



# United States Department of the Interior

## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE Mountain-Prairie Region



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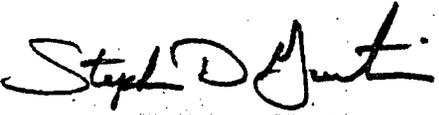
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DEC 16 2008

Memorandum

To: Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks

Through: Director

From: Regional Director, Region 6 

Subject: Greater Sage-Grouse Interim Status Update Results

The "Greater Sage-Grouse Interim Status Update" that was transmitted to you on October 31, 2008, contains information presented at the cross-regional greater sage-grouse status review as well as some more detailed analysis. The purpose of this document was to provide an update on our synthesis of biological information relative to the status of the greater sage-grouse, and the threats to the species that may affect its viability and persistence. This document is an interim step in completing our greater sage-grouse status review, and will inform our eventual finding on whether the greater sage-grouse should be listed or not under the ESA.

### Summary

On September 16 and 17, 2008, Service biologists from Region 6 (as species lead), Region 1 and Region 8, provided a coordinated cross-regional greater sage-grouse status review briefing to their regional leadership which included myself on behalf of Region 6, David Wesley on behalf of Region 1, and Ren Lohofener on behalf of Region 8.

During the September meeting, we recognized that while there are serious threats to sage brush habitat, especially from energy, fire and invasive species, at the same time, we noted that there were many positive actions currently underway that are addressing these challenges. For example, the Administration's "Healthy Lands Initiative" highlighting the Green River Basin of Wyoming as a priority has just over the past fiscal year devoted an additional \$1.5 million dollars in Service funding to hire additional staff to focus on sage-grouse habitat needs. These funds are being leveraged along with similar funding for the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Geological Survey under the Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative (WLCI). WLCI is a state, federal and local government partnership whose purpose is to, in part, balance species conservation with ongoing domestic energy production. The WLCI is a long-term, science based effort to assess and enhance aquatic and terrestrial habitats at a landscape scale in southwest Wyoming, while

facilitating responsible development through local collaboration and partnerships. Also the Governor of Wyoming through Executive Order and State Land Commission ruling has established a process to ensure conservation of sage-grouse on all state lands and is leading the development of a state-wide Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for greater sage-grouse.

To further enhance these positive actions within the Service, the Regional leadership pledged to take the following management actions to prioritize our efforts. 1) Renewed commitment to collect data in conjunction with others to monitor the species; 2) Establish a position – housed in Region 6 – to focus on sage brush landscape conservation under the priority Strategic Habitat Conservation focus areas (this position will be jointly funded by the three regions and is currently undergoing classification review); 3) Work with the Bureau of Land Management Director and Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) in the context of a recently signed Memorandum of Understanding with WAFWA to form an oversight team to resolve development issues to benefit the sage ecosystem (the documentation to form this team is in review circulation); and 4) If not done sooner, come back in two years to revisit and review any additional information.

During the September meeting, we focused on several key points.

First, in the context of the briefing, we determined that for clarification purposes, we would evaluate information at two scales: the Mono-Basin Populations and all others.

Second, we tried to determine a realistic snapshot of the status and trends of the species. Largely based on lek counts and harvest estimates from the States, we have a range of some 150,000 to 500,000 birds. However, since neither pre-settlement nor current numbers of sage-grouse are accurately known, the actual rate and magnitude of decline since pre-settlement times is uncertain. We reviewed two independently conducted analyses of greater sage-grouse trends using two different statistical methods. Both concluded that range-wide greater sage-grouse populations have experienced long-term declines in the past 43 years, with that decline lessening in the past 22 years.

Third, we discussed the major threats to the species, particularly from energy development, fire and invasive species.

Research examining the effects of energy development on the greater sage-grouse indicates that greater sage-grouse populations are negatively affected by energy development activities, especially those that degrade important sagebrush habitat, even when mitigative measures are implemented. However, based on the data available to us and how it has been analyzed to date, we were not able to tie projected developmental pressures to specific geographic locales in a way to adequately assess impacts on the species viability.

The effects of fire on sagebrush habitats, and therefore, their potential effects on sage-grouse, vary according to the species of sagebrush present, community association (e.g., understory type), and the severity, size, complexity, and intensity of the fire event. In other words, the potential threat differed throughout the range of the species.

Quantifying the total acres of sage-grouse habitat impacted by invasives is problematic due to differing sampling methodologies, incomplete sampling, inconsistencies in species sampled, and varying interpretations of what constitutes an infestation (Miller et al., in press). Widely variable estimates of the total acreage of weed infestations have been reported.

Despite a documented decline in sage-grouse numbers in the last 40 years, trends in recent years reflect variability in this decline, and some populations have stabilized or possibly increased. Although estimates of population size are difficult to obtain with accuracy and precision, there still appear to be hundreds of thousands of sage-grouse extant across its range. Nonetheless, the distribution of these numbers is not uniform across the range of the species. Approximately 50 percent of these birds occur in a relatively small portion of the species range.

Therefore, clearly the biological status of the species is a complex question and one for which all the information necessary was not available in September of 2008. Based on the data presented at the briefing we concluded that there were many uncertainties regarding accurate population counts, distribution, and our understanding of how the threats affect different populations and the species as a whole. Since the time of our meeting in September, it was decided that to remain in compliance with the court's order, the Service would not complete a final status review until after May of 2009. This decision to not make a finding in December of 2008 allows the Service time to gather and review the additional information and publications being prepared by species experts, so that our understanding of the threats, the viability of the species, and the connection between the two will be enhanced by the time a final finding is made. All three regions have agreed to strengthen the data collection and analysis that is ongoing with our partners such that we can resolve as many uncertainties as possible by the time this significant status review is completed next spring. This Interim Status Update reflects a step in response to this need in our ongoing review of the species status.