



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE Mountain-Prairie Region

IN REPLY REFER TO:
FWS/R6/ES
Greater Sage-grouse

MAILING ADDRESS:
P.O. BOX 25486, DFC
Denver, Colorado 80225-0486

STREET LOCATION:
134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228-1807

Dear Interested Party:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is in the process of evaluating the status of the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*), to determine the need for potential listing as a threatened species or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*). The greater sage-grouse was designated as a candidate species for listing under the ESA on March 23, 2010 (75 FR 13910).

We are gathering and analyzing available information on the species as part of our process to evaluate its status. The ESA requires that we use the best scientific and commercial data available in the development of our determination of whether the greater sage-grouse is a threatened or endangered species. With this letter, we are providing notification to interested parties including State, Federal, Tribal, County Association, and non-governmental organizations. We are seeking your input to ensure we have the best available information upon which to base our determination.

We are collecting qualitative and quantitative information and data on the greater sage-grouse through two separate avenues:

- 1) information about plans and projects designed to provide a conservation benefit to greater sage-grouse will be entered into a database (Conservation Efforts Database (CED)) specifically designed for this status review and is described in Attachment 1; and
- 2) population status, trend and available threat information will be collected as described in Attachment 2.

The Conservation Effort Database is an easy to use, web-based, geospatial database to collect information on conservation efforts. Information we will collect via this portal includes plans and projects that are in place, or with a high likelihood of being in place, to conserve greater sage-grouse.

Developed to provide a secure and transparent way to give credit to conservation partners for the work they are doing as we develop our status determination, the CED allows for multiple users to enter data at different scales, upload documents and spatial information, and link conservation actions to one or more threats. Conservation Plans, individual projects, tabular data from large data sets, spatial data, and documentation of the data sources can all be entered in the CED which is housed on the data sharing platform, LC Map. See Attachment 1 for additional details on the CED. The CED will open for data entry on August 11, 2014.

We know these data requests require extra time and effort, but believe that this process will ensure our analyses are based on the best available information. We understand that some States may be gathering similar information in their own database efforts. We want to coordinate with those efforts so we can access those databases and incorporate them into this data collection effort.

While we will accept new information throughout this process, we request that you provide any pertinent information about population status and threats to us by October 31, 2014, to ensure we have adequate time to consider it during development of the determination. The CED will be open for data entry from August 11 through December 31, 2014. All data and information submitted to us, including names and addresses, will become part of the decisional record for this package and available for public inspection.

Thank you for your efforts in providing the Service the best scientific and commercial data regarding the greater sage-grouse.

Sincerely,

Noreen Walsh
Director, Mountain-Prairie Regional

Attachment 1 – Conservation Efforts Database

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is reviewing the status of the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; hereafter, sage-grouse), to determine by September 2015, if this species warrants listing as a threatened or endangered species. The combination of voluntary incentive-based efforts, habitat restoration projects, and management through regulatory mechanisms could have a significant influence on the Service’s upcoming listing determinations.

To efficiently and effectively capture the unprecedented level of sage-grouse conservation efforts throughout its 11-state range, the Service and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) have developed the Conservation Efforts Database (CED). The CED will be the repository of information about the beneficial plans and projects designed to prevent and ameliorate habitat fragmentation and loss, the primary threat factor identified in the Service’s 2010 “warranted but precluded” finding (75 FR 13910).

The CED is easy to use. It is a web-based, geospatial database that is used to collect information on the plans and projects in place, or with a high likelihood of being in place, to conserve sage-grouse. Developed to provide a secure and transparent way to gather information on sage-grouse conservation efforts, the CED allows multiple users to enter data at different scales, upload documents and spatial information, and link conservation actions to one or more threats to the species. Conservation plans, individual projects, tabular data from large data sets, spatial data, and documentation of the data sources can all be entered in the CED, which is housed on the data sharing platform, LC Map. The CED is user-friendly for all technical levels and was designed with efficiency in mind. No GIS skills are required for entering data on individual plans or projects, and USGS programmers are available to help with batch uploads of large data sets, or to upload existing geo-spatial analyses.

The CED is secure. Agencies and organizations will work with the Service/USGS CED Team to establish “authorizing officials” to determine who can enter data in the CED for their organization. Designated “approving officials” will allow for important quality control of data for agency partners.

The CED is transparent. The information on the CED will become part of the public record and may be publicly disclosed as part of the Service’s administrative record or in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

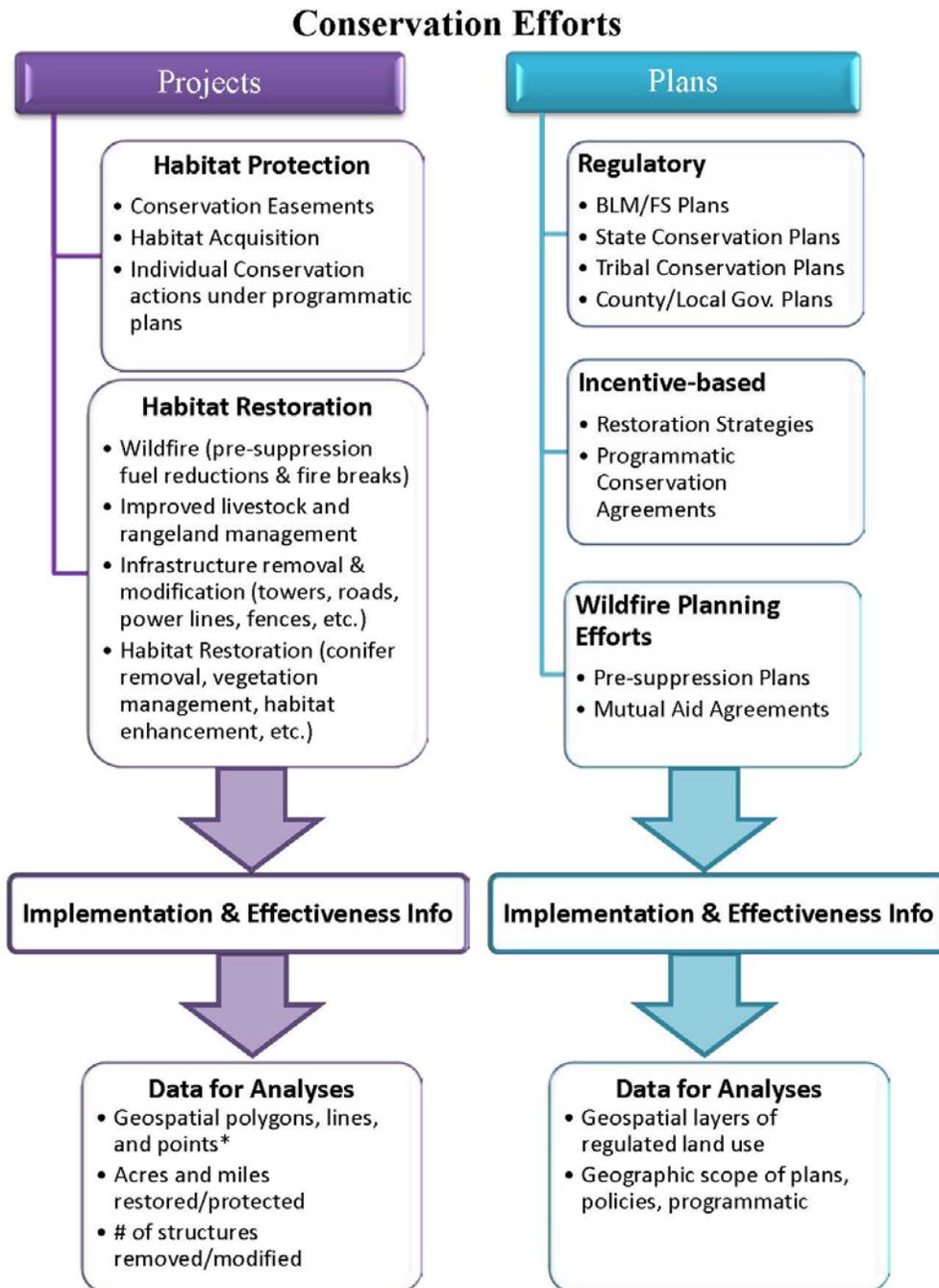
The CED is simple. Each project or plan entry consists of six main components:

1. Basic project information
2. Location information (easy-to-use onscreen digitizer, or upload shape files)
3. Activity and metrics
4. Threats addressed
5. Upload supporting documents (optional)
6. Implementation and effectiveness information

What will the information be used for? The Service will use the information in the CED to assess the degree to which the specific threats to each population and its' associated Priority Areas for Conservation, as identified in the Conservation Objectives Team Report (aka the COT report) are being ameliorated. The CED will not collect information about the distribution or severity of threats as that information will be collected by the Service through other venues. Each plan or project entered in the CED will be linked to one or more of the following threats (in alphabetical order):

Agricultural Conversion	Free Roaming Equids	Mining	Urbanization
Conifer Encroachment	Grazing/Range Management		Noxious Weeds/ Annual Grasses
Energy Development	Infrastructure		Recreation
Fire	Isolated/Small Population Size	Sagebrush Elimination	

An overview of some of the basic components of the CED are illustrated below in Fig. 1. It is



* geospatial data will be buffered to protect personally identifiable information

Figure 1. Simplified portrayal of the CED structure and information flow.

Attachment 2 - List of Population Status and Threat Data Requests

For all questions below, we are looking for data from 2009-2014, and information prior to 2009 that was not provided prior for the 2010 finding.

For any of the information requested below, where spatial data exists, we ask that you provide us with that data, in addition to any other information related to the topic.

Most of the items below are focused in information about population status and trends, habitat status and trends and threats. However, we recognize that significant efforts are ongoing to conserve sage-grouse. Information about conservation efforts will be gathered with the Conservation Efforts Database which is described further in Attachment 1. However, previous conservation efforts that are no longer being implemented will not be captured in the CED. Please provide information on conservation efforts previously reported that are discontinued for reasons other than completion of the effort using the email provided for this data call.

A. Population status, trends and numbers: This section is primarily directed towards State and Provincial agencies for response.

1. What are the population trends for your State or Province? If describing by population, use the population descriptions identified in Chapter 1 of the 2006 WAFWA Conservation Strategy.
 - a) Do you have hypothesis that explains the trends you have observed?

B. Habitat status and trends: We are actively working to collect range wide threat information but we recognize some threats may be localized or data may only be available at regional or local scales. In order to consider the best available scientific data, we are requesting your data. Please provide information on the following items related to the status of greater sage-grouse habitat. To the extent possible, for each item listed below, please identify if the threat occurs in occupied (at least during one season) or unoccupied habitats, sagebrush habitats that are important for long-term species persistence (e.g. connectivity corridors), and provide locations, populations affected, acreage affected and geospatial data if available.

Please provide any information you may have on the following: For all items, please estimate the acres lost, provide the locations where the impact occurred (geospatial if possible), and impacts to the greater sage-grouse.

1. Areas of sagebrush lost due to conversion (e.g. agricultural lands, urban development, expansions, and/or subdivisions). In addition, please identify the stage of loss or restoration (e.g. proposed, in NEPA review, completed). Additionally, please provide any information related to lands that were previously included in the Conservation Reserve Program and are now in agricultural production.

2. Proposed energy developments within occupied sagebrush habitats. In addition, please identify the type (oil, gas, wind, solar, hydropower, geothermal, uranium, etc.) and stage of development, well/turbine/development density, and life of project, and any efforts to minimize impacts to greater sage-grouse.
3. Acres of sagebrush habitats that were lost or degraded from fire (either wild or prescribed fires).
4. The recent incursion of cheatgrass, or other invasive species, weeds, or annual grasses into sagebrush habitat that is still serving as suitable habitat, as well as areas known to now be dominated by cheatgrass or other invasive species.
5. The encroachment of conifers (including but not limited to: piñon, juniper) in sagebrush habitat.
6. New, proposed, or expanded mining activities in sagebrush habitats, and any efforts to minimize impacts to greater sage-grouse.
7. Energy transmission corridors in sagebrush habitats. Please include status (e.g., NEPA completed, under construction, proposed), and any efforts to minimize impacts to greater sage-grouse and sagebrush.
8. New or improved upon infrastructure that fragments or degrades greater sage-grouse habitat. This may include but not limited to: infrastructure (roads, powerlines, communication towers, wind turbines, etc.) associated with energy development, road or trails associated with recreation, grazing and rangeland management and/or new roads in greater sage-grouse habitat.
9. Impacts from overgrazing (grazing practices inconsistent with local ecological conditions). Provide information on impacts from grazing practices that are inconsistent with local ecological conditions. In addition to information regarding domestic livestock please: provide information about the following:
 - a) Treatments conducted for wild ungulates that result in loss of sagebrush or other sage-grouse habitat elements;
 - b) Increases in wild equid population abundance and distribution.
10. Losses in habitat connectivity, or increases in habitat fragmentation, both within and between populations from human or natural causes.

C. Hunting and other uses: (Identify State or Province)

1. Have there been any changes to hunting regulations for greater sage-grouse? If so, please identify the reason behind the change, and if applicable, any results.
2. Have there been any negative impacts from recreational activities or in recreational use of greater sage-grouse?

3. Please identify current research projects on greater sage-grouse hunting or other uses in your State or Province, and whether or not the project includes bird capture or marking (VHF or PPT).

D. Disease and Predation: (Please provide locations where appropriate)

1. Please report any West Nile virus outbreaks, where outbreaks occurred, and impacts to greater sage-grouse.
2. Are you aware of any new diseases/parasites that have population-level effects?
3. Do you have any data that suggests that predators may be limiting greater sage-grouse in any part of the range, independent of habitat conditions?
4. Do you have data that supports increases or decreases in predator populations that are affecting greater sage-grouse as the result of habitat alterations?

E. Other Factors:

1. Do you have any new information regarding effects of pesticides, contaminants, recreational activities or other human disturbance, drought and other climatic conditions on the greater sage-grouse?
2. Please report any new information on the impacts of climate change on greater sage-grouse or their habitats.

G. Literature:

1. Please identify pertinent literature you believe we should consider in our status review. In addition, if you have cited any literature above, provide the page numbers in addition to the citation.