| | |
|---|---|
| **From:** | Irwin, Thomas |
| **To:** | Dan Ashe |
| **Cc:** | Roslyn Sellars; David Lucas; David Lucas; Bruce Hastings; Noreen Walsh; Betsy Hildebrandt; Anna Munoz |
| **Subject:** | Dan"s remarks for today |
| **Date:** | Tuesday, September 22, 2015 9:42:55 AM |
| **Attachments:** | Sage Grouse Remarks with Director edits for 9-22-15.docx |

---

Done!

Ready for printing.

Thomas

thomas_irwin@fws.gov - (202) 208-4545
Office of the Director - 1849 C Street NW - Room 3356 - Washington, DC 20240

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe**
**Final Listing Determination for the Greater Sage Grouse**
**September 22, 2015**

Good Morning everyone and welcome to Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR!

Let's look back to March 2010 when we determined that the greater sage warranted ESA listing due to historic and ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation.

There was still significant, high quality habitat and still abundant populations, but land use trends and inadequate regulatory mechanisms to change those trends led us to conclude that habitat losses would continue, and likely accelerate.

We recommended that Federal land use plans could provide the adequate regulatory measures that we found lacking, and we urged leadership and change in fire prevention, suppression, and restoration.

We went to work, asking the BLM and Forest Service, to revise Federal Plans covering 51 percent of the bird's habitat; and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to engage the private landowners who control 36 percent. We asked our state counterparts, U.S. Geological Survey scientists and great NGO partners to join us in the largest land conservation planning effort ever undertaken.

The result is a remarkable turn of events. When you read our 2015 finding, you'll find these conclusions:

1. risk of exposure to oil and gas development is "substantially reduced";

2. threat of new infrastructure "has changed substantially";

3. 87 percent of the population is "not at risk" from agricultural conversion;

4. a comprehensive, forward-looking approach to fire suppression, prevention, and post-fire treatments in the Great Basin represents a "distinct" and "unprecedented" change;

5. a "major shift" in grazing management and monitoring, meaning the risk of improper grazing is "greatly reduced";

6. "considerable effort" is reducing conifer encroachment;

7. the impacts of mining are "reduced";

8. potential impacts from renewable energy are "substantially reduced"; and

9. perhaps most significantly, combined, the Federal and State Plans have "substantially improved" regulatory mechanisms across the range.

Many minds, hands and hearts have helped get us here, but it is Wyoming's leadership, designing the Core Area Strategy, that first showed us what was possible.

Undoubtedly, we would be announcing a different outcome without the substantial regulatory protections within the BLM and Forest Service plans. And by enacting their own comprehensive voluntary and regulatory programs, Montana and Oregon helped to build a Federal and State framework of layered protections over approximately 90 percent of the bird's breeding habitat.

Secretary Jewell, herself, delivered a key element, signing Secretarial Order 3336 and focusing priority in fighting wildfire and invasive species.

The NRCS brought private landowners to the table in an enterprising partnership with my agency. The NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative has driven habitat improvements and protections onto 4.4 million acres of private land. And they've pledged another $198 million through 2018.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances now cover 1.8 million acres of private ranch lands in Oregon and Wyoming, with more to come.

Together, all of these efforts have framed an integrated and comprehensive strategy to conserve sage grouse. The key elements are:

1. restrictive Federal land use allocations;

2. consistent, science-based lek buffers, and density and disturbance caps;

3. monitoring and adaptive management;

4. mitigation to achieve net conservation gain;

5. landscape strategy addressing fire and invasive species; and

6. durable and proven successful efforts to target and incentivize private land conservation.

All of these spring from epic collaboration, across political, organizational, and ecological boundaries, supporting a conclusion that we have preserved --

"... expanses of undisturbed habitat supporting the largest, best-connected sage grouse populations into the foreseeable future."

This does not mean that sage grouse and their habitat are not free from risk. Losses will continue, but we believe at declining rates. Indeed, we already see rates of loss declining from historical averages. We must sustain, support and implement every element of this strategy, or we will almost certainly find ourselves reconsidering this decision.

This is the most scientifically rich and transparent listing decision ever made. Certainly, some will dispute it. That's fair. Science, especially the application of science to a decision of this complexity, is a human enterprise. It is not an automated process of aggregating data, solving equations, and discovering **the**

answer. It's a journey over difficult terrain on trails with names like "unknown," "uncertainty," "adversity," and "ambiguity." It demands the exercise of good judgement, by people of good intention and character. This is the case here.

The women and men of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have done their duty well!

In the end, they gave me a unanimous recommendation: 10 field office supervisors; 3 Assistant Regional Directors; 3 Regional Directors; an Assistant Director and 2 Deputy Directors; all career public servants; among them, over 500 years of collective professional experience; all unanimous in recommending this not warranted determination.

Today is a good day to be sagebrush. A greater sage grouse.
A mule deer. A Brewers sparrow. A rancher. A Governor. A State or Federal agency. Even, an oil and gas or mining company.

We've shown that through great leadership and partnership we can come together, cooperating in the best interests of our nation.

So, I'll end by quoting Wallace Stegner from, *The Sound of Mountain Water*:

"One cannot be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery."

Today's decision, and the epic cooperation which has brought us here, is deserving of the West's the spectacular scenery, including, of course, the spectacular and iconic greater sage grouse.

Thank you!