From:	Deibert, Pat
To:	Jessica Gonzales
Cc:	Jesse DElia; Heather McPherron
Subject:	Re: GRSG: Draft WA FWS response to WDFW GRSG Recovery Plan and Threats
Date:	Tuesday, October 21, 2014 12:35:13 PM
Attachments:	20141020_FWS resp to WDFW GRSG Recovery Plan and Threats (1) pd.docx

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Jessie -

Here is a very quick review of your letter. Please let me know if you have questions.

pat

On Mon, Oct 20, 2014 at 3:49 PM, Jessica Gonzales <Jessica_Gonzales@fws.gov> wrote:

> For our discussion today, if you have time for review.
>
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>
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United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Reference: 01EWFW00-2014-CPA-0013

October 17, 2014

Philip Anderson
Director
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
600 Capitol Way N
Olympia, WA 98501-1091

Dear Director Anderson,

This letter is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) response to your request for feedback on the effectiveness of Washington state's plans and implementation to reduce threats to the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; hereafter sage-grouse) based on information provided in three documents produced by your agency: the *2004 Greater Sage-grouse Recovery Plan* (Recovery Plan)(Stinson et al. 2004), the *Sage-Grouse Conservation in Washington: 2013 Report* (Conservation Report) (Stinson et al 2014), and the *Report on Conservation Efforts in Response to Threats to Greater Sage-grouse in Washington* (Threat Response Report) (Stinson 2014). The Recovery Plan summarizes the historic and current distribution and abundance of sage-grouse in Washington and describes factors affecting the population and its habitat. It prescribes strategies to recover the species, including recovery goals and objectives, setting target population objectives, conservation strategies and tasks, and implementation tasks and costs. The Conservation Report provides information current to 2013 on sage-grouse distribution and populations in the state and on the progress of implementing Service conservation strategies and as outlined in the state's Recovery Plan. The Threat Response Report assesses the abatement of threats to each Washington sage-grouse population identified in the *Greater Sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) Conservation Objectives: Final Report* (COT Report) and discusses sage-grouse conservation actions taken to date by your agency and its partners. This letter is the Service's response as to the sufficiency of the Recovery Plan and information provided in the two supporting reports towards meeting sage-grouse conservation objectives in the COT Report.

As you are aware, each state within the range of the greater sage-grouse joined the Service in a unique and collaborative approach to develop rangewide conservation objectives for the sage-grouse. This ~~effort conducted by the~~ Conservation Objectives Team (COT), which your agency participated in, resulted in producing conservation objectives that are necessary for sage-grouse management rangewide. Demonstrating Washington state's consistency and effectiveness in managing sage-grouse within the areas of emphasis in the COT Report and according to the identified conservation objectives is necessary for the Service to assess

whether the sage-grouse is in danger of extinction or likely to become in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future. Concurrent with the Service's listing decision will be a determination as to whether a distinct population segment will remain in place for greater sage-grouse in the Columbia Basin.

We appreciate the effort of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to solicit input and compile information from conservation partners in preparing the Conservation and Threat Response Reports. We met with your staff on July 18, 2014 to review your agency's assessment and rational provided by your staff on existing threats and whether they are being addressed. However, after meeting with your staff, it became apparent that more information was needed from the U.S. Army and the Yakama Nation for threats identified on lands they manage. Consequently, this response and the Service's threat assessment overview table do not contain the full assessment of the Yakama Nation and Yakima Training Center populations. The attached Greater Sage-grouse Threat Assessment Overview Table for Washington State Populations takes into account your staff's assessment and information provided to the Service for the Moses Coulee & Crab Creek populations and overall statewide assessment.

General Comments on the Recovery Plan

Although the Recovery Plan is dated~~, completed in~~ 2004, the Service agrees that it still provides a relevant recovery strategy and its content generally meets the Service's needs for recovery plans; however it does not provide sufficient assurances of achieving the conservation objectives of the COT Report. The Recovery Plan and implementation to date have relied heavily on voluntary conservation actions, which the state and its partners have made excellent recent progress and these actions have proven effective in moving the state forward in achieving the objectives. However, the plan is lacking sufficient regulatory mechanisms and assurance for achieving the prescribed conservation actions over the next twenty years. Due to the voluntary nature of the Recovery Plan and because privately owned lands provide the majority of sage-grouse habitat in the state (59% of all PACs), it is difficult to demonstrate that Washington currently has sufficient regulatory mechanisms in place to avert listing in 2015. It is for this reason that the Service greatly appreciates recent efforts to work collaboratively with your agency and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) to develop Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances that will start to fill this regulatory gap. We encourage you to finishing these agreements as soon as possible.

Comment [DP1]: Was this the question asked by the state? If not should we really include this statement?

Comment [DP2]: The listing is based on more than WA. I would change to something like "to ensure conservation that will contribute to a not warranted determination" or something similar.

Although we are not able to consider the conservation actions contemplated within the Plan as an adequate regulatory mechanism under Factor D in our five-factor analysis for the listing decision, we can consider conservation actions in the Recovery Plan, if they meet certain criteria, through the Services Policy for Evaluation of Conservation Efforts When Making Listing Decisions (PECE).

Specific Comments on the Recovery Plan

The Service recommends that future reporting of conservation and/or recovery actions be done within the context of Washington's Priority Areas of Conservation (PACs) identified in the COT Report, in addition to the Sage-grouse Management Areas identified in the state

Comment [DP3]: By their staff

Recovery Plan. The Service acknowledges the PACs as the spatial planning areas for sage-grouse conservation range-wide. Using the PAC boundaries for reporting and spatial analysis of recovery actions will facilitate rangewide assessment of conservation progress and needs.

Comment [DP4]: You should be consistent as to hyphen or not. I've seen both in this letter.

Comment [DP5]: See previous comment

The Service recommends that the implementation schedule (Table 11) be updated. It would be timely to show current cost estimates, prioritize the recovery actions, and revise the responsible entity column to include a lead entity for each action. It would also be helpful to breakdown some of the larger and long term actions into step-wise parts for implementation planning purposes. The Service would like to offer our assistance in updating the implementation schedule.

Comments on the Threat Response Report

The Threat Response Report provides updated information on conservation efforts conducted in sage-grouse management units by the state and its many partners and the Service generally agrees with the content of this assessment. The Threat Response Report and Conservation Report provides current information on sage-grouse conservation actions in Washington, such as sage-grouse reintroductions/existing population augmentation, grazing requirements, and funding for habitat restoration, enhancement, and acquisitions that contribute toward sage-grouse conservation in Washington. While there are many actions in these reports that the Service supports and acknowledges are contributing towards sage-grouse conservation, the report reveals the need for regulatory mechanisms that provide required and durable conservation on state managed and private lands, which are ~~necessary to~~key in helping avoid federally listing sage-grouse. The report also highlights the need to focus recovery work on improving the vulnerability, connectivity and size of our isolated and small populations of sage-grouse, as well as restoring and securing habitat in critical areas.

Comments on the Conservation Report

The Conservation Report contains excellent and detailed information on conservation efforts in the state that need to be entered into the Service's Conservation Efforts Database (CED). The Service encourages your agency to enter data into the database so that it can contribute to the analyses that will need to be conducted rangewide in preparation for the listing decision. We are encouraged to see your commitment to working with the Service to enter this vital data into the CED, as referenced in you October 13, 2014 letter to Noreen Walsh.

Comment [DP6]: This seems to be contradictory to information shared with Kathy Hollar – please check with her on this.

The Service would like to clarify that in the current draft of the *Douglas County Multi-species GCP*, recreational and motorized use during critical mating, nesting and brood-rearing periods (February 1-June 30) are "restricted," which means access is minimized during critical periods but not prohibited entirely.

Comment [DP7]: If this is what we want we should say so.

The Service would also like to clarify that the Pygmy Rabbit Safe Harbor Agreement requires notification to the Service if there are changes to Permittees' land management activities, but it does not require protection of shrub-steppe on their land, unless the Permittee specifically agreed to it. References to protection of shrub-steppe habitat under the Pygmy Rabbit Safe Harbor Agreement should be clarified in Sections 4.3.1 and 7.1. The text incorrectly infers

that 120,532 acres are protected. These acres are enrolled in the Safe Harbor Agreement, but receive protection only to the level defined in the agreement.

In Section 10.5.1 Participate in the Washington Shrub-steppe Working Group, the official name of this group has changed to the South Central Washington Shrub-steppe/Rangeland Partnership. An accurate description of the partnership, its goals related to sage-grouse management, and the conservation strategy the Partnership produced in September 2010 should be included in the Report. One of the conservation goals is "to recover the greater sage-grouse and decrease the likelihood of future listing." Also, this partnership is not a subset of the Arid Lands Initiative, although they share some goals and a portion of the larger Arid Lands Initiative planning area. The difference is primarily one of scale and the focus of their conservation planning work is somewhat different, but both are relevant to sage-grouse conservation.

Comment [DP8]: Not sure you need this given the subsequent paragraph. But since I don't know the nuances I will defer to you.

A description of the Arid Lands Initiative partnership, its goals related to sage-grouse management, and the conservation strategy the partnership produced this year should be included in the Report. Sage-grouse was a conservation planning target and surrogate species used to develop the habitat conservation plan for the Columbia Plateau ecoregion and the Columbia Plateau Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Analysis was integral to this planning process. The draft conservation summary document is available for your review, along with GIS derived maps identifying areas with the highest conservation value for sage-grouse habitat.

Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to review and comment on the Recovery Plan and reports. Overall these documents are quality planning tools and contain vital information for the upcoming FWS listing decision. We would like to emphasize that our comments are intended to facilitate the collaborative process in which we are engaged, as well as provide you with ongoing feedback as you continue to refine and implement the Recovery Plan. We look forward to continued coordination with the State in this process. Please contact Jessica Gonzales by phone at 509-665-3508 extension 2000 or by email at Jessica_Gonzales@fws.gov, if you have any questions regarding these comments.

Sincerely,

Thomas L. McDowell, Acting Manager
Washington Fish and Wildlife Office

cc (via email):
USFWS, Regional Office, Portland, OR (Terry Rabot, Jesse_D'Elia)

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Olympia, WA (Greg Schirato, Penny Becker, Collen Stinson)

Literature Cited

Stinson, C. M. 2014. Report on Conservation Efforts in Response to Threats to Greater Sage-grouse in Washington: An evaluation of Washington State's efforts to address threats to the viability of Sage-grouse listed in the Conservation Objective Team (COT) report (USFWS 2013). Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Olympia, Washington. 26 pp.

Stinson, D. W., D. W. Hays, and M. A. Schroeder. 2004. Washington State Recovery Plan for the Greater Sage-Grouse. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Olympia, Washington. 109 pages.

Stinson, C. M., and M. A. Schroeder. 2014. Sage-grouse conservation in Washington: 2013. Wildlife Program, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Olympia, Washington.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013. Greater Sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) Conservation Objectives: Final Report. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, CO. February 2013.