

Launching Nation's First Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Bank

Senior officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service joined Wyoming Governor Matt Mead in announcing the launch of the nation's first conservation bank for greater sage-grouse. The bank will manage a vast expanse of central Wyoming for sage-grouse, mule deer and other wildlife, allowing energy development and other economic activities to proceed on lands elsewhere in the state.

A conservation bank is a site or suite of sites established under an agreement with the Service to protect, and where feasible, improve habitat for a species. Entities pursuing development that require mitigation can purchase "credits" generated by perpetual conservation easements and conservation projects to offset impacts occurring elsewhere.

Interior Secretary Sally Jewell praised the announcement. "The long-term health of the greater sage-grouse throughout the West depends on strong and innovative partnerships to conserve and restore its habitat in ways that embrace traditional uses of the land such as cattle ranching," Jewell said.

The heart of the project is the Pathfinder Ranch, a 235,000-acre cattle ranch west of Casper, WY, that provides significant wildlife habitat for the greater sage-grouse and other native species. Originally purchased for wind energy development, the project was converted to a conservation bank and deeded to the newly created Sweetwater Conservancy. The conservation bank will launch with 55,000 deeded acres. As demand grows, it can expand to 700,000 acres on lands the Conservancy owns.

"Protecting the very best sage-grouse habitat is a vital part of the long-term conservation strategy for this bird and the hundreds of species that depend on healthy sagebrush ecosystems," said Service Director Dan Ashe. "The Service is committed to continually exploring new and innovative ways to work with states, industry and private landowners to support sage-grouse populations and the vitality of rural communities across the West."

In 2010, the Service determined that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but was precluded by higher priorities. Since then, a remarkable, broad-based coalition of stakeholders has come together across the bird's 165 million-acre, 11-state range to address threats in an effort to prevent a listing.

Most of the Sweetwater River Conservancy Conservation Bank is classified as core sage-grouse habitat by the state of Wyoming, a designation applied to areas of the highest sage-grouse populations. In addition to sage-grouse, the Conservancy will manage the property for the benefit of other wildlife and to improve water quality and flows on the property.

More about sage grouse: <http://fws.gov/greatersagegrouse>.