

Press Release



**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Seeks Science, Data Related to Greater Sage-Grouse and Efforts to Protect Sagebrush Habitat

Information from partners will assist in Service's determination on whether to propose the species for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

DENVER – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is initiating its formal status review of the greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act by requesting information from a broad array of state and federal agencies and tribes, along with industry and local conservation partners, about the ground-dwelling bird's population and efforts to protect its sagebrush habitat.

During the next several months, the Service will be gathering the best available scientific and commercial data to evaluate the effectiveness of the unprecedented and ongoing campaign to protect North America's largest native grouse and its sagebrush habitat. The West's vast "sagebrush sea" supports an abundance of wildlife. More than 350 other species call the landscape home, including elk, mule deer and golden eagles.

"We want to be sure we have the best, most up-to-date information on which to base our determination," said Noreen Walsh, Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region. "A tremendous amount of good work has been accomplished by state and federal agencies, groups and individuals when it comes to smart land-use planning and on-the-ground conservation. We're asking for our partners' help to ensure that we fully understand and capture this work."

In 2010, the Service determined that the greater sage-grouse was a candidate for protection under the Endangered Species Act, but that action was precluded by higher priority listing actions. The Service agreed, as part of a 2011 court settlement, to make an initial determination on whether to propose the species for listing by September 30, 2015.

Federal and state partners are working in an unprecedented and collaborative fashion to put a comprehensive plan and adequate protections in place to conserve imperiled sagebrush landscape in the face of threats such as fire and invasive species, expanding development and habitat fragmentation. A landscape-scale approach, working across land ownerships and jurisdictions, is necessary.

To ensure the Service can fully consider the cumulative effect of the conservation work across the bird's 165 million-acre range in advance of September 2015 deadline, the Service is requesting that information be provided by December 31, 2014.

Service officials are seeking information on the greater sage-grouse through two avenues. Details of plans and projects designed to provide a conservation benefit to greater sage-grouse will be entered into a Conservation Efforts Database. Information on greater sage-grouse populations, status and trends, greater sage-grouse habitat status and trends, as well as information on hunting harvest, disease and predation will be accepted by email. Where appropriate, the Service is requesting information to assist in the evaluation of the species status relative to both threats as well as the conservation efforts designed to reduce those threats.

About 64 percent of sage-grouse habitat is on federally managed lands. The Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service are coordinating updates to more than 90 resource management plans to address identified threats. Likewise, state fish and wildlife agencies are finalizing state-based management plans. Exemplifying this effort is the Sage Grouse Initiative, a program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service, which has enrolled more than 950 ranchers in conservation programs that have protected more than 2.6 million acres of sagebrush habitat. Strong state plans and private landowner participation are important to continue the progress being made to further conservation of the sage-grouse.

"There's no doubt that without this work, the situation facing sage-grouse would be much more tenuous," Walsh added. "I applaud the partners – like the many ranchers who have entered into conservation programs – who are taking action to conserve this habitat that's so critical to wildlife and our Western way of life."

Members of the public who wish to provide input can do so as part of the Service's annual candidate notice of review process, which will be announced this fall.

A long-lived, game bird currently managed by the states, the greater sage-grouse is dependent on large, unfragmented tracts of sagebrush containing a healthy understory of grasses and forbs. Since the settlement era, the greater sage-grouse has lost an estimated 56 percent of its historic habitat and is now found in 11 western states and two Canadian provinces. Males of the species are known for their flamboyant spring mating displays on traditional dancing grounds called leks. Individual birds may range across 230 square miles in the course of a year.

Based on lek counts and other data, Wyoming is believed to have the most breeding males, with Montana, Nevada and Idaho also hosting substantial populations. While estimates of historic populations vary widely, researchers have documented significant and ongoing population declines across the greater sage-grouse's range since the 1960s.

In 2010, the Service determined that the primary cause of shrinking grouse populations is the loss and fragmentation of its sagebrush habitat. In the eastern half of the bird's range in Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, Colorado and Utah, the Service found then that energy development and agricultural conversion are primary drivers of habitat loss. In the Great Basin, the Service determined that conifer encroachment and the combination of exotic annual grasses and amplified wildfire cycles are primary threats. Overgrazing and predation can reduce or depress sage-grouse populations in localized areas.

To learn more about greater sage-grouse and sage-grouse conservation, visit our website at:

<http://www.fws.gov/greaterSageGrouse/>

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