

Background: The Greater sage-grouse is a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which means that it has been determined to warrant listing under the ESA, and a proposed rule or change in determination must be made by the end of fiscal year 2015 as a condition of a court approved settlement agreement.

What is the Conservation Objectives Team (COT)? The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) wanted to work in advance of the 2015 decision to develop conservation objectives for the greater sage-grouse that could help both the Service and all conservation partners direct conservation actions for the species. The Service recognizes that state wildlife agencies have management expertise and have management authority for greater sage-grouse. The Service created a Conservation Objectives Team (COT) of State experts and FWS representatives to accomplish this task.

How will the final report be used? The COT was formed and charged to develop information that might be useful in evaluating the species status under the ESA. It was also intended that State, Federal, local and private entities with permitting or land management authority would use the information between now and September 2015 to take conservation action. Such actions might involve modifying or amending regulatory frameworks to ensure the long-term conservation of the species by avoiding, minimizing, or mitigating the threats to the species, or focusing voluntary conservation efforts in ways that will benefit the species the most.

What does the report say? The final COT report identifies several conservation objectives to address the habitat threats identified in the 2010 12-month finding. These conservation objectives need to be achieved in order to reduce the threats to the species. The report only identifies conservation objectives, but does not detail how to achieve those objectives. How the objectives will be achieved should be determined locally, based on local ecological conditions and local strategies.

The final COT report does identify “options” for achieving some conservation objectives. However, these are simply suggestions, and not requirements.

What else does the final COT report provide? In addition to the conservation objectives identified for each habitat threat, the final COT report also identifies habitat threats by sage-grouse population. It emphasizes the need to begin necessary habitat management and restoration efforts immediately due to the slow response time of the sagebrush ecosystem, and the need for effective conservation strategies to implement any steps taken to address applicable conservation objectives. The need for robust, scientific monitoring plans to track the success of conservation efforts, and allow for management adjustments if necessary, are also identified. The final COT report also encourages proactive voluntary conservation actions and continuing research to address scientific management uncertainties such as climate change.

Do conservation plans have to address each conservation objective identified in the final COT report? No. State and local conservation plans should address the threats that are pertinent to their local area. Also, local ecological conditions should be considered in the design of any strategy used to address conservation objectives.

What were the key comments from the scientific peer review? The draft COT report was submitted for peer review to evaluate the merit of the scientific principles used in the report and the validity of the approach. That peer review was completed at the end of October, 2012.

The scientific peer review greatly strengthened the quality of the final COT report. The primary concerns identified were the use of “resistance” as a conservation parameter, the need for a more repeatable technique for quantifying threats within each sage-grouse population and the lack of quantified conservation objectives.

As a result of these comments, the report no longer considers “resistance” as a conservation parameter. Resistance is defined as the ability of a population or habitats to withstand a threat without experiencing negative consequences. The resistance of a population depends on the health of the population and associated habitats and the severity of the threat. When resistance of a population is lost, the ability of the population to persist is then a function of its resilience. The team reviewed its use in the draft report and determined that it contributed no value to the conservation objectives. Therefore, resistance is no longer discussed in the final COT report.

Given the sometimes qualitative assessment of habitat threats, the team determined that providing a quantification of these threats was inappropriate. Therefore, threats are identified by each sage-grouse population, but only by their presence or absence. Since populations in the draft COT report were designated as C1 through C4 based on the initial quantification of threats, carrying those designations to the final report was not valid. Therefore, the C1 through C4 population rankings are not in the final COT report.

Conservation objectives are now provided for each habitat threat. In most cases the conservation objectives focus on achieving and maintaining native sagebrush plant communities. They also provide measures necessary for reaching the objective. In some cases, options to consider for achieving the objective are also provided. While the individual conservation objectives are not quantified, they were identified with the purpose of achieving the quantified objective in the 2006 Western Association of Wildlife Agencies Conservation Plan for the greater sage-grouse – to achieve and maintain neutral to positive long-term population trends.

How will the COT’s recommendations affect ongoing conservation efforts for the Greater sage-grouse? Individual states and Federal land management agencies either have completed or are in the process of completing state and Federal plans that will guide conservation efforts for the greater sage-grouse. The COT report does not replace or supersede those efforts. Instead it can serve as a guide to help all conservation partners focus their conservation efforts on the threat-reduction activities that will benefit the species the most.

Does the final COT report consider the impacts of the extensive wildfires that hit the western states in late 2012? Yes. The final COT report details the wildfires that affected Priority Areas for Conservation late last summer, as well as providing recommendations for restoration and additional protections in those areas.

What is a “Priority Area for Conservation?” Because each State or Federal agency uses different terminology for important habitat for greater sage-grouse (core, priority, etc.), the COT developed Priority Areas for Conservation to embrace all the various concepts of key habitat areas for Greater sage-grouse.

What percent of the PACs are in federal ownership (e.g. Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service)? Approximately 64% of the land within the PAC's is under Federal ownership or administration based on 2005 land ownership data. This is subject to revision based on new data or analysis.

What is the purpose of BLM's National Technical Team (NTT) Report? The NTT report made general recommendations about sage-grouse habitat, based on the best available science, recognizing that land managers and biologists will have to tailor decisions protective of sage-grouse to the specific habitat conditions and circumstances in their area.

While the report's goals and objectives provide a general guiding philosophy, each planning effort will identify goals and objectives specific to each distinct planning area.

How is it different from the COT Report? The COT report establishes conservation objectives for the primary habitat threats identified in the March 2010 12-month determination. Those objectives should be met through local planning efforts, including BLM/FS and State efforts such that the conservation goal – stable or increasing population trends – would be achieved. If the local plans vary from the threats to be addressed, as described by the COT report it needs to be justified on a scientific or local basis.

COT report first identifies key areas for conservation efforts, identifies key threats and identifies the extent to which the threats need to be reduced to not list.

What is the mission of the GSG Team? The mission of the Service's "GSG Team" is to conserve the Greater sage-grouse and its sagebrush ecosystem in perpetuity. Working with our partners we will manage the key threats to the species and stop its long-term decline.

How will BLM and the Forest Service use the COT report? As with the NTT report, the COT report provides a resource for BLM and Forest Service field personnel to address localized, on-the-ground conditions through the different alternatives they analyze as part of the public planning process.