

News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Harney Soil and Water Conservation District Agree to Conserve Sage-Grouse Habitat

Private landowners ready to enroll in program to benefit wildlife, protect ranchers' future

PORTLAND, Oregon – Oregon ranchers are embracing an opportunity to further conservation for the greater sage-grouse while working together with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

Today, the Service and the SWCD entered into a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) as part of ongoing efforts toward conservation of greater sage-grouse. In a CCAA, landowners voluntarily agree to manage their lands to remove or reduce threats to a species. In return, landowners receive assurances against additional regulatory requirements should that species ever be listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

“As a rancher, I am excited that the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District and leaders of Harney County worked with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to develop a tool that can help preserve the cultural and economic activities of our rural communities while meeting the habitat needs of sage-grouse,” said Stacy Davies, manager of Roaring Springs Ranch. “The CCAA gives landowners an opportunity to maintain grazing and other traditional agricultural uses on their land and protect those uses should an ESA listing occur.”

Added Robyn Thorson, the Service’s Pacific Region Director: “Teaming with private landowners is an essential part of protecting this country’s unique species. This partnership is a prime example of how we can effectively work together to develop sufficient protections for the greater sage-grouse while at the same time protecting the future of an important economic driver in Oregon. This is a huge win-win for everybody involved.”

This CCAA covers more than 1 million acres of private rangelands within the range of greater sage-grouse in Harney County, Oregon. Private landowners collectively owning 250,000 acres have committed to enroll

and seven other Oregon counties are pursuing CCAAs of their own. These agreements have the potential to conserve the majority of greater sage-grouse habitat on private lands in Oregon.

“Landowners in Eastern Oregon are highly concerned about the cultural, social and economic impacts of our rural way of life by the potential listing of greater sage-grouse under the ESA,” says Carol Dunten, SWCD chairwoman and private landowner. “The Harney County CCAA was created by a diverse group of stakeholders working with the Service to develop a proactive voluntary private land management plan that provides greater sage-grouse habitat conservation. Based on the initial interest in enrollment, this plan will demonstrate agriculture’s commitment to protect the species.”

Landowners who voluntarily enroll will develop site specific plans that address threats to sage-grouse and maintain or improve habitat. In Harney County, the two largest factors causing habitat loss are wildfire in low-elevation sagebrush and a resulting increase of exotic annual grasses, and juniper encroachment in upper-elevation sagebrush. All participating landowners will agree to maintain contiguous habitat and avoid further fragmentation on enrolled lands. Activities that benefit greater sage-grouse include juniper removal, invasive annual grass and weed control, and marking fences known to be a strike hazard for sage-grouse.

The SWCD formed a steering committee to collaboratively develop this programmatic agreement. Steering committee members included local private landowners and representatives from the SWCD, Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Harney County Court, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, Oregon State University Extension, The Nature Conservancy, Oregon Department of State Lands, and Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center.

Greater sage-grouse currently occur in 11 states and two Canadian provinces, and loss and fragmentation of habitat is the primary threat across its range. In Oregon, greater sage-grouse were once found in most sagebrush habitats east of the Cascades. Greater sage-grouse were listed as a candidate species in 2010. The Service is scheduled to make a listing decision in September 2015.

For more information about greater sage-grouse and to view the agreement, visit <http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/>.

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