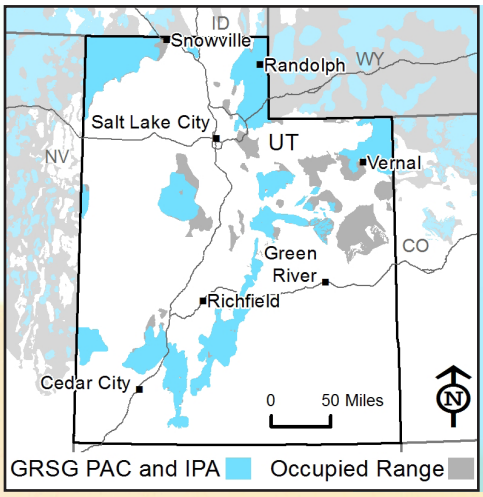
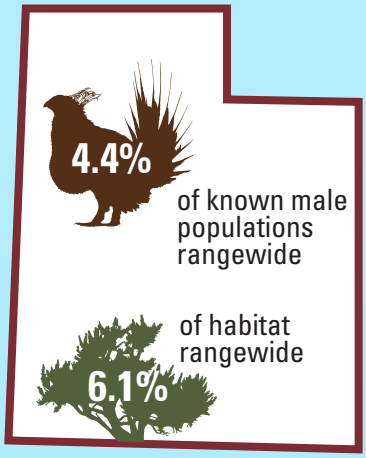
Greater Sage-grouse Conservation in Utah



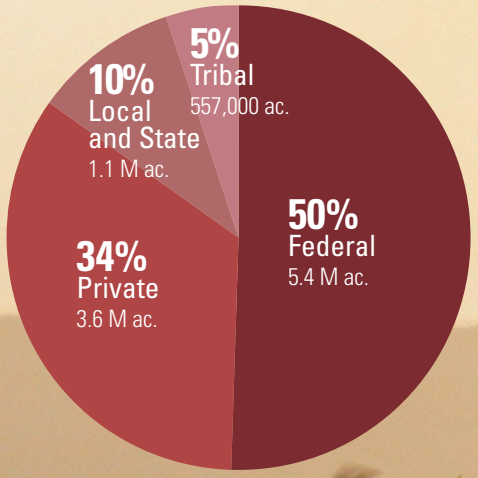
Important Conservation Areas and Occupied Range for Greater Sage-Grouse in Utah

Utah has been an active partner in the collaborative, science-based conservation campaign to protect the greater sage-grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem. Due to the collective efforts of federal, state and private partners across the range, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has found that the greater sage-grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. Greater sage-grouse will continue to be managed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.



Land Ownership

Total Occupied Range: 10.6 million acres



Greater Sage-Grouse in Utah

Utah's greater sage-grouse populations are distributed along the northern and western borders of the state with a string of isolated populations in the state's geographic center.

Sage-grouse populations in Utah are important because they represent numerous resilient populations across a diverse landscape; contributing to the long-term viability of the species across its range.

Sagebrush habitat in Utah reflects the rugged and incised natural topography of the state. Utah is home to the most southern population of sage-grouse within the species range, providing evidence of historic linkages to the south. The relatively isolated nature of greater sage-grouse in Utah have also provided extensive research opportunities, the results of which have greatly enhanced our understanding of the species. They may also provide adaptive capacity to continue the long-term persistence of the species.

Approximately half of occupied habitat is managed by the federal government. Energy development, invasive grasses, fire, and conifer encroachment pose major challenges to greater sage-grouse in Utah.

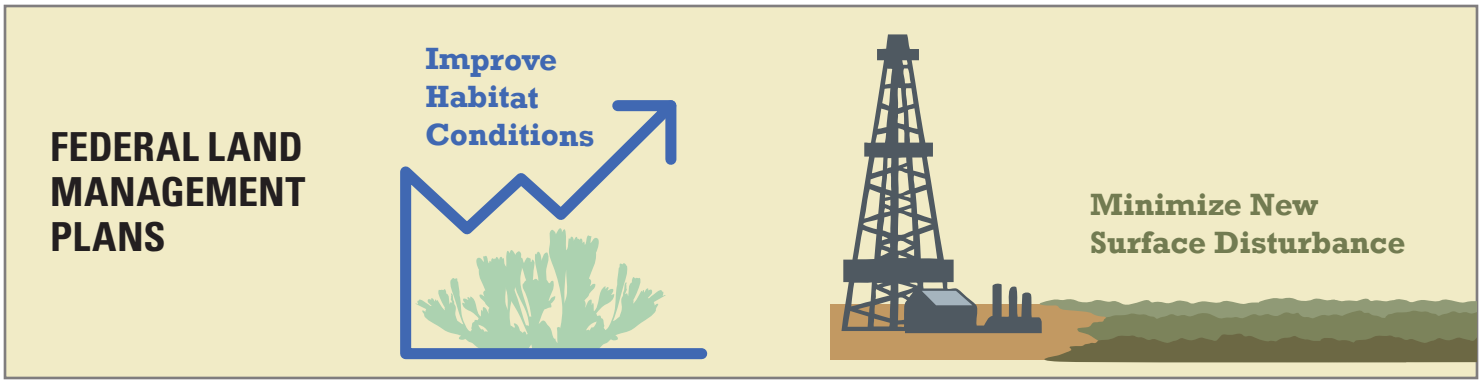
Primary Threats

Depending on location:

- Energy development and associated infrastructure,
- Invasive grasses wildfire,
- Conifer encroachment,
- Agricultural conversion.

Background photo: © Tatiana Gettelman

Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy in UT



STATE AND PRIVATE LAND CONSERVATION

Overview of State Actions

- The Utah plan applies to all lands within the state's 11 Sage-Grouse Management Areas across approximately 7.5 million acres. The state's goal is to conserve 90 percent of the state's greater sage-grouse habitat and approximately 94 percent of the population.
- The Utah state plan addresses threats to sage-grouse associated with fire, invasive species, predation, conifer encroachment, recreation, energy development and the removal of sagebrush.
- The Utah Executive Order requires the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining to coordinate with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources before issuing permits for energy development. It also directs the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining to implement recommendations provided by the Utah Division of Wildlife.
- Many of the conservation measures in the plan are voluntary and rely on negotiated incentive-based covenants, easements, or leases to achieve conservation on private lands, School and Institutional Trust Administration Lands, and local government lands.
- In 2014, Utah's incentive-based approach, coupled with efforts from state, federal, and private partners, exceeded the Utah conservation plan objectives, reporting 249,170 acres of habitat enhancement and restoration (Utah Department of Natural Resources.
- The Utah Governor's Executive Order also directs the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands to prioritize fuels-mitigation activities and pre-attack planning and coordination with other federal and local fire suppression partners in sage-grouse habitat, second only to the protection of human life and structures.

NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative

The Natural Resources Conservation Service's Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) has been a catalyst for sagebrush conservation across the West. SGI's vision of wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching provides win-win solutions for ranchers, sage-grouse and 350 other species. With more than 1,120 participating ranches in 11 western states, SGI and its partners have invested $424.5 million in greater sage-grouse conservation on 4.4 million acres of private ranchlands.

Utah removed 70,000 acres of invasive conifer to restore sagebrush grazing lands, implemented sustainable grazing on 173,000 acres and seeded 27,000 acres back to native perennial habitats. Wet meadows and associated chick survival is a limiting factor in Utah and other sagebrush landscapes. New to Utah in 2015 is acquisition and enhancement of more than 1,000 acres of such brood habitats.

RANGELAND FIRE STRATEGY

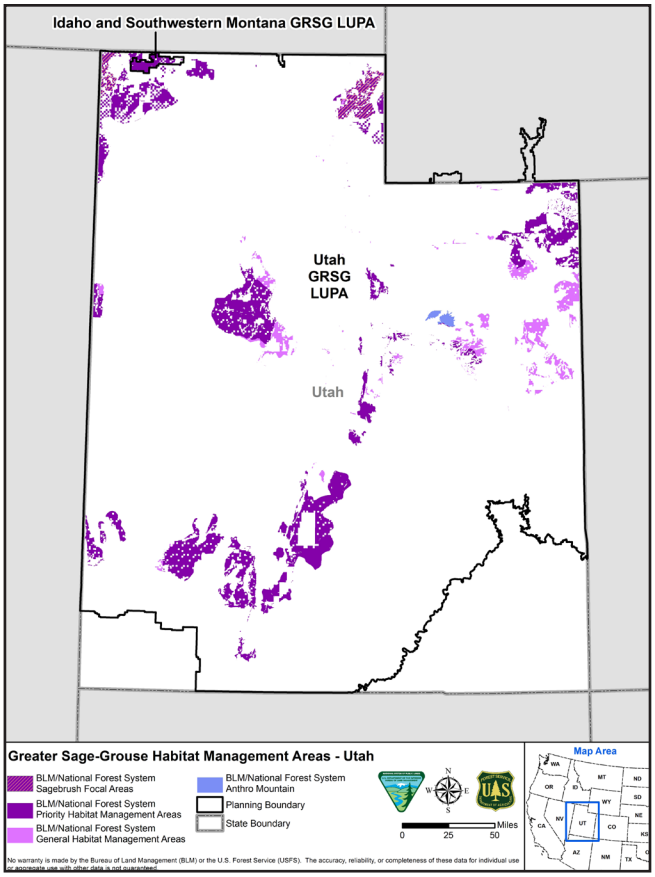
In 2015, Utah received $811,000 in targeted Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool funding for numerous sagebrush habitat restoration efforts, including the Parker Front project to remove juniper stands and seed native plants and grasses. This funding will support a larger ongoing partnership with the Utah Watershed Restoration Initiative, which has already contributed $70,000 to treat 2,000 acres of priority habitat. These funds have been leveraged with outside money from the State of Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative and BLM's Resilient Landscape program to increase the investment in fire protection measures for sagebrush habitat in the state.

Across Utah, BLM fire suppression resources have been increased by roughly 10 percent. This has allowed the state to fully staff fire engines and add additional engines and bulldozers to respond to wildfires.

BLM-USFS Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plans in UT

- The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) have amended the land-use plan in Utah to address threats to the greater sage-grouse. The BLM-USFS plans provide a layered management approach that focus protections on the areas of highest importance to the species:
  - The highest levels of protections are applied to Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFA), which are landscapes with high breeding population densities of sage-grouse, high-quality sagebrush habitat and a preponderance of federal ownership or protected areas that serve to anchor the conservation value of the landscape. These areas are prioritized for habitat improvement and vegetation management efforts and proposed for locatable mineral withdrawal.
  - Priority Habitat Management Areas (PHMA), equivalent to Core Areas, are managed to avoid and minimize further disturbance. Surface energy and mineral development is limited in these areas. Development is capped with limits on the amount and density of disturbance allowed.
  - General Habitat Management Areas (GHMA) provide greater flexibility for land use activities. Mitigation and required design features ensure that impacts from development are avoided, minimized and mitigated in GHMA.

SFA Acres	PHMA Acres	GHMA Acres
228,500 acres	2.7 million acres	583,000 acres

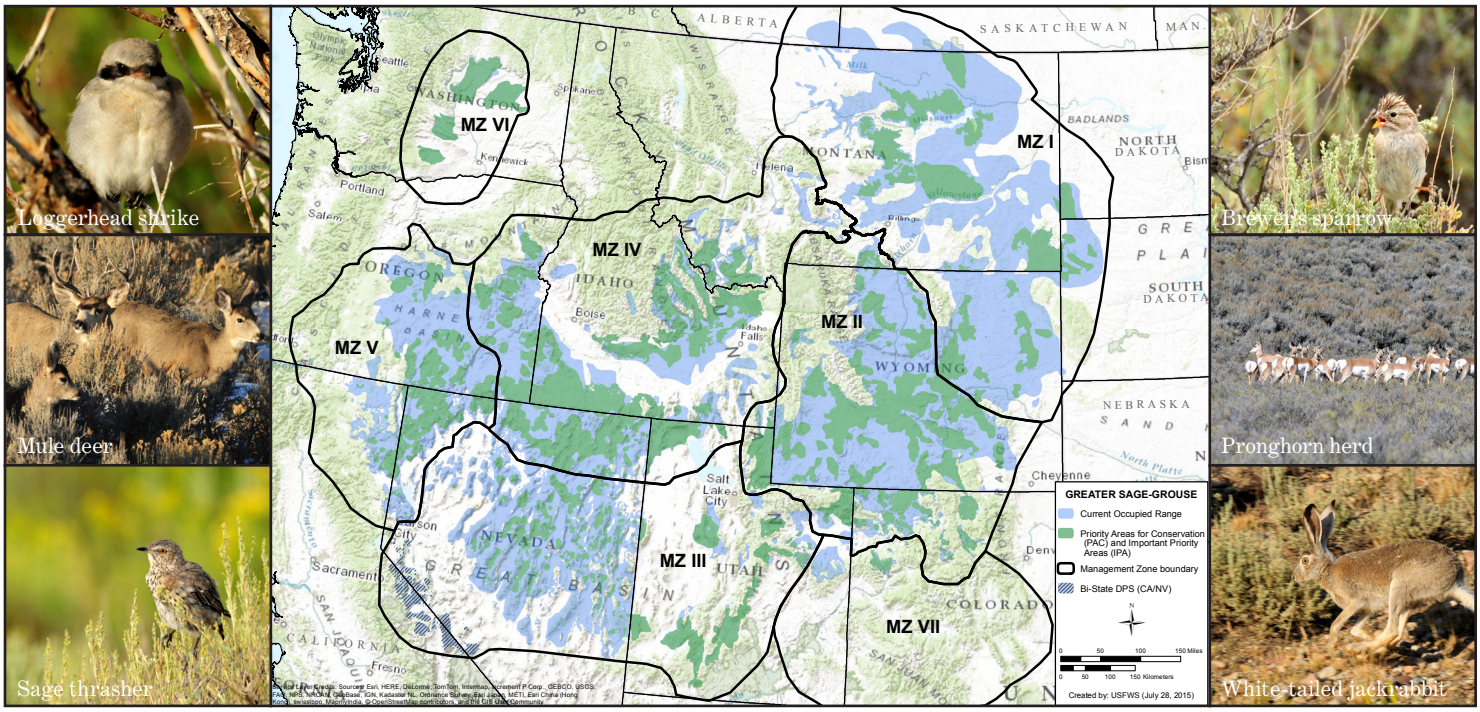


- Compared to other states, greater sage-grouse habitat in Utah is highly fragmented; the Utah plan proposes management based on actual greater sage-grouse populations rather than just habitat.
- The plans respect valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals and other permitted projects.
- During grazing permit renewals and modifications on lands within sage-grouse habitat, the BLM will 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 the areas most important for greater sage-grouse first, SFA, followed by PHMA, with a focus on lands containing riparian areas and wet meadows.
- The Utah plan will help reduce the threat of rangeland fire by placing added priority on the prevention, suppression and restoration of sagebrush landscapes threatened by rangeland fire through improved federal-state-local collaboration and coordination.

About 95 percent of federal lands with high and medium oil and gas potential in Utah are outside of federally managed priority conservation areas.

Acres of High & Medium Oil and Gas Potential and Lease Status on Federal Lands and Minerals within PHMA								
	High/Medium Oil Potential				High/Medium Gas Potential			
State	Within PHMA Already Leased	Within PHMA Subject to BLM/ USFS RMP Decisions for Priority Habitat	Outside of PHMAs	Total High/ Medium Oil Potential	Within PHMA Already Leased	Within PHMA Subject to BLM/ USFS RMP Decisions for Priority Habitat	Outside of PHMAs	Total High/ Medium Gas Potential
Utah	8,298,000	39,000	8,211,000	28,248,000	91,000	237,000	6,714,000	7,041,000

The Future for Greater Sage-Grouse in UT



Redefining the Future of Conservation

FWS is confident that the unparalleled conservation effort by federal, state, and private partners has addressed the major threats to greater sage-grouse by putting the right protections in the most important places. A sustained commitment to sagebrush conservation is needed to ensure effective conservation for greater sage-grouse and the hundreds of other wildlife that depend on sagebrush habitat.

Implementation

Partners will now begin to implement their commitments whether under state and federal plans, individual conservation agreements, or the Rangeland Fire Strategy. The BLM and USFS plans will be implemented in close coordination with state and local partners, as well as through continued collaboration with the Sage Grouse Task Force and local working groups. FWS will remain an active partner in the sagebrush conservation effort, funding new research, providing on-the-ground support for private landowners, as well as federal, state, industry and conservation partners.

Enduring Benefits for All

Restoring the greater sage-grouse will benefit hundreds of other native plants and animals and communities across the West. What's more, these conservation efforts are led and strengthened by effective partnerships – ensuring that the gains we make for the greater sage-grouse will endure.

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Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0

Since 2010, SGI has focused on arresting habitat loss in the highest priority areas for conservation from ex-urban development and conifer encroachment, and on reducing greater sage-grouse collisions with high-risk fences.

NRCS has committed to invest another $211 million in SGI 2.0, with an expanded mission of addressing the synergistic problems of invasive weeds and wildfires, on slowing the loss of sagebrush to agricultural conversion and on protecting wet meadow habitat critical for brood-rearing. The program's goal is to bring the total amount of private land under conservation to 8 million acres.

By 2018, Utah will remove another 25,000 acres of invasive conifers and reduce greater sage-grouse collisions by 83 percent through the marking or moving of all high-risk fences on private lands.