

Public Lands Foundation

Position Statement: 2010-11

Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation

August 8, 2010

Executive Summary

The sage-grouse is the representative bird of the western United States sagebrush landscape. Significant declines in the populations of sage-grouse have occurred and they currently occupy only an estimated 56 percent of their historically occupied habitat.¹ More than half of the remaining sage grouse habitat is on public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In response to a growing pressure for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), a major collaborative effort began several years ago to protect and restore sage-grouse habitats and to rebuild grouse populations. That effort includes the western state wildlife agencies, the Western Governors' Association, and the BLM, along with a full range of public land users and wildlife conservation interests.

On March 5, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that listing of the greater sage-grouse as an endangered species was warranted, but precluded by the need to complete other listing actions of higher priority. The Public Lands Foundation (PLF) believes this decision, along with the focused and accelerated management efforts by BLM working hand-in-hand with western state wildlife agencies, non-profit organizations and private landowners, can facilitate needed development in the public interest and assure the maintenance of healthy and abundant sage-grouse populations as well as the ecological health of the western lands generally.

Any subsequent listing decision should be deferred until enough time has elapsed to adequately assess the efforts currently being made to reverse historic trends and to rebuild and restore productive sagebrush habitat and sage-grouse populations.

Background

The sage grouse is the representative bird of the western United States sagebrush landscape.

According to BLM, “sage-grouse have declined in number over the past one hundred years because of the loss, degradation, and fragmentation of sagebrush habitats essential for their survival. Greater sage-grouse now occupy only about 56% of the habitat that was available to them before the arrival of settlers of European descent. Gunnison sage-grouse now occupy about 10% of the habitat that existed before the arrival of settlers.”¹

Over the past three decades, this decline in sage-grouse over their historic range in the sagebrush landscape in the West has been a matter of concern to hunters, wildlife

agencies, conservationists, and public land managers. The seriousness of the decline led to petitions for listing the sage-grouse under the ESA and to an extensive analysis by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

The loss of habitat is the result of a combination of intentional and unintentional human activities, together with natural occurrences and processes such as fire, drought, disease, and weather patterns. Activities that have resulted in habitat loss include urbanization; agricultural development; livestock grazing; mineral and oil and gas development; the proliferation of roads and trails; off-road vehicle recreation; vegetation manipulation, including burning, plowing, and herbicides; and the explosive spread of non-native invasive plants.

While there is some disagreement about the extent and rate of losses and declines and about the relative impact of various human activities, there is general agreement that this is a serious situation that will require significant effort to halt and reverse. BLM has the management responsibility for the land that contains over 50 percent of the remaining viable sage-grouse habitat. To protect and restore sagebrush habitat for sage-grouse and for the numerous other wildlife species, such as pygmy rabbits, which are dependent on sagebrush habitat, BLM developed a “National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy” in November 2004.

In December 2006, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies published its “*Greater Sage-grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy*,”² which has as its overall goal the maintenance and enhancement of populations and distribution of sage-grouse by protecting and improving sagebrush habitats and ecosystems that sustain these populations.

In 2008, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed among the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, U.S. Forest Service, BLM, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Natural Resources Conservation Service and the USDA Farm Service Agency. This MOU provided for the cooperation among the participating agencies in the conservation and management of greater sage-grouse sagebrush habitats and other sagebrush-dependent wildlife throughout the Western United States and Canada.

Then, on March 5, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that listing of the greater sage-grouse as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is warranted, but listing is precluded by the need to complete other listing actions of higher priority.

On the same day, BLM issued Instruction Memorandum No. 2010-071 to supplement its National Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy of 2004. The program areas addressed in this supplement include oil and gas, oil shale, geothermal, wind, solar, and associated rights-of-way, wildlife, land use planning, and the National Environmental Policy Act.

“Guidance for Addressing Sagebrush Habitat Conservation in BLM Land Use Plans” has been developed, as well as “Guidance for the Management of Sagebrush Plant Communities for Sage-Grouse Conservation.” These guidance documents provide consistency and specific direction for improving and stabilizing sagebrush lands when implementing land use plans.

BLM is also working collaboratively with western state wildlife agencies and is an active partner in the working groups formed by the Western Governors' Association. These groups, comprised of a cross section of interests, are developing strategies and priorities at the local level directed at the conservation of sage-grouse.

Discussion

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's determination that listing of the greater sage-grouse as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act is warranted, but precluded, provides sorely needed additional time to assess actions being taken to reverse long-term trends.

BLM and numerous others have developed partnerships and made strong commitments over the last several years to manage sage-grouse habitat and maintain and restore sagebrush landscapes.

There are many examples of management actions being taken to conserve and protect sage-grouse and its habitat. New Resource Management Plans and plan amendments in areas with sage-grouse habitat include a strong focus on sage-grouse, sagebrush and sagebrush-related species. Sage-grouse conservation efforts include collaborative restoration projects, surveys, research, and monitoring on Federal, State, Tribal and private lands. Threat assessments to sage-grouse habitat and the mapping of sagebrush plant communities are taking place. Advance planning, prompt action during fires, and effective rehabilitation of burned areas are helping to limit the damage from unwanted wildfires in sagebrush habitat. And, travel maps indicating approved, restricted, and closed routes of travel in managed habitat for many species of wildlife, including sage-grouse habitat, have been developed by land management agencies.

The decision not to list the sage-grouse at this time is well-suited to facilitate needed development in the public interest while assuring the maintenance of healthy and abundant sage-grouse populations and the ecological health of western landscapes.

The PLF endorses and supports BLM's focused and accelerated management efforts to rebuild and restore sagebrush habitat and its commitment to work hand-in-hand with the western state wildlife agencies, non-profit organizations, and private landowners toward a common goal.

It is clear that BLM's program thrust, and the major efforts being made by the western states, recognize the potential threat of endangered species listing. And, it is clear there is a desire to avoid the regulatory, bureaucratic, and legal quagmire that could result from turning the sage-grouse into the "spotted owl of the western rangelands."

If these efforts succeed, the beneficial intent of the Endangered Species Act may be achieved without entangling BLM, public land users, and conservationists in an unending and unproductive morass of wrangling and recrimination.

PLF Position

1. The decision that the listing of the greater sage-grouse as an endangered species under the ESA is warranted, but precluded, along with the accelerated management efforts by BLM and others, can facilitate needed development and assure the maintenance of healthy and abundant sage-grouse populations as well as the

ecological health of western lands.

2. Any subsequent listing decision should be deferred until enough time has elapsed to adequately assess the efforts currently being made to reverse historic trends and to rebuild and restore productive sagebrush habitat and sage-grouse populations.
3. BLM and other affected parties need to use the best science available to improve land use planning and decision-making to conserve sage-grouse habitat while providing for other appropriate uses.
4. BLM needs to continue to cooperate with western state wildlife agencies, non-profit organizations and private landowners, as it manages sage-grouse habitat while providing wise multiple use and sustained yield management of the National System of Public Lands.

1 http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/more/sage_grouse_home2.html. Page 1, July 3, 2010

2 Stiver et al. 2006. *Greater Sage-Grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy*. Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Updated from PLF No. 24-04, September 17, 2004.