

Greater Sage Grouse: Forest Plan Amendment

Fire Management Guide

Introduction

The Greater Sage-grouse (GRSG) Plan Amendment Records of Decision (RODs) were signed on September 16, 2015 by the Regional Foresters of the Intermountain, Rocky Mountain and Northern Rockies Regions. These RODs contain forest plan amendments for forests that have GRSG habitat. This document is to be used as a guide to aid the implementation of the Fire Management Desired Condition (DC), Standards (ST) and Guidelines (GL) which are designed to provide guidance and protection of greater sage-grouse and its habitat while working to mitigate the adverse effects of fire and fire suppression activities.

Risk Management

The Desired Condition for each state's Fire Management section affirms to "protect sagebrush habitat from loss due to unwanted wildfires or damages resulting from management-related activities while using agency risk management protocols to manage for firefighter and public safety and other high priority values. In all fire responses, first priority is the management of risk to firefighters and the public. Greater sage-grouse habitat will be prioritized as a high value resource along with other high value resources and assets."

Fire Management – Best Management Practices (BMP)

Guidelines pertaining to fire management are written in the form of a doctrinal statement which means that each guideline is written to describe a desired outcome without describing details of how to accomplish the outcome. Fireline leadership, Incident Commanders and agency administrators are designated the authority to determine how guidelines are implemented or mitigated. Resource advisors play a critical role in identifying sage grouse populations and habitat for the agency administrators and working with incident commanders to implement appropriate conservation measures. Following all guidelines at all points in time across a large fire would be difficult and deviations from the guidelines are allowed provided the intent of the guideline is followed. Fireline leadership and agency administrators are tasked with providing leadership direction (task, purpose and end state) that give the individual fire fighter the ability to operate while meeting the intent of the fire management guidelines of protecting sage grouse habitat.

There is no specific direction written into the RODs that describes documentation requirements associated with implementing fire management direction, including modifying guidelines during fire situations. However documenting situations where guideline mitigation actions are taken on a fire is highly recommended. Fire managers, resource advisors and agency administrators should work together to develop documentation practices that will meet the needs of each forest.

Fire Management Guidelines are primarily designed to mitigate fire suppression effects and to protect sagebrush areas. The guidelines identified in plan revisions are fairly similar from state to state but there are slight differences, forest leadership will need to consult each state's plan to ensure they are addressing the appropriate guidelines. Actions outlined in the Best Management Practices (BMP) guide will address all guidelines that were developed. Following these BMPs will ensure all guidelines are followed for each state.

National policy has determined that there are two types of wildland fires, Wildfires – an unplanned event, and prescribed fires – a planned event. Since fuels management activities are essentially vegetation treatments, fuels management standards and guidelines are addressed with vegetation guidelines and it will be important for fuels managers to refer to the vegetation guidelines when initiating any fuels planning projects. On the wildfire side, the forest plan amendment did not differentiate between the various objectives for which a wildfire may be managed. For example a wildfire may be managed for both resource objectives and protection objectives or just protection objectives. The forest plan amendment does not eliminate the opportunity to manage for resource objectives on a particular fire. All fires regardless of objectives are required to be managed within the direction of the forest plan amendment.

Preseason:

1. Line officers should be involved in setting pre-season wildfire response priorities including protection of priority, important and general habitat management areas and sagebrush focal areas.
2. Unit-specific GRSg fire management-related information should be added to wildland fire decision support systems (currently, the Wildland Fire Decision Support System); local operating plans and resource advisor plans to be used during fire situations to inform management decisions; and aid in development of strategies and tactics for resource prioritization.
3. Ensure Spatial Fire Management plans are current and include guidance for management of GRSg and habitat.
4. Update computer aided dispatching systems (CADS) to identify dispatching areas that contain GRSg habitat and identify actions and notifications should a fire occur in these areas
5. Conduct informational meetings and workshops with federal, state, and local cooperators to share sage grouse information such as location of habitats and best management practices (BMP) for suppression activities in habitat areas. Maintain

routine communications and brief local interagency sage grouse working groups regarding fire management and conservation of habitat.

6. Provide training to Resource Advisors on the wildfire suppression organization, objectives, tactics, and procedures to develop a cadre of qualified individuals. Qualification requirements will follow the standard agency requirements. The unit line officer will be responsible for assigning local resource advisors and determining the appropriateness of individuals to represent GRSG issues.
7. Localized maps of priority, important and general habitat management areas and sagebrush focal areas should be made available to fireline, dispatch, and fire support personnel.
8. Roads and natural fuel breaks should be incorporated into planned fuel-break design to improve effectiveness and minimize loss of existing sagebrush habitat.

During Fire Season:

9. On critical fire weather days, protection of GRSG habitat should receive high consideration, along with other high values, for positioning of resources.
10. During periods of multiple fires or limited resource availability, fire management organizational structures (local, regional, national) will prioritize fires and allocation of resources in which GRSG habitat is considered along with other high values.

During Incidents:

11. Utilize Geographical Information System (GIS) maps in Computer Aided Dispatch Systems (CAD) to determine if new starts are within or near sage grouse habitat and relay that information to responders.
12. Brief all local and out-of-area fire crews on locations of GRSG habitat and the importance of habitat conservation, and ensure they are familiar with fire suppression procedures to be used in GRSG habitat areas.
13. Assign a Resource Advisor with sage grouse expertise to all extended attack fires in or near GRSG habitat areas as early as possible. Include Resource Advisors in planning meetings, firefighter briefings, and formulation of the Incident Action Plan.
14. Consider using fire retardant and mechanized equipment only if it is likely to result in minimizing burned acreage, preventing the loss of other high value resources, or increasing the effectiveness of other tactical strategies. Agency administrators, their designee, or fireline leadership should consider fire suppression effects while determining suppression strategy and tactics.

15. Locate wildfire suppression facilities (i.e., incident command posts, spike camps, helibases, and mobile retardant plants) in areas outside of priority and general habitat management areas and sagebrush focal areas. When needed to best provide for firefighter and public safety or to minimize fire size in GRSG habitat, impact to the greater sage-grouse should be considered and removal of sagebrush should be limited.
16. Cross-country vehicle travel during fire operations should be restricted. When needed to best provide for firefighter or public safety or to minimize fire size in GRSG habitat, impacts to the GRSG should be considered and removal of sagebrush should be limited.
17. Use fire management tactics and strategies that seek to minimize loss of existing sagebrush habitat.
18. Where practical and available, all fire-associated vehicles and equipment should be inspected and cleaned using standardized protocols and procedures and approved vehicle/equipment decontamination systems before entering and exiting the area beyond initial attack activities to minimize the introduction of invasive annual grasses and other invasive plant species and noxious weeds.
19. Consider using the full range of suppression techniques to protect unburned islands, doglegs, and other GRSG habitat features that may exist within the perimeter of wildfires. These suppression objectives and activities should be prioritized against other wildland fire suppression activities and priorities.

Post-Incident:

20. As required based on current procedures and policy, the assigned resource advisor or a member of the host forest will consider the necessity of completing a Burned Areas Emergency Response (BAER) assessment.