

Press Release



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December 22, 2014

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Urges Partners to Submit Data On Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Efforts

*Information will help Service determine whether the species
still needs protection under the Endangered Species Act*

DENVER – As it prepares to shift from data collection to data analysis in determining whether the greater sage-grouse still warrants the protection of the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is reminding stakeholders to submit documentation over the next month pertaining to the many conservation efforts that have been completed or are underway to benefit the species.

The Service is required to use the best available scientific and commercial information in its decisions, and so in August, it asked a broad array of state and federal agencies and tribes, along with industry and local conservation partners, to report on the ground-dwelling bird's population and efforts to protect its sagebrush habitat.

"A tremendous amount of effective conservation work to benefit the species has been accomplished by state and federal agencies, groups and individuals," said Noreen Walsh, Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region. "But we will only be able consider it in our analysis if that data is submitted to us."

In 2010, the Service determined that the greater sage-grouse was a candidate for protection under the ESA, 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 the end of the 2015 fiscal year.

The FY 2015 Omnibus Appropriations Bill contains a rider that currently prevents the Service from publishing a proposed listing rule regarding sage-grouse, but it does not relieve the Service of its obligation to determine whether the species still warrants protection under the ESA, as the agency determined in its 2010 status review. As a result, the Service will continue to collect data and conduct analysis in order reach a decision.

The Service is requesting that stakeholders enter information and spatial data about planned and ongoing conservation efforts designed to support greater sage-grouse into the Conservation Efforts Database by January 15, 2015. This on-line data-collection tool is available at <https://conservationefforts.org>.

The Service initiated the formal status review and data call in August, 2014.

While the decision is not due until September 30, 2015, many steps in the decision-making process will be nearing completion by late spring. Service officials say that the earlier they receive conservation data, the more fully they will be able to integrate it into the analysis and subsequent decision-making process.

“We recognize that not all of our partners will be able provide this information by the end of the year, but we urge that they send it to us by January 15, and we’ll assist any partners who have questions,” Walsh added. “The sooner we get this information, the better we can analyze it.”

The greater sage-grouse status review is a monumental effort to assess a suite of factors affecting this flagship sagebrush species across 165 million acres in 11 states. It is one of the most complex status reviews the agency has ever undertaken.

Federal and state partners have been working in an unprecedented partnership to put a comprehensive plan and adequate protections in place to conserve the imperiled sagebrush landscape in the face of threats such as fire and invasive species, expanding development and habitat fragmentation. 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. Healthy sagebrush is also crucial for maintaining sustainable ranching operations throughout the region, the backbone of the West and its economy.

In addition to the Conservation Efforts Database, information on the status and trends of the greater sage-grouse and its habitat, as well as information on hunting harvest, disease and predation is being collected from land managers and state wildlife agencies. Where appropriate, the Service is requesting information to assist in the evaluation of the species’ status relative to both threats and the conservation efforts designed to reduce them.

About 64 percent of greater 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 critical in continuing 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 that are engaged in conservation efforts are encouraged to work with their state and federal conservation partners to ensure that their work is being reported to the Service.

A long-lived, game bird, 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 dancing displays on traditional mating grounds called leks. Individual birds may range across 230 square miles in the course of a year.

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, visit our website at: <http://www.fws.gov/greaterSageGrouse/>

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