



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Greater Sage-Grouse Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Private Rangelands in Harney County, Oregon



QUESTION: What is the Greater Sage-Grouse Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Private Rangelands in Harney County, Oregon (Harney CCA)?

ANSWER: On May 21, 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (Harney SWCD) will sign the Harney CCA to conserve sage-grouse and maintain the ranching way of life on private rangelands in Harney County. The Harney CCA provides voluntarily enrolling landowners with assurances they can continue their routine ranch and land management practices, while identifying opportunities to benefit sage-grouse by reducing threats. The Harney CCA covers nearly 1.2 million acres of private rangelands within the range of sage-grouse in Harney County and has a term of 30 years.

QUESTION: How was the Harney CCA developed?

ANSWER: The Harney SWCD and USFWS worked with a steering committee comprised of local private landowners and representatives from Harney SWCD, Harney County Court, Oregon State University Extension, The Nature Conservancy, Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center as well as numerous state and federal agencies to develop this agreement.

The Harney SWCD assists landowners and managers plan and implement conservation projects that protect water, soil and wildlife habitat. Harney SWCD provides access to technical, financial and education resources from local, state and federal levels.

QUESTION: What are the main goals of the CCA?

ANSWER:

1. Provide landowners with assurances that current ranch and land management practices covered by this CCA will continue in the event sage-grouse is listed under the ESA.

2. Promote conservation measures that reduce or remove threats to sage-grouse through proactive ranch and land management.
3. Provide an ecological approach to maintain current sage-grouse habitat and to improve habitat that is not meeting conservation objectives as identified in enrolled landowners' site-specific plans.

QUESTION: What are conservation measures?

ANSWER: A “conservation measure” is defined as an activity that, when implemented, will reduce or remove threats to sage-grouse and improve or maintain their habitat. This county-wide strategy allows participants to identify threats to sage-grouse and opportunities unique to their operation that may be addressed by specific conservation measures. Some examples of potential conservation measures for landowners are: invasive weed control, juniper removal, retrofitting water troughs with escape ramps, and installation of visual markers on fences that may pose a strike risk to sage-grouse.

QUESTION: What other documents are issued along with a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances?

ANSWER: As part of a CCAA, the USFWS issues an enhancement of survival permit (EOS permit) to the applicant. The EOS permit allows the incidental take of listed species caused by implementation of a CCAA provided certain criteria are met. Additionally, the EOS permit associated with the agreement provides landowners with assurances that their conservation efforts will not result in future ESA regulatory obligations in excess of those they agree to at the time they enter into the agreement.

QUESTION: What is incidental take?

ANSWER: *Incidental take* is take that results from, but is not the purpose of, carrying out an otherwise lawful activity such as rangeland management. Take is defined in the ESA to include a number of activities including harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct. Harm includes significant habitat modification or degradation where it kills or injures sage-grouse by significantly impairing essential behavioral patterns, including breeding, feeding, or sheltering.

QUESTION: How do landowners enroll in the Harney CCAA and what are the requirements?

ANSWER: Interested landowners can contact the Harney SWCD at (541) 573-5010 for further information. Landowners who voluntarily enroll in the CCAA will

implement actions, known as “conservation measures” on their lands that will remove or reduce threats to sage-grouse and their habitat.

QUESTION: What are the threats to sage-grouse?

ANSWER: The greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is a large, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches long and two feet tall. They are sagebrush obligates, which means they depend on sagebrush for their survival. In the winter they feed almost exclusively on the leaves of sagebrush and in nesting season the females depend on it to help conceal their nests from predators.

Evidence suggests that habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation across much of the species’ range have contributed to significant population declines over the past century. If current trends persist, many local populations may disappear in the next several decades, with the remaining fragmented population vulnerable to extinction.

Currently, human disturbance has an impact on sage-grouse due to direct habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from wildfire, invasive species (e.g., cheatgrass, juniper, and noxious weeds), energy development, urbanization, agricultural conversion, improperly managed livestock grazing, and infrastructure development.

QUESTION: What is the range of the greater sage-grouse?

ANSWER: Currently, greater sage-grouse are found in 11 western states and 2 Canadian provinces. The birds occupy approximately 56 percent of their historical range. They are found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet.

QUESTION: Where do sage-grouse occur in Oregon?

ANSWER: Sagebrush rangelands and sage-grouse persist in portions of eight counties (Baker, Crook, Deschutes, Grant, Harney, Lake, Malheur and Union) in southeast Oregon. . In Oregon, sage-grouse populations have fluctuated markedly since the mid-1900s.

QUESTION: What is the current status of the greater sage-grouse?

ANSWER: In 2010, the Service concluded that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the ESA but that proposing the species for protection was precluded by the need to take action on other species facing more immediate and severe extinction threats.

The greater sage-grouse are on the list of species that are candidates for ESA protection. The Service is reviewing the status of the species, and will either propose the species for protection or make a determination that the listing is not warranted. A listing decision is scheduled for September 2015.

QUESTION: What are the threats to the sage-steppe ecosystem and how do they affect sage-grouse?

ANSWER: The sage-steppe ecosystem found in the Great Basin is an ecosystem in decline. Recently, the sage-steppe was recognized as one of the most imperiled ecosystems in America. The primary threat to this rich and diverse ecosystem is conversion of lower elevation sage-steppe habitat to invasive annual grasslands (primarily cheatgrass) that leads to an increased frequency of wildfire. Sagebrush is killed by fire and must regenerate from seed and can take several decades to recover in lower elevations, or if fires are large in size there is no sagebrush seed source.

We currently may be losing hundreds of acres a day to cheatgrass, and scientists estimate that in 30 years we may have five times more cheatgrass dominated areas in the Great Basin than we have today. Activity and interest in combating these invasive annual grasses has heightened again since it was recognized as a threat to the sage-grouse in the USFWS's 2010 listing determination.

Another primary threat to the sage-steppe ecosystem is western juniper invasion. Since the late 1800s, western juniper has been encroaching upper- and mid-elevation sagebrush rangelands. This is the result of a multitude of factors, but primarily a lack of wildfire. Juniper encroachment threatens sage-grouse habitat in two ways: 1) by providing an excellent perch for eagles, hawks and ravens, which are natural predators of sage-grouse and their eggs; and 2) by crowding out the understory leaving behind very little usable wildlife habitat.

For more information and resources about the greater sage-grouse

<http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com>

To learn more about threats to the sage-grouse habitat http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/factsheets/Inv_Fire_101813.pdf

For a beginner's guide to sage-grouse

<http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/sagegrouse/Primer1-SGBeginnersGuide.pdf>