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Subject:	Revised stronghold Q&A
Date:	Friday, March 27, 2015 2:49:15 PM
Attachments:	FWS.GrSG.stronghold QA.final.032715.docx
Importance:	High

Thanks.

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US Fish and Wildlife Service
Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation
Questions and Answers about the Service's "Stronghold" Recommendations for the Federal Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Planning Process

Background

- Greater sage-grouse conservation is a complex conservation issue, unprecedented in scope and scale. **The US Fish and Wildlife Service has been and remains an active partner in a broad and historic campaign to protect this bird and the 350 other wildlife species that depend on heathy sagebrush.**

- The Service has invested significantly in the ongoing sage-grouse conservation effort to secure adequate on-the-ground protections to make an Endangered Species Act listing unnecessary. **Our role has been to provide the best available technical and scientific information to help our federal, state and other partners understand what the bird needs to persist into the future and what measures can help secure those needs in a meaningful way and provide certainty** .

- Throughout the federal planning process, we have worked closely with BLM and Forest Service at all levels of our respective organizations to develop conservation measures to address threats to sage-grouse on federal lands. As part of that collaborative effort, in the fall of 2014 **we responded to a request from BLM leadership to identify those areas within which it is most important for BLM (and USFS) to apply the highest levels of protection.** We produced a series of landscape-scale maps identifying highly important areas for sage-grouse conservation and transmitted those maps via a memo to BLM and USDA leadership in late October, 2014.

- These areas are informally known as "**strongholds**" and the Service has advised BLM and USFS that "**strong, durable, and meaningful protection of federally-administered lands in these areas will provide additional certainty and help obtain confidence for long term-sage-grouse persistence."**

Questions and Answers about the Service's "Stronghold Recommendations"

Q: *What are sage-grouse "strongholds" and why did the Service map these areas?*

A: Sage-grouse strongholds are those landscapes in sage-grouse range that contain *federally-administered* lands that the current scientific literature indicates are important for the persistence of the species. These landscapes also contain other key criteria, including:

- Existing high-quality sagebrush habitat for sage-grouse;
- Highest breeding densities of sage-grouse; and,
- A preponderance of current federal ownership, and in some cases, adjacent protected areas that serve to anchor the conservation importance of the landscape.

The Service mapped these areas in response to a request from BLM leadership to identify a subset of priority habitat most vital to the species' persistence, within which the Service recommended BLM and USFS provide the strongest level of protection in the final federal sage-grouse conservation plans. An example of such protections includes the withdrawal of locatable minerals on the federal estate from further entry where applicable.

It is important to note that the landscape-scale maps we provided the federal partners do not represent "new" recommendations. (All priority habitat necessary for protection was previously identified; these areas are largely a subset of that priority habitat.) In addition, the conservation community has for more than a decade indicated these areas are "strongholds" for sage-grouse and critical to the long term persistence of the species. The Service is highlighting these areas as especially important for meaningful and durable conservation because the scientific literature assigns so much value to these places.

Q: *Why did the Service include non-federal lands in the strongholds?*

A: To identify the strongholds, the Service mapped larger landscapes containing those federal lands that met the above criteria. In so doing, we effectively created a boundary to delineate that landscape, within which lie some non-federal lands. However, we identified these landscapes specifically in response to a request from our federal land management partners. While we will always encourage and support effective sage-grouse conservation efforts on other lands within these strongholds (and across the range of the species), the Service is in no way prescribing management for non-federal lands in these landscapes.

Similarly, we are not prescribing specific management actions on the federal estate. Rather, we are recommending BLM and USFS adopt a conservative approach to managing these landscapes because they are so vital to the species persistence. In addition to supporting healthy sage-grouse populations, these landscapes support other ecological attributes critical for the long-term health of America's sage-steppe ecosystem, which supports numerous other wildlife species, including big game. Many of the strongholds also provide important habitat for shrub-steppe passerine birds and mule deer winter range.

Q: *What about other federal lands located within the strongholds?*

A: One criterion we considered in mapping these areas was the presence of existing protected areas (e.g., wilderness, National Park System units, National Wildlife Refuge System units) that could serve as "anchors" for a larger landscape conservation effort on BLM and USFS lands that will be managed pursuant to the final federal sage-grouse conservation plans. The Service's position is that these protected areas already have in place management regimes that – directly or indirectly – protect sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. For example, in the Northern Great Basin stronghold area, Craters of the Moon National Monument in Idaho, administered by the National Park Service, closes certain parts of the monument seasonally to protect nesting sage-grouse. Likewise, in the North Central Montana stronghold area, the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana, administered by the

Service, is managed for "wildlife first" (including sage-grouse) and serves as a potential anchor for the BLM sage-grouse conservation planning efforts for the larger landscape surrounding the refuge.

Q: *Did the Service inform partners and other stakeholders about Director Ashe's memo*?

A: Yes. Immediately following Director Ashe's transmittal of the strongholds memo and maps to BLM Director Neill Kornze and USFS Chief Tom Tidwell, the Service held a series of briefings for members of the Governors Sage-Grouse Task Force, including states and federal agencies. We explained our rationale and methodology for the mapping effort and emphasized we were responding to a request from BLM for technical assistance. We then held a series of follow-on meetings at the staff level with interested partners to further discuss technical aspects of the mapping process and also posted the memo and maps on a public website (USGS Science Base) so any interested party could view and download the maps and associated GIS layers. To enhance access to the memo and maps, we then posted these materials on the Service's national sage-grouse conservation site and created a link from that site to the Science Base site:
Memo and
maps: http://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/documents/ESA%20Process/GRSG%20Strongholds%20memo%20to%20BLM%20and%20USFS%20102714.pdf

Data layers: https://www.sciencebase.gov/catalog/item/546cf30be4b0fc7976bf1d4e

We continue to work with our federal planning partners and other stakeholders to explain and help operationalize the stronghold concept and maps and are committed to a robust and transparent public dialogue about our recommendations to conserve sage-grouse and the larger landscapes on which the species depends. To learn more about our broader, West-wide sage-grouse and sagebrush conservation efforts and constellation of partners, please visit: http://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/index.php

Q: *What is the relationship between the Service's stronghold recommendations and wildfire management efforts in sage-grouse range?*

A: The Service recommends that our federal partners apply a risk-based, cross-boundary approach to fire response planning and preparedness across planning areas identified by the federal Fire and Invasive Species Assessment Team and by incorporating recommendations from the January 5, 2015 Secretarial Order 3336 – Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management and Restoration issued by Secretary Jewell, which calls for "targeted, strategic investments of Departmental resources to enhance the management of rangeland fire in the Great Basin." We recommend this approach apply to all such areas, including sage-grouse strongholds.

In addition, to reduce the loss of critically important sage-grouse habitat to rangeland fire, the Service supports recent interagency recommendations to design and implement comprehensive, integrated fire response plans that prioritize protection of the low resilience landscapes that are the most at-risk to detrimental impacts of wildfire and invasive species.

Lastly, the Service will continue to work closely with our federal partners to ensure a consistent approach and delivery of effective products across the FIAT planning area, including where that area overlaps with a recommended sage-grouse stronghold.