

Frequently Asked Questions:
**Greater Sage-Grouse Status and Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs and CCAAs)
in Oregon**

1. What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s determination regarding the status of the greater sage-grouse?

In 2010, the Service determined that the greater sage-grouse was warranted for protection under the ESA due to the loss and fragmentation of habitat and a lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms to stem habitat loss. The Service did not propose a listing rule at the time due to the needs of higher priority species. When the Service made the warranted but precluded finding in 2010, the sage-grouse became a candidate species. Through a court-ordered work plan, the Service committed to finalize the greater sage-grouse’s designation by September 30, 2015.

After evaluating the best available scientific and commercial information regarding the greater sage-grouse, the Service has determined that protection for the greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is no longer warranted and is withdrawing the species from the candidate species list. The Service has concluded that the greater sage-grouse is no longer likely to face the risk of extinction in the foreseeable future based on the number of large, connected populations distributed across the species’ range, the regulatory mechanisms that protect sage-grouse and their habitat, the Service’s current assessment of primary threats to the species, and the unprecedented level of conservation actions now in place to address those threats.

2. How was the Service’s decision impacted by language in the 2014 appropriations law?

On May 10, 2011, the Service filed a multiyear work plan as part of a settlement agreement in a consolidated case in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The settlement included a work plan and a deadline to resolve the greater sage-grouse’s “candidate” designation by September 30, 2015 by either proposing to list the species as threatened or endangered or remove the species from the “Candidate List,” an action already required by the ESA. The settlement did not commit the Service to any specific determination.

In December 2014, Congress passed the Omnibus Appropriations Bill, which included language precluding the Service from spending appropriated funds on a proposed listing rule for greater sage-grouse or a Columbia Basin distinct population segment. As a result, during this status review, the Service has considered only whether the species still warranted ESA protection. The rider did not impact the Service’s ability to decide whether listing was warranted or not, nor affect the ability to develop, implement and analyze conservation efforts to support the species, nor prevent the Service from publishing this finding consistent with the court deadline.

3. Why does this conservation effort matter?

The greater sage-grouse conservation effort is one of the largest and the most challenging conservation undertakings in U.S. history. The deadline on the listing determination galvanized a large and diverse group of partners to work toward a common goal of reducing or eliminating threats to sage-grouse while maintaining current and future economic development potential. The

scope, scale and complexity of the state, federal and private conservation efforts accomplished by this diverse group in the past five years are unequaled in the history of wildlife conservation in the United States. The greater sage-grouse conservation effort sets the bar for how complex, landscape-scale conservation challenges can be resolved through cooperative efforts by people and organizations with common goals. It also demonstrates that wildlife conservation and sustainable communities can go hand in hand, and that the Endangered Species Act is an effective tool for achieving that goal.

Going forward, it will be essential for all the partners who contributed to this historic achievement to maintain momentum and keep advancing conservation in this uniquely American landscape.

4. What has the Service concluded regarding the change between 2010 and 2015 in the Great Basin?

In the Great Basin, federal land use plans developed since 2010, combined with Oregon's state plan and the success of the Service's CCAA & CCA program will substantially reduce the primary potential threats of wildfire, invasive plants, and conifer encroachment as well as reduce threats from mining, renewable and non-renewable energy development and other forms of disturbance. Nonetheless, controlling both invasive grasses and rangeland fires must remain a primary focus of collective conservation efforts.

5. What does the future hold for greater sage-grouse conservation following this decision?

It is important to recognize that the threats to greater sage-grouse and its habitat – fire and invasives, population growth, and climate change – are not going away. The federal, state and private conservation measures described in the Service's finding across every state in the range – and robust monitoring and adaptive management programs associated with those measures – must continue into the future if we are to avoid continued decline of the species and a potential future listing under the ESA for greater sage-grouse or other at-risk, sagebrush-dependent species. Continued, dedicated funding for all aspects of greater sage-grouse and sagebrush conservation is a critical component of successful future conservation efforts.

Greater sage-grouse will still require intensive, conservative management into the future. An ongoing and concerted effort by all partners – public and private – is needed to maintain and advance conservation measures, and control impacts to the bird and its habitat.

The Service will remain an active partner in sagebrush conservation and will continue to invest in new science, management techniques, technical assistance for partners, and in private lands programs to help landowners conserve habitat on their own land. The Service has committed to monitoring all of the continuing efforts and population trends, as well as to evaluate the status of the species in five years. The Service anticipates state plans and related efforts will strengthen as they mature and develop track records of success. Private lands conservation programs, such as the NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative and the Service's CCAA program will continue to recruit new landowners and work into sagebrush management and restoration programs.

6. What actions by the state of Oregon and private landowners are contributing to the conservation of the species?

Oregon is one of three states that have adopted state sage-grouse conservation plans that incorporate regulatory mechanisms. The Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan ensures regulatory protection and enhancement of sage-grouse and their habitat on state and private lands in Oregon. The plan, backed by new legislation and an Executive Order, establishes explicit habitat and population goals with incremental completion dates. The Oregon Plan prioritizes avoidance with standards for mitigation of impacts if necessary and includes regulatory mechanisms, such as disturbance caps and adaptive management triggers, to reduce impacts to sage-grouse in the State.

Conservation of habitat on private lands is an important part of the all-lands strategy for this species. In Oregon, private landowners who control more than 2 million acres of greater sage-grouse habitat have enrolled or signed letters of intent with the Service to enroll in CCAAs. Private landowners have also worked with the BLM to commit 2.1 million acres of public grazing allotments to CCAAs extending similar private-land stewardship to public lands.

7. What can landowners do to help?

Despite the Service's not warranted determination, the hard work must continue in order to restore sagebrush ecosystems and reverse the long-term decline of greater sage-grouse. For those private landowners wanting to contribute to the recovery of greater sage-grouse there are numerous programs available within the Service and through other agencies and organizations.

On August 27, 2015, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced that the Sage Grouse Initiative would receive an additional \$211 million in Farm Bill funding through 2018 to continue working with ranchers across the range. The Sage Grouse Initiative estimates that by 2018, a total of \$760 million will have been invested by the program and partners to reach a goal of protecting sage-grouse habitat on 8 million acres of private ranchlands. See <http://www.sagegrouseinitiative.com/> for more information.

Since 2013, the Service and the BLM have enrolled or secured commitments from ranchers controlling 5.5 million acres to participate in voluntary Candidate Conservation programs. The Service will continue to provide this assistance for these programs in the years ahead.

The Service will also continue to provide financial and technical assistance to landowners seeking to conserve listed species on their private land through its Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. For more information on these tools, see <http://www.fws.gov/angered/landowners/landowner-tools.html>.

8. If the greater sage-grouse is no longer a candidate, can landowners still enroll in a Greater Sage-Grouse Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA)?

Yes, landowners can still enroll in a CCAA if they so desire. At its foundation, the CCAA is a voluntary conservation agreement between the Service and landowners to address the

conservation needs of a specific species before it becomes listed as endangered or threatened. The Service did not list the greater sage-grouse as either endangered or threatened in 2015 because it was determined that the greater sage-grouse does not face the risk of extinction in the foreseeable future. If CCAA implementation is continued as was anticipated in the 2015 status review, then the CCAA program will substantially reduce the threats of wildfire, invasive plants, conifer encroachment, mining, renewable and non-renewable energy development, and other forms of disturbance. By voluntarily implementing specific actions to reduce or remove the aforementioned threats to the species, landowners enrolled in CCAAs are contributing to stabilizing or restoring the greater sage-grouse.

Although federal protection is not warranted at this time, a listing may be necessary in the future if conservation actions under CCAAs do not continue because the threats will not be ameliorated on private lands. Thus, the combined actions of property owners across the range of the species may be sufficient to eliminate the need to list in the future because they reduce the potential risk of extinction in the foreseeable future.

9. If the greater sage-grouse is no longer a candidate, can the BLM still enroll allotments into a Greater Sage-Grouse Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) under their Programmatic agreement?

Yes, the BLM can still enroll allotments in a CCA. At its foundation, the CCA is a voluntary conservation agreement between the Service and other agencies to address the conservation needs of a specific species before it becomes listed as endangered or threatened. The Service did not list the greater sage-grouse as either endangered or threatened in 2015 because it was determined that the greater sage-grouse does not face the risk of extinction in the foreseeable future. If CCA implementation is continued as was anticipated in the 2015 status review, then the CCA program will substantially reduce the threats of wildfire, invasive plants, conifer encroachment, mining, renewable and non-renewable energy development, and other forms of disturbance. By voluntarily implementing specific actions to reduce or remove the aforementioned threats to the species, the BLM and its permittees enrolled in CCAs are contributing to stabilizing or restoring the greater sage-grouse.

Although federal protection is not warranted at this time, a listing may be necessary in the future if conservation actions under CCAs do not continue because the threats may not be ameliorated sufficiently on public lands. Thus, the actions of the BLM and its permittees across the range of the species may be sufficient to eliminate the need to list in the future because they reduce the potential risk of extinction in the foreseeable future.

10. Does the name of the CCA or CCAA need to change?

No, the name does not need to change. If the Service had decided to list the greater sage-grouse, then the title of the agreement would be very important to reflect the change in the official status and the different criteria for entering into the agreement. However, since the decision was to not list the bird, the name of the agreement becomes inconsequential and the agreements can proceed under the same criteria as before.