SAGE GROUSE TASK FORCE

Co-Chairs
Governor Matthew H. Mead, Wyoming
Governor John W. Hickenlooper, Colorado
Acting Director Mike Pool, Bureau of Land Management

June 29, 2012

The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary of the Interior
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

The Sage Grouse Task Force was formed shortly after the December 9, 2011 meeting you co-hosted with Governor Mead in Cheyenne to discuss range-wide sage-grouse conservation among the eleven sage-grouse states and four federal agencies. Four days after the Cheyenne meeting, you sent a letter to each of the eleven sage-grouse state governors asking for a report and recommendations on how to best move forward with a multi-state conservation sage-grouse plan. On June 14, 2012, the Sage Grouse Task Force finalized the attached report describing the process by which a range-wide action plan can address near-term conservation measures, and when coupled with past and current efforts will result in a viable population of sage-grouse range-wide.

The Sage Grouse Task Force has made meaningful progress in achieving its objectives. We are optimistic that the process described in the attached report will deliver the range-wide conservation necessary by 2015 to ensure that sage-grouse will not warrant protections under the Endangered Species Act while sustaining strong Western economies.

Please contact us if we may provide additional information regarding the attached report.

Sincerely,

Co-chairs of the Sage Grouse Task Force

Matthew H. Mead , Governor of Wyoming

John Hickenlooper, Governor of Colorado

Mike Pool, Acting Director, Bureau of Land Management

Approved 6-14-12

State/Federal Sage-Grouse Task Force

Process for Developing a Range-wide Conservation Plan for Sage-Grouse

The mission of the State/Federal Sage-Grouse Task Force (Task Force) is to identify and address high priority conservation actions and integrate ongoing actions that are necessary to ensure protection of key habitat leading to sustainable sage-grouse populations and strong Western economies. The Task Force will identify key actions necessary in the short-term, facilitate their implementation, and share information that could be of benefit to all task force members.

Background

There are many conservation plans for sage-grouse. Some are range-wide plans; others are state plans or local plans. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (WAFWA) Greater Sage-Grouse Comprehensive Conservation Strategy is one of the first conservation plans, offering a good framework for long-term efforts to conserve the species. When the Fish and Wildlife Service (the Service) made its warranted-but-precluded determination for the Greater Sage-grouse in 2010, it acknowledged the potential value of the comprehensive conservation strategy, but noted that it was new and had not yet been extensively implemented. Further, the comprehensive strategy does not focus on near-term actions that could influence the 2015 listing decision required of the Service. Thus, there remains an unmet need for an action plan that prescribes near-term conservation measures, that when added to the body of past and current efforts would ensure a viable sage-grouse population in the West and preclude the listing of the species.

In recognition of this remaining need, the eleven sage-grouse states and the four federal natural resource agencies with management responsibilities for sage-grouse or their habitat met in December 2011 to catalyze attention to those near-term actions that could affect the required 2015 determination. As a result of that meeting, the Task Force was convened for the purpose of developing an action plan to restore fragmented habitat and to maintain and/or increase sage-grouse populations. Accordingly, the Task Force has focused its efforts on identifying those near-term actions, of both state and federal agencies, that could beneficially affect the outlook for the sage-grouse when its status is reviewed in 2015. Those near-term actions should focus on reducing the most serious threats to the species identified in the various parts of its range and may include:

- on-the-ground projects (e.g., fence marking or removal, green-stripping, easement acquisition, and similar measures, such as those being financed by NRCS through its Sage-Grouse Initiative);

- policy initiatives (e.g., identifying and removing roadblocks to effective wildfire suppression, management, and control, or roadblocks to the effective sharing of data across state boundaries); and
- regulatory measures (executive orders, regulations, ordinances, etc., such as those adopted in Wyoming as part of its core area strategy, and those being considered for inclusion in BLM's amended Resource Management Plans).

Describing the Current State of Conservation

A clear understanding of the conservation efforts currently being done for the benefit of sage-grouse range-wide is helpful in developing a plan. Since the FWS's 2010 status review many new efforts have been or will soon be implemented. A comprehensive understanding of sage-grouse conservation efforts is necessary to quantify the cumulative effect of management actions and regulatory mechanisms for sage-grouse by 2015 and beyond.

In 2011, Western Governors through the Western Governors' Association (WGA) surveyed the sage-grouse states for the purpose of identifying sage-grouse conservation initiatives underway at the state and local level. This was an important first effort in identifying many of the initiatives conducted primarily by state fish and wildlife agencies and local partners. After reviewing the inventory report, most of the participants in the survey recognized its incompleteness. Particularly absent were the efforts of state agencies other than the states' fish and wildlife agencies, the efforts of local government, and new initiatives implemented since the WGA survey was conducted. The WGA did not survey the efforts of federal agencies or NGOs. There is a need to update the WGA survey and accurately include the efforts of conservation partners.

Action Item:

- **Update the WGA inventory of sage-grouse conservation initiatives. All 15 members of the Task Force will add conservation efforts missing from the 2011 report, including those made by agencies and groups that were not solicited earlier.**

Defining Success

Many state and federal agencies have made significant conservation commitments without the benefit of any clarification from the Service regarding the particular criteria it expects to employ in making its 2015 determination. The Service will provide clarification of those criteria by empanelling the Conservation Objectives Team (COT), comprised of state and federal experts that will make its recommendations to the Director of the Service, following an independent peer

review to ensure their scientific validity. However, because the principal factors affecting the well-being of sage-grouse and the means to address them are reasonably well known, the Task Force believes that state and federal agencies should continue to develop and implement conservation initiatives without waiting for clarification from the Service.

Listing decisions under the ESA are required by law to be based on scientific considerations. However, because it may be possible to achieve the conservation objectives in a variety of ways, each of which may have different social or economic implications, the Task Force will provide the Service with its views on how best to achieve the objectives while having the least adverse social or economic consequences.

Action Items:

- **The Service will identify, based on recommendations of the COT, conservation objectives that if met would result in a long-term viable sage-grouse population, thus meaning that the species would not be in danger of extinction or be likely to become endangered.**
- **The Task Force will consider the COT recommended objectives and information about the status of ongoing conservation actions and determine how it can support or facilitate high priority conservation actions that are necessary for a successful range-wide action plan.**

Achieving Success

The States and federal agencies will develop their individual sage-grouse conservation plans consistent with the over-arching conservation objectives identified by the Service. The States and federal agencies will have the latitude to refine or supplement their conservation actions, including policy initiatives and regulatory measures, during the development and implementation of their sage-grouse plans. While contributing to the range-wide conservation of the species, the States' plans will address their individual needs including their socio-economic objectives.

The Service will assess the cumulative effects of the individual state and federal agency plans to determine whether they meet the criteria of their 2015 listing decision and if they are adequate for achieving the range-wide conservation objectives. The Task Force will remain together through at least 2015 to monitor the implementation of the cumulative conservation effort and ensure that the conservation objectives are met by 2015. The Task Force recognizes that whatever plans are developed to conserve the sage-grouse and therefore make the protections of the ESA unnecessary will continue beyond 2015. Therefore, once the conservation plans are submitted, the Task Force will determine if it would be beneficial to remain active beyond 2015.

During this intervening time, the Task Force will also engage WAFWA to ensure that Organization's expertise is utilized.

Action Items:

- **The States and Federal agencies will continue to develop and/or implement their conservation initiatives while the Service develops its criteria for making its 2015 determination.**
- **The States will develop and/or implement their sage-grouse conservation plans in an inclusive manner, with input from a broad range of stakeholders that contributes to range-wide conservation of the species, while at the same time achieves their socio-economic objectives.**
- **The Service will assess the individual plans to ensure they are capable of meeting the conservation objectives by 2015.**
- **The Task Force will review the implementation of conservation plans to ensure the conservation objectives are met by 2015.**
- **The Task Force will open a dialogue with WAFWA to solicit their opinions on conservation plans, federal actions and anything else where their expertise could be utilized.**