

# Greater Sage-grouse-Frequently Asked Questions

## GENERAL

### **Q: What actions recently took place?**

**A:** On Tuesday, September 22, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) will issue its Endangered Species Act listing determination for the greater sage-grouse (GRSG). Simultaneously, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will announce completion of their multi-year effort to conserve, enhance, and restore GRSG populations and habitat on National Forest System and BLM-administered lands.

### **Q: Why was this planning effort needed?**

**A:** The GRSG, an iconic species of the sagebrush steppe ecosystem, currently occupies only 56% of its historic range, and populations have continued to decline for the past 40 years. In 2010, the FWS determined that, due to loss of habitat and lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms, listing GRSG under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was “warranted but precluded” by other priorities.

### **Q: Who else has been involved in development of the GRSG land management plan amendments?**

**A:** The Forest Service and BLM land use plans are the product of extensive coordination, including the active engagement of the FWS in helping to inform land allocation and related management decisions by the land management agencies. They also benefit from strong collaboration with the states and reflect the unique landscapes, approaches, and priorities in each.

### **Q: What is the goal of the Forest Service GRSG land management plan amendments?**

**A:** The goal of incorporating these specific conservation measures into Forest Service plan amendments is to protect, enhance, and restore the GRSG and its habitat and to provide sufficient regulatory certainty such that the need for listing the species under the ESA can be avoided.

### **Q: How extensive is the GRSG’s range?**

**A:** Currently, there is about 165 million acres across 11 states in the West that is covered by GRSG habitat.

### **Q: What is the estimate of the remaining GRSG population numbers?**

**A:** At one time, the GRSG population likely numbered in the millions, but today numbers are estimated to have dwindled to 200,000 to 500,000 birds range-wide. There has been an estimated 30 percent decline in population since 1985, according to the FWS.

### **Q: Why is GRSG habitat declining?**

**A:** The two dominant threats to sagebrush habitat are infrastructure associated with energy development in the eastern portion of the GRSG range and the conversion of sagebrush communities to annual grasslands associated with large uncharacteristic wildfires in the western portion of the species’ range. Maintaining and restoring sagebrush landscapes on public lands is the primary way that the BLM and Forest Service can conserve GRSG.

### **Q: Who manages GRSG habitat?**

**A:** The Forest Service and BLM land use plans are an essential component to the effort to conserve GRSG and its habitat--Combined, the plans affect nearly two-thirds of the remaining habitat for the species. The remaining GRSG habitat is either managed by other federal agencies, states, local governments or they are lands that are privately owned.

**Q: How many national forests and grasslands are involved and affected by the Forest Service GRSG plan amendments?**

**A:** The land management plans for 20 national forests and grasslands in six Western States will require amendments specific to areas affected by threats to GRSG habitat.

**Q: How will the Forest Service land management plan amendments conserve GRSG and its habitat?**

**A:** Effective conservation of the GRSG and its habitat, in the Forest Service, is based on a collaborative, science-based three-legged stool approach that includes: 1) strong federal conservation plans that improve habitat and minimize new or additional disturbance, 2) strong conservation plans for state and private lands, and 3) an effective strategy to reduce rangeland fire risk.

**Q: Was the best available science used in the development of the GRSG land management amendments?**

**A:** Science-based decision-making was fundamental to the development of the GRSG plan amendments. The amendments address threats to the GRSG identified by state fish and wildlife agencies, the Greater Sage-grouse National Technical Team, the FWS in the context of its listing determination, and the Conservation Objectives Team report. Additional science-based reviews by the USGS (USGS Report Conservation Buffer Distance Estimates for the GRSG – A Review and related peer-reviewed scientific literature provided further guidance on specific issues that arose in developing the Forest Service plan amendments.

**Q: Why will the Forest Service have Records of Decision separate from the BLM?**

**A:** Any Forest Service decisions made about conservation of GRSG will apply only to National Forest System lands and are subject to Agency resource and funding availability. Therefore, the Forest Service is responsible for developing and approving specific records of decision for each Forest Service land management plan amendment on the identified 20 national forests and grasslands.

**Q: Why is the Forest Service a cooperating agency in this effort?**

**A:** More than 50 percent of GRSG habitat is located on BLM-administered lands, while the Forest Service is the steward of about 8 percent of the GRSG habitat nationwide; as such, the BLM has the lead in the conservation effort and the Forest Service is a cooperating agency.

**Q: What other federal agencies did the Forest Service collaborate with during development of the GRSG effort?**

**A:** The Forest Service coordinated with the BLM as a cooperating agency, and with the States of Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming and the Fish and Wildlife Service in the analysis of particular resources and in establishing direction to protect and/or restore GRSG habitat.

**Q: Are the two sub-populations of the GRSG, the Washington State Distinct Population Segment and “Bi-State” Distinct Population Segment, addressed in this planning effort?**

**A:** No. GRSG in Washington State have been managed under a specific Washington Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan since 2004. In April 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the Bi-State population does not require the protection under the ESA.

## **MANAGING IMPACTS**

**Q: What is a multi-tiered approach to conservation of GRSG and its habitat?**

**A:** The plan amendments provide a multi-tiered approach that identifies Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMAs) as those having the highest value for maintain sustainable GRSG populations. Sagebrush

Focal Areas (SFAs), a subset of PHMA, are areas identified by the FWS as “strongholds” with the highest densities of GRSG and other criteria important for the species’ persistence. General Habitat Management Areas (GHMAs) are those that are either occupied seasonally or provide year-round habitat where some special management would apply. This approach allows land managers to prioritize habitat while providing some management flexibility. Due to differences in state approaches and ecological considerations, some plans may contain additional habitat categories.

**Q: How will the plan accommodate mapping errors or future changes in sage-grouse habitat?**

**A:** As new information about GRSG habitat becomes available, including seasonal habitats, in coordination with the state wildlife agency and the FWS and based on best available scientific information, the Forest Service may revise GRSG habitat management area maps and associated management decisions through LMP amendment/revision, as appropriate.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from fire and invasives plant species in GRSG habitat?**

**A:** In all fire responses, the first priority is the management of risk to firefighters and the public. The plan amendments include specific guidance to fight the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive species, position wildland fire management resources for more effective rangeland fire response, and accelerate the restoration of fire-impacted landscapes to native grasses and sagebrush. Resilience and resistance concepts (Fire and Invasives Team assessments and Chambers et al. 2014) focus on restoring GRSG habitat to provide the greatest conservation benefit to GRSG populations. The assessment will provide a list of findings, recommendations, and considerations to protect, maintain, and enhance GRSG habitat.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from infrastructure?**

**A:** Authorization of high-voltage transmission lines, major pipelines, distribution lines, and communication tower sites will be limited in PHMA. In GHMA (except in Wyoming), authorization of high-voltage transmission lines, major pipelines, distribution lines, and communication tower sites may continue with stipulations and if the development can be located within existing designated corridors or rights-of-way. In all GRSG habitat management areas, upgrades to existing transmission lines will be located within the existing designated corridors or rights-of-way unless an alternate route would benefit GRSG or its habitat. Existing authorized uses will continue to be recognized.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from energy development?**

**A:** Estimates are that 90 percent of lands with high to medium potential for oil and gas development are located outside of federally managed PHMA. The Forest Service plan amendments include language to limit disturbance and surface occupancy to areas least harmful to the GRSG and to work with operators to minimize impacts to the GRSG and its habitat, such as locating facilities in non-habitat areas first and then in the least suitable habitat. The Forest Service will work with lessees, operators and proponents of proposed fluid mineral projects on existing leases to mitigate adverse impacts to sage-grouse by avoiding, minimizing and compensating for unavoidable impacts. The plans seek to reduce surface disturbance from oil, gas and geothermal development while recognizing valid, existing rights.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from improper livestock grazing?**

**A:** The plan amendments recognize that well-managed grazing can be compatible with long-term GRSG conservation. The plan amendments do not prohibit grazing on NFS lands, nor do they require a one-size-fits-all approach to grazing allotments. Varied local ecological conditions and site potential will be evaluated when deciding where and how to apply specific management direction and guidance. When grazing permits are waived without preference or obtained through permit cancellation the full range of administrative authorities for future allotment management will be considered. The amendments provide guidance to ensure that residual cover is sufficient to provide essential concealment cover to protect

nesting GRSG from predation.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from coal development?**

**A:** In all plan amendments, except Wyoming, when consenting to new underground coal leases, the Forest Service will include a lease stipulation prohibiting the location of surface facilities in PHMA. In Wyoming, stipulations will be applied to coal exploration and new projects.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from locatable minerals?**

**A:** The Forest Service will recommend to the Secretary of the Interior that SFAs not already withdrawn from mineral entry be withdrawn. All other lands not previously withdrawn will remain open to locatable mineral.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from mineral materials?**

**A:** Except in Wyoming, PHMAs are closed to new mineral material sales except for free use permits and the expansion of existing active pits. In Wyoming, stipulations will be applied to mineral materials permits.

**Q: How will Forest Service ameliorate any potential threat from wild horses and burros?**

**A:** On National Forest System lands that have wild horse and burro populations, appropriate management levels for wild horse and burro territories will be adjusted where GRSG management standards are not being met due to degradation that is at least partially attributed to wild horse and burro populations.

**Q: What about monitoring the effect of the plan amendment direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Forest Service will monitor the implementation of the plan amendment direction. Monitoring will be based on the *Greater Sage-Grouse Monitoring Framework* developed by the Interagency Greater Sage-Grouse Disturbance and Monitoring Sub-team, May 30, 2014.

**Q: How will disturbance in GRSG habitat be mitigated?**

**A:** When authorizing new land uses that result in habitat loss or degradation, the Forest Service will require mitigation that provides a net conservation gain to the GRSG. Mitigation will be achieved by avoiding, minimizing, and compensating for impacts by applying beneficial mitigation actions. Mitigation will follow the regulations from the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR, Part 1508.20 Mitigation; e.g. avoid, minimize, and compensate).

**Q: Why does the Forest Service have an adaptive management strategy for management decisions in GRSG habitat?**

**A:** It is necessary to have an adaptive management strategy to adjust management decisions if monitoring indicates guidance and direction is not meeting the conservation goals. The adaptive management strategy includes soft and hard triggers and responses. The triggers are not specific to any particular project, but identify habitat and population thresholds outside of natural fluctuations or variations.

**Q: What is a lek buffer?**

**A:** The Forest Service will assess and address impacts from activities using the lek buffer-distances identified in the *USGS Report Conservation Buffer Distance Estimates for the GRSG – A Review* (Open File Report 2014-1239).

**Q: What is a disturbance cap?**

**A:** A disturbance cap has been established on new human-caused disturbance in PHMA in accordance with the recommendations contained in the report *A Report on National Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Measures in December 2011*. The cap is 3% in all states except Wyoming and Montana where the cap is 5%. Within existing designated utility corridors, except in Wyoming, the disturbance cap may be

exceeded if analysis indicates that a net conservation gain to GRSG will be achieved.

**Q: Why are the Transwest and Gateway South power lines exempted from the required mitigation in the Proposed Plan, yet counted in the disturbance cap?**

**A:** The planning, siting, and environmental review of a limited number of Presidential priority lines (Gateway West, Boardman to Hemingway, and Transwest Express, including those portions of Gateway South that are co-located) have been underway for a number of years. These lines are critical to expanding access to renewable sources of energy and to improving the reliability of the Western grid. Planning for these lines will proceed consistent with the standards in the existing land management plans and potential impacts to the GRSG will be fully.

## **COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION**

**Q: Is the GRSG land management plan amendment direction and guidance the same in every state?**

**A:** No. The plans include common elements across the range to address threats to the bird, while also allowing for state-specific variations where different approaches or priorities were consistent with the overall conservation objectives. The Forest Service amendments build upon the foundation for GRSG conservation initiated by a number of states, including Idaho's three-tiered conservation approach and Wyoming's Core Area Strategy.

**Q: Why didn't the Forest Service adopt state GRSG plan direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Forest Service worked closely with the states to minimize differences between plan amendments. Through these efforts, the strategies and objectives of both the state plans and the Forest Service plan amendments are closely aligned. Specific direction and guidance to achieve the strategies and objectives may sometimes differ.

**Q: How will the Forest Service work with states and counties on implementing the plans?**

**A:** The plan amendments and their future implementation are strengthened by the contributions of local partners and their knowledge, expertise, and experience. The Forest Service will work at the local level with state and local partners as well as continued collaboration with the Sage Grouse Task Force and local working groups to implement the direction and guidance in the amendments.

**Q: Why weren't my comments incorporated?**

**A:** During the comment response period, the Forest Service and the BLM considered all substantive comments and new information. The CEQ regulations require an agency to determine if the comment or new information affects the EIS's alternatives, affected environment, or the results of impact analyses (43 CFR 1503.4). If so, the agency must decide how to respond. Appropriate responses were developed, which may include modifying an alternative(s); developing and evaluating alternatives not previously given serious consideration; supplementing, improving, or modifying the analysis, or making factual corrections.

**Q: Why were the cooperating agencies shut out of the process?**

**A:** The Forest Service worked with cooperative agencies, state partners, and other federal agencies throughout the process. The landscape approach of the plans and the need to provide sufficient regulatory certainty to the FWS, the process was focused more regionally than locally. However, the flexible landscape approach provided the opportunity to incorporate recommendations resulting from collaboration with cooperating agencies and local cooperators in each planning area. Most states across the range provided state conservation plans that were part of the range of alternatives analyzed in the Final EISs. Components of these state conservation plans were used to develop the plan amendments. The Forest Service conducted tribal consultation when preparing the draft and final EISs and proposed plan amendments. Coordination with tribes occurred throughout the planning process.

**Q: Will local/state science apply?**

**A:** Biologists from the Forest Service coordinated closely with biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state wildlife agencies to ensure the plans incorporated the best available science on GRSG and its habitat. As is typically the case when incorporating science, the focus was on peer-reviewed, published studies. State and site-specific science and concerns will be incorporated in project-level decision-making. Additionally, many of the decisions in the plan amendments are designed to allow for justifiable departures based on local data, best available science, landscape features, and other existing protections.

**UNIQUE ASPECTS OF THE LAND MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENTS**

**Colorado**

**Q: Was the State of Colorado GRSG plan direction considered in the Forest Service’s GRSG plan amendment direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Northwest Colorado land management plan amendment adopts key elements of the State of Colorado Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan (Colorado Greater Sage-grouse Steering Committee 2008) by establishing conservation measures and focusing restoration efforts in the same key areas identified by the Forest Service as most valuable to the GRSG.

**Q: Does the Colorado plan amendment address sagebrush focal areas?**

**A:** No. SFAs were identified in Colorado and thus there are no management actions for SFAs in the Northwest Colorado LMP amendment.

**Idaho and Southwest Montana**

**Q: Was the State of Idaho GRSG plan direction considered in the Forest Service’s GRSG plan amendment direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Idaho and Southwestern Montana land management plan amendment adopted specific aspects of the State of Idaho’s Conservation Plan for the GRSG. The most significant aspect adopted from the state’s plan is a third tier of habitat management area, Important Habitat Management Areas (IHMAs). IHMA encompasses areas of generally moderate to high conservation value habitat and/or populations, but that are not as important as PHMA. In a landscape that is most threatened by fire and invasive species, this three-tiered approach allows land managers to focus suppression and restoration resources on those areas of highest importance while providing an acceptable additional level of flexibility in IHMA and GHMA since development is not as great a threat. The three tiers also serve as the foundation for an adaptive management approach that includes habitat and population hard and soft triggers that when hit require shifting IHMA to PHMA to maintain sufficient PHMA to support populations.

**Q: What about calculating disturbance in GRSG habitat in Idaho and Southwest Montana?**

**A:** The Idaho plan amendment includes a modified disturbance calculation to account for effective habitat, which was developed by the BLM in concert with the Idaho Fish and Game, the Forest Service, and the FWS. The decisions affecting Southwestern Montana in the plan amendment follow the Montana approach and do not include IHMA.

**Nevada**

**Q: What GRSG habitat map was used in Nevada?**

**A:** The Nevada plan amendment uses the 2014 Coates maps, developed locally using the best available

science and included Other Habitat Management Areas, where mitigation for disturbance will be required based on impacts to the specific habitat values such as connectivity.

**Q: Was the State of Nevada’s GRSG plan direction considered in the Forest Service’s GRSG plan amendment direction and guidance? What about incorporating the State of Nevada’s Conservation Credit System?**

**A:** Decisions for NFS lands in the State of Nevada incorporate key elements of the State of Nevada Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan (State of Nevada 2014) including consideration of the State of Nevada Conservation Credit System (Nevada Natural Heritage Program and Sagebrush Ecosystem Technical Team 2014) as the plan amendment is implemented and as projects are proposed within the planning area.

**Q: How is the plan amendment addressing the potential for geothermal development in Nevada?**

**A:** The Nevada plan amendment allows for an exception to the NSO fluid minerals direction for geothermal, which is an energy development priority for the state, if a team of experts advises on project-mitigation measures, mitigation is consistent with the Mitigation Strategy, and the project is consistent with the disturbance protocols.

## Utah

**Q: Was the State of Utah’s GRSG plan direction considered in the Forest Service’s GRSG plan amendment direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Utah plan amendment adopts some key strategies of GRSG conservation plans or directives developed by the State of Utah (Conservation Plan for Greater Sage-Grouse in Utah) and the State of Wyoming (Executive Orders 2011-05 and 2013-3), which establishes conservation measures to protect, restore, and enhance the GRSG and also focuses conservation and restoration within key areas deemed most valuable to the GRSG.

**Q: Why does the Utah plan amendment provide direction and guidance for land in Wyoming?**

**A:** The Utah plan amendment provides direction and guidance for land in Wyoming because portions of Utah Ashley and Uinta/Wasatch/Cache National Forest are in Wyoming.

**Q: Why is there additional flexibility for development in GHMA in Utah and parts of Wyoming?**

**A:** The plan amendment provides additional flexibility for development in GHMA because 96% of the breeding the GRSG in Utah and parts of Wyoming are within PHMAs. Within GHMA, the Utah plan amendment allows for wind energy and high voltage transmission rights-of-way development, as well as oil and gas development.

## Wyoming

**Q: Was the State of Wyoming’s Governor’s Executive Order for GRSG management considered in the Forest Service’s GRSG plan amendment direction and guidance?**

**A:** The Wyoming plan amendment is built upon the foundation for GRSG management established by and complementary to the Governor’s Executive Order, Greater Sage Grouse Core Area Protection by establishing similar conservation measures and focusing restoration efforts in the same key areas most valuable to the GRSG.

**Q: In what ways is the Forest Service’s Wyoming plan amendment similar to the Governor’s Executive Order, Greater Sage Grouse Core Area Protection?**

**A:** Wyoming plan amendment allows for high-voltage transmission lines and major right-of-way development and wind energy, leasable minerals, and mineral material development in GHMA. Fluid

mineral in PHMA is limited to NSO within a 0.6 mile radius around occupied leks in PHMA and 0.25 mile radius around occupied leks in GHMA, with timing limitations in core areas as well as density and disturbance caps, consistent with the Wyoming Core Area Strategy approach. Additionally, consistent with the Governor's Executive Order, Greater Sage Grouse Core Area Protection, the Wyoming LMP amendment implements a 5% disturbance cap in PHMA and a more inclusive formula for calculating. The Wyoming plan amendment also establishes screening criteria and conditions for new human-caused activities in PHMA and GHMA to ensure a net conservation gain for GRSG populations and habitat, consistent with the Governor's Executive Order, Greater Sage Grouse Core Area Protection.

**Q: How does the Forest Service plan amendment differ from the Governor's Executive Order, Greater Sage Grouse Core Area Protection?**

**A:** Unlike the Core Area Strategy, the Forest Service plans commit to achieving a net conservation gain for the GRSG in PHMA for new authorizations.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

**Q: What happens to FS activities right after the Record of Decision is signed?**

**A:** Implementation will not occur instantaneously, and to be successful, implementation will proceed in a thoughtful way that is collaborative and transparent with federal, state, and local partners.

**Q: When will the plan amendment direction and guidance be implemented?**

**A:** The land management plan amendments provide the overall direction and guidance for management activities on NFS lands. The actual changes on the ground will occur as project-level decisions and resulting actions are implemented.

**Q: How the multiple uses on NFS lands impacted?**

**A:** The Forest Service will work to effectively manage the GRSG populations and its habitat while achieving the best mix of multiple uses necessary to implement the mandate of the National Forest Management Act. The decision allows for the necessary time to gather additional site-specific data that may be needed to work with permittees and others to address impacts to those users as we implement actions for GRSG conservation.