

Press Release



**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State of Wyoming, Sweetwater River Conservancy Launch Nation's First Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Bank

CHEYENNE, WY – Senior officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service joined Wyoming Governor Matt Mead today in announcing the launch of the nation's first conservation bank for greater sage-grouse. The bank will manage a vast expanse of central Wyoming for sage-grouse, mule deer and other wildlife, allowing energy development and other economic activities to proceed on lands elsewhere in the state.

At a ceremony in the State Capitol hosted by Governor Mead, Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Jim Lyons, Fish and Wildlife Service Deputy Director Jim Kurth and Jeff Meyer, Managing Partner of the Sweetwater River Conservancy, formalized the agreement creating the project, which ranks as the largest conservation bank in the country.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell praised the announcement. "The long-term health of the greater sage-grouse throughout the West depends on strong and innovative partnerships to conserve and restore its habitat in ways that embrace traditional uses of the land such as cattle ranching," Jewell said. "As the first conservation bank for greater sage-grouse, the Sweetwater River Conservancy provides one model for how we can work with states, landowners, tribes, local communities and others to conserve our working, western landscapes."

The heart of the project is the Pathfinder Ranch, a 235,000-acre cattle ranch located west of Casper near Pathfinder Reservoir that provides significant wildlife habitat for the greater sage-grouse and other native species. Originally purchased for wind energy development, the project was converted to a conservation bank and deeded to the newly created Sweetwater Conservancy with the encouragement of former Governor Dave Freudenthal, who was building Wyoming's Core Area sage-grouse strategy. The conservation bank will launch with 55,000 deeded acres. As demand grows, it can expand to 700,000 acres on lands the Conservancy owns.

"Protecting the very best sage-grouse habitat is a vital part of the long-term conservation strategy for this bird and the hundreds of species that depend on healthy sagebrush ecosystems," added Service Director Dan Ashe.

“The Service is committed to continually exploring new and innovative ways to work with states, industry and private landowners to support sage-grouse populations and the vitality of rural communities across the West.”

A conservation bank is a site or suite of sites established under an agreement with the Service to protect, and where feasible, improve habitat for a species. Entities pursuing development that require mitigation can purchase “credits” generated by perpetual conservation easements and conservation projects to offset impacts occurring elsewhere.

“Wyoming continues to work on practical and effective means to ensure a healthy population of sage-grouse,” said Governor Mead. “Here private landowners, state and federal agencies worked together and the result is this innovative conservation plan. I applaud everyone who took part.”

In 2010, the Service determined that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but was precluded by higher priorities. Since then, a remarkable, broad-based coalition of stakeholders has come together across the bird’s 165 million-acre, 11-state range to address threats in an effort to prevent a listing. Market-based mitigation tools like conservation banks, and the financial incentives they provide, help conserve the habitat required for abundant, well-distributed sage-grouse populations.

Most of the Sweetwater River Conservancy Conservation Bank is classified as core sage-grouse habitat by the State of Wyoming, a designation applied to areas of the highest sage-grouse populations. In addition to sage-grouse, the Conservancy will manage the property for the benefit of other wildlife and to improve water quality and flows on the property. The Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust has been selected to hold and administer the conservation easements in perpetuity.

“Sweetwater’s goal is to protect and enhance some of the nation’s best sage-grouse habitat while delivering an important tool that will contribute to the long-term health of Wyoming’s business community,” said Jeff Meyer, Managing Partner of the Sweetwater River Conservancy. “Mitigation credits created on this landscape will be available to offset unavoidable impacts of economic development by supporting permanently protected, high-quality habitat for the greater sage-grouse.”

A review team has guided the conservation bank’s creation and will continue overseeing its long-term management. Team members include representatives from Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality, Wyoming Game and Fish, Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments, Bureau of Land Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, private landowners, and the Service.

"Meaningful mitigation is central to the BLM's mission to manage public lands under the principles of multiple use and sustained yield," said BLM Director Neil Kornze. "Today's announcement demonstrates that forward-looking approaches to mitigation can provide real benefits for investors, industry, and conservation."

To read more, please visit <http://fws.gov/greatersagegrouse>.

Note: Media can find project area maps, photos, a history of the ranches and B-roll at the following site: <https://pathfinderwindenergy.eqnyte.com/fl/6NR6GtYiSh#folder-link/>

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