

News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes conservation agreement to conserve sage-grouse and maintain ranching way of life

The Service is seeking public input on a draft Environmental Assessment and Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances

A partnership effort among diverse interests in eastern Oregon has resulted in a draft Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) to conserve greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) and their habitats on private rangelands in Harney County. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) partnered with the Harney Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and 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.

A CCAA is a voluntary agreement whereby landowners agree to manage their lands to remove or reduce threats to a species that may become listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In return, landowners receive assurances against additional regulatory requirements should that species ever be listed under the ESA. This CCAA provides landowners assurances that routine ranch and associated land management practices can continue in the event sage-grouse is listed, while also identifying opportunities to provide additional benefits by reducing or removing existing threats to sage-grouse.

“The Harney County Programmatic CCAA represents nearly 3 years of successful collaborative development efforts between the ranching community of Harney County, the Fish & Wildlife Service, and many other participating agencies,” said Tom Sharp, landowner and Chair of the CCAA Steering Committee.

“The best way to conserve the sage-grouse is to work with private landowners, who are primary stewards of the land,” said Paul Henson, State Supervisor, Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office. “Working together we can develop protections that will work towards keeping the sage-grouse off the endangered species list. Strong partnership efforts have shown the greatest success in protecting species.”

Prior to settlement in the 19th century, sage-grouse inhabited 13 western states and three Canadian provinces. They have declined across their range due to a variety of causes and now occur in 11 states and two Canadian provinces. The primary threat across their range is loss of habitat due to increased surface disturbance and

fragmentation of the landscape. Greater sage-grouse were listed as a candidate species in 2010 but was precluded from being listed as threatened or endangered by species at greater risk of extinction. The Service is scheduled to make a final listing decision in September of 2015.

In Oregon, sage-grouse were once found in most grass land and sagebrush habitats east of the Cascades. European settlement and conversion of sagebrush steppe into agricultural production led to extirpation of the species in the Columbia Basin by the early part of the 1900s, but sagebrush rangelands have persisted, particularly in southeast Oregon. Sage-grouse populations have fluctuated markedly since the mid-1900s. Although Oregon sage-grouse numbers have declined over the long term, over the last 30 years a relatively stable population has been observed.

“Our goal is to ensure that the species is able to maintain its viability,” Henson said. “Our biologists and staff work closely with the public and other partners to save wildlife, improve habitat and preserve a future where the public can enjoy nature.” The CCAA between the Service and the SWCD covers over 1 million acres of private rangelands within the range of sage-grouse in Harney County, Oregon.

Landowners who voluntarily enroll in the CCAA will develop site specific plans that will address threats to sage-grouse and maintain or improve habitat on enrolled lands. Example of activities that enrolled landowners may implement for sage-grouse include juniper removal, invasive weed control, install visual markers on fences that may pose a strike risk for sage-grouse and retrofit water troughs with escape ramps.

“This agreement provides farmers and ranchers within Harney County the best opportunity to proactively protect their private land use interests, while demonstrating their stewardship towards maintaining a healthy ecological system of rangelands, and hopefully contribute to a non-listing decision of the sage-grouse by the Fish & Wildlife Service,” said Sharp. “Additionally, we welcome and encourage other counties within Oregon and other affected western States to utilize this CCAA as a guiding template to help assist development efforts of CCAAs within other jurisdictions.”

For more information about greater sage-grouse and to view the Federal Register notice and associated documents, visit <http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/>. Comments will be accepted on the CCAA and the associated Environmental Assessment until February 14, 2014.

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