C.L. "Butch" Otter
Governor

RECEIVED BY
FEB 05 2012
F & W OFFICE
U.S. FWS

February 3, 2012

Brian Kelley, State Supervisor
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368
Boise, ID 83709

Dear Brian,

As you know, the issue of sage grouse conservation in Idaho and the species' current status as "Warranted but Precluded" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has been a top priority for me as well as other Idahoans who wish to conserve the species while maintaining predictable uses of our public lands. There are many moving parts to the overall conservation of the bird, and I believe it is time that the State of Idaho asserts its role, its rights and its responsibilities in this issue.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) must re-determine the status of the species throughout its 11-state western range by September 30, 2015. During this period, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will re-evaluate the many Resource Management Plans on public lands to ensure adequate conservations for the bird. This is a very large undertaking on the part of the BLM, and the State remains concerned about the additional restrictions this agency and the USFWS may place on BLM-administered lands.

Yet, the September 30, 2015 timeline provides Idaho an additional opportunity to conserve the bird and continue our good work. Over the past ten years, Idaho has developed a Sage Grouse Conservation Plan, and funding has been provided for the 12 Sage Grouse Local Working Groups to provide on-the-ground conservation measures. This and many other voluntary measures will be beneficial to sage grouse, and we already are seeing a gradual increase in some of our populations in Idaho.

With all of these moving parts in play, I want to ensure that the State has a sound, science-based plan that will provide for the bird's sustainability in Idaho, preclude a listing under the ESA, assure proper uses of our public lands, and enable our constituents to participate in the process.

I will need your help to accomplish these goals. I would like to invite you or your designee to meet with me and other potential stakeholders in my office on Friday, February 10th, at 10 a.m. At that time, I would like to discuss the issue and ask for your participation in a Governor's Task Force on Sage Grouse in Idaho. I will have the administrator of my Office of Species Conservation, Nate Fisher, in attendance in order to discuss the path forward.

I believe Idaho needs to take control of this process and develop solutions for sage grouse as well as for our constituents. With your assistance, we can turn these challenges into sound solutions beneficial to sage grouse and to Idaho. Thank you for your positive consideration of this important issue.

As Always – Idaho, "Esto Perpetua"

C.L. "Butch" Otter
Governor of Idaho

The Governor's Sage-Grouse Task Force

Goals for the Idaho Plan:

I. **Draft a State of Idaho plan for the greater sage-grouse to supersede the state from compliance with the National BLM Interim Management Guidance.**
   - The State develops and provides the full force and affect of law for the Greater Sage-Grouse Plan.
   - Ensure that the state sage-grouse plan is adopted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

II. **Provide a mechanism to preclude the need to list the species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).**

III. **In the event of listing of the species, minimize the impact to and provide regulatory certainty for the use of permitted and lawful activities on public land.**

Objectives of the Task Force:

Develop an Idaho Plan that is:

- Biologically-driven, legally defensible and politically palatable.
- Centered on conserving the species and its habitat while maintaining predictable levels of land use.
- The product of input from a diverse group of stakeholders.
- Able to be incorporated into BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs) consistent with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).
- Calibrated to meet the "adequate regulatory mechanism" standard under the ESA.
- Built on, to the extent possible, the great efforts provide by local sage-grouse working group plans and the current 2006 state-wide plan for the species.
- Request and seek pertinent scientific information and technical expertise to inform the Task Force's deliberations regarding key sage-grouse habitat. This technical information may include :
  - GIS coverage of information on Preliminary Priority Habitat and Preliminary General Habitat
  - Land ownership and land use
  - Federally-permitted uses on federal lands
  - Current habitat conditions
  - Updated fire maps

Currently, State of Idaho agencies are reviewing Idaho 2006 Conservation Plan Sage Grouse in Idaho, Local Working Group plans, the recently-completed Wyoming Core Area Strategy and BLM's RMPs. The state agencies will prepare a preliminary document as a "Straw Man" to provide the Task Force of management options for the development of the final plan. These documents should provide the Task Force with the information and concrete examples to expedite the process.

We would like to convene our initial working Task Force meeting as soon as possible. Please review your schedules for the week of February 20-24, and contact Ashley Liggett, OSC, (208) 334-2189 or ashley.liggett@osc.idaho.gov to report your availability. We anticipate the initial meeting to last at least 4 hours.

We anticipate having a meeting at least once a month for the next six months. Please anticipate full day meetings.

Nate Fisher, Administrator

Office of Species Conservation