its review of the species' status.

Myth: *Cooperators (states and counties) were not involved in the plan development.*

Fact: States have been important partners in the development of the federal land management plans since 2011. The federal plans build upon the foundation for sage-grouse conservation initiated by a number of states, including Wyoming and Montana's core area strategy, Idaho's three-tiered conservation approach, and Oregon's "all lands, all threats" approach.

- In 2011, then-Secretary of the Interior Salazar and Governors Mead and Hickenlooper formed the Sage-Grouse Task Force. The federal-state working group has met regularly to identify a collaborative conservation approach.
- Cooperators' comments on the draft plans in 2013 helped inform the final plans, and the BLM-USFS worked to address additional comments in the Records of Decision.

Myth: *Delaying plan implementation or reversing the FWS determination is a viable solution.*

Fact: States, landowners, communities and companies need certainty. Delays will only undermine progress and deny states and businesses much-needed clarity about the rules of the road. A 'not warranted' decision by the Service is a major achievement – but it cannot hold unless states, federal agencies, and private landowners implement the conservation measures put in place.

- The time to address the threats to sagebrush habitat is now - not in five or ten years, when the bird's habitat is more fragmented, fire-prone and has lost more productive rangeland to invasive species.

Myth: *The BLM-USFS plans impose a one-size fits-all standard.*

Fact: The plans include common elements across the range to address threats to the bird identified in the peer-reviewed Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report, developed by a team of state and federal wildlife biologists. The foundation for the state BLM and USFS plans was state conservation efforts, allowing for state-based variations where different approaches or

priorities were consistent with the overall conservation objectives. The federal plans are built upon the foundation for sage-grouse conservation initiated by a number of states, including Idaho's three-tiered conservation approach, Wyoming and Montana's core area strategies, and Oregon's "All lands, All Threats" approach. The plans also reflect input received through the public comment period, the Governor's Consistency Review, and guidance developed collaboratively by the BLM, USFS and FWS.

SCIENCE

Myth: *The FWS 'not warranted' determination does not follow the science.*

Fact: The FWS has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the analysis it developed for the greater sage-grouse finding is based on the very best and most current scientific and commercial information available. Sage-grouse are one of the most-studied birds in North America, and the FWS relied on the best available science drawn from extensive published literature, as well as input from internal wildlife biologists, state agencies, the U.S. Geological Survey, and other sources. Among the many reports and studies influencing the determination are: a first-of-its-kind "Conservation Objectives Team" report that identified priority conservation areas for the sage-grouse and specific threats to the birds' survival, prepared by experts from both state and federal agencies; a "National Technical Team" compilation of science prepared by the BLM that provides options for dealing with the most significant threats to the sage-grouse; and a series of reports on how to address the threats of rangeland fire and invasive species prepared in collaboration with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

- The FWS has been diligent in identifying, tracking and evaluating new and emerging scientific studies and reports right up to the date that the finding was sent to the *Federal Register*. These include: evaluations of fire, grazing and the Priority Areas of Conservation strategy, as well as population trend analysis based on the most recent lek count data conducted by sage-grouse experts with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Myth: *The plans don't adapt to new information or science.*

Fact: The Service has been diligent in identifying, tracking and evaluating new and emerging scientific studies and reports along with input from recognized experts, state agencies, the U.S. Geological Survey, and other sources right up to the date that the finding was sent to the *Federal Register*. These include: evaluations of fire, grazing and the Priority Areas of Conservation strategy, as well as a population trend analysis based on the most recent lek count data conducted by sage-grouse experts with the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Federal and state land use plans and state plans are grounded in the best available science. The land management plans, the rangeland fire strategy and other conservation efforts are designed and required to incorporate new science. Importantly, the plans include monitoring and adaptive management measures to ensure overall conservation objectives are being met during the implementation phase.

- The plans contain coordinated monitoring and evaluation of population changes, habitat condition and mitigation efforts. The plans may be adjusted based on a series of pre-determined benchmarks and actions developed with state wildlife agencies to ensure

there is an immediate, corrective response to any identified threshold declines in population or habitat.

Myth: *The BLM and USFS plans do not protect important seasonal habitats like brooding and wintering areas or connectivity.*

Fact: The plans incorporate brood-rearing, winter concentration areas and known migration or connectivity corridors in both Priority Habitat and General Habitat. These areas were identified in the plans in close coordination with the respective state fish and wildlife agencies. Further, the plans add additional protections for sage-grouse outside of priority habitat through buffers and requirements for mitigation and design features. The plans require that the BLM and USFS consider prioritizing the identification of wintering habitat and corridors to connect important habitat areas in future updates of the habitat maps and in implementation decisions.

Myth: *The plans are weak because they don't create special "reserves" for greater sage-grouse.*

Fact: While the plans do not create formal "reserves," they do take strong actions to protect nearly 12 million acres of Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs), which are a subset of Priority Habitat Management Areas. The FWS identified these areas as the most important places for the conservation of sage-grouse habitat because SFAs have the highest quality habitat, the highest breeding densities, and other criteria important to the persistence of the species. Fluid mineral development in most of the SFAs will be limited to No Surface Occupancy restrictions, with no exceptions. The BLM and the USFS are jointly proposing to withdraw lands within SFAs from location of new mining claims. Finally, these areas receive priority for actions designed to improve the bird's sagebrush habitat. In short, these areas will be managed with the purpose of maintaining and restoring healthy sagebrush habitat.

Myth: *The plans do not put sufficient emphasis on fire management, which are the primary issues in states like Utah and Idaho.*

Fact: The Administration is aggressively addressing rangeland fire threats to sage-grouse habitat in a number of ways, including through the BLM-USFS plans that incorporate management actions to help reduce the threat of rangeland fire and to restore fire-impacted landscapes. These plans build on habitat restoration and improved fire management that federal, state and local partners have been investing in for years. In addition, the Department of the Interior developed an "[Integrated Rangeland Fire Management Strategy](#)" that focuses on reducing the size, severity and cost of rangeland fires, addressing the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive species that exacerbate the threat of fire, and positioning fire management resources for more effective rangeland fire response. Additional new actions to support those activities include: the President's \$60 million 2016 budget request for sage-grouse conservation and the President's fire budget fix; a commitment to refocus funding to restore fire-impacted lands to benefit rangelands; and a new [National Seed Strategy](#) that will improve habitat restoration across major landscapes, by increasing access to locally grown native seed to re-vegetate habitat damaged by fire.

Myth: *The BLM-USFS plans for Wyoming offer insufficient protections for greater sage-grouse when compared to other state plans.*

Fact: Wyoming has the most sage-grouse habitat and largest sage-grouse population in the United States. In 2008, Wyoming implemented a core area strategy, the first "all lands" regulatory mechanism developed by state or federal officials to conserve the greater sage-grouse

and its habitat. To date, Wyoming's proactive, landscape-level approach has proven to be an effective management strategy for conserving important greater sage-grouse habitat and encouraging robust development elsewhere.

- In coordination with the FWS, the BLM considered and analyzed the National Technical Team conservation measures, as well as the Wyoming Governor's 2011 Executive Order on the management of greater sage-grouse core areas, in order to develop plans for Wyoming federal public lands that meet the conservation objectives of the planning effort.

ENERGY AND DEVELOPMENT

Myth: *The BLM-USFS plans lock up development in the West, including eliminating large areas from oil and gas development.*

Fact: The majority of federal lands within the priority sage-grouse habitat have zero to low potential for oil and gas, solar, and wind energy development. In contrast, approximately 90 percent of high to medium oil and gas potential and 97 percent of high wind potential is outside of federally-managed priority habitat.

- The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development. The plans continue to allow oil and gas leasing on greater sage-grouse habitat on BLM and USFS lands but require measures for most new leases to limit surface disturbance in priority habitat through a "no surface occupancy" requirement. Directional drilling technology means that most oil and gas resources can continue to be developed, even if they are under important sage-grouse habitat.

Myth: *The plans will impact existing oil and gas leases or transmission rights-of-way that have already been granted.*

Fact: The plans will respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects.

Myth: *The plans don't do enough to prohibit hardrock mining in all priority habitat.*

Fact: The FWS has identified habitat disturbance and fragmentation caused from certain hardrock mining operations as a threat to sage-grouse habitat. As a result, the BLM and USFS land use plans recommend that the Secretary exercise her authority, through a separate, public process, to safeguard approximately 10 million acres of the most important landscapes identified by the FWS in Sagebrush Focal Areas through mineral withdrawals.

- With the finalization of the plans, the Secretary is taking prompt action on the BLM and USFS recommendations to ensure that the Sagebrush Focal Areas that anchor the range-wide conservation strategy for the greater sage-grouse are protected from the threat of new hardrock mining claims. During the withdrawal process, the Secretary will consider information provided by the states, stakeholders and others on mineral potential, including rare earths, as well as the importance of these areas as sagebrush habitat.

Myth: *The plans will halt all transmission lines.*

Fact: The plans respect valid, existing rights and do not impact existing infrastructure. The plans require the BLM and USFS to work to avoid sage-grouse habitat where possible when

siting transmission lines. If impacts cannot be avoided through siting, the agencies will analyze a range of project design options during the project-level NEPA process to provide for protection of sage-grouse habitat to a net conservation gain mitigation standard. The review will consider technical and financial feasibility.

Myth: *The land management plans will greatly limit livestock grazing and require a specific stubble height for grazing allotments range-wide.*

Fact: The plans recognize – as does the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – that well-managed livestock grazing can be compatible with long-term sage-grouse conservation. The plans do not close greater sage-grouse habitat to livestock grazing, nor do they require a one-size-fits-all approach to grazing allotments. Instead, the plans recognize the need to evaluate habitat based on local ecological conditions and site potential when deciding where and how to apply different types of management.

- During grazing permit renewals and modifications on lands within sage-grouse habitat, the BLM will use the best available science to 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 sage-grouse habitat, with a focus on Sagebrush Focal Areas and lands containing riparian areas and wet meadows.

Myth: *The plans set aside vast, new land for coal leasing.*

Fact: The plans do not propose any new areas for future coal leasing; the areas available for leasing through the resource management plan have not changed for 30 years. Additionally, the plans do not authorize any specific leases or mining operations; any new coal leases would require environmental reviews specific to the particular lease application. The purpose of the Resource Management Plans is to provide balanced management of all of the resources in the area including wildlife habitat, ranching, recreation, conservation and mineral development.

- The Interior Department is working separately to pursue reforms to the federal coal program. These include proposals – such as the Stream Protection Rule – to address the environmental impacts of coal mining. They also include reforms to make sure American taxpayers are getting a fair return on the coal resources managed by the federal government.