

From: [Bush, Jodi](#)
To: [Jeff Berglund](#); [Brent Esmoil](#)
Subject: Fwd: GRSG draft SD ES comments on South Dakota Final GRSG Management Plan
Date: Wednesday, February 25, 2015 11:21:46 AM
Attachments: [GRSG draft Comments on Final SD Plan 2.18.15.docx](#)

You might want to glance through this...If you have a few minutes. Sorry I neglected to send until now. Apparently Utah has something coming too. If you can't get to it don't worry. JB

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----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Larson, Scott** <scott_larson@fws.gov>
Date: Sun, Feb 22, 2015 at 7:45 PM
Subject: GRSG draft SD ES comments on South Dakota Final GRSG Management Plan
To: FW6 Sage-grouse FMT <fw6_sage-grouse_fmt@fws.gov>

Colleagues,

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks has finalized their Greater Sage Grouse Management Plan and it is located at the following website.

<http://gfp.sd.gov/wildlife/management/plans/docs/SageGrouseManagementPlan.pdf>

We have drafted a response letter (attached) for review by the FMT and encourage responses on our draft letter by March 4.

Thank You
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DRAFT

Mr. Doug Hofer, Acting Secretary
South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks
Joe Foss Building
523 East Capitol Avenue
Pierre, South Dakota 57501-3182

Dear Mr. Hofer:

We appreciate the important role the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (Department) has played in the collaborative conservation planning efforts for the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) (hereafter sage-grouse). We previously provided comments on the draft *Sage-grouse Management Plan for South Dakota, 2014-2018* (Plan) in our letter dated April 15, 2014 (enclosure). We recognize that sage-grouse populations within the State of South Dakota (SD) represent a small portion of the range-wide population but continue to believe SD is a valuable portion of the sage-grouse range.

We believe the final Plan adequately identifies threats and stressors to sage-grouse in SD and describes many actions that if fully implemented will benefit sage-grouse. The six objectives in the Plan and subsequent strategies for each objective will provide benefits to sage-grouse if the resources are available to implement the strategies and we appreciate the additional strategies included to the final Plan to help address identified threats. These new strategies include development of Memorandums of Understandings or other processes to facilitate Departmental review and comment on projects potentially affecting sage-grouse with key State Agencies. In particular, the development of a Memorandum of Understanding with School and Public Lands should be valuable because of the relatively large land base that agency manages in the sage-grouse range. We also believe the extra strategies included to assist wild fire suppression during hunting seasons will be valuable as well as a defined process to manage potential sage-grouse hunting seasons which are currently closed. We also believe the expansion of the Priority Areas of Conservation (PACs) into the larger State Core Areas in the Plan can provide some additional benefit to sage-grouse conservation.

We acknowledge that with large percentages of the sage-grouse core areas in private ownership, working cooperatively with landowners is invaluable to accomplishing the desired conservation. Accordingly, many of the strategies outlined in the Plan place a high value on collaborative conservation efforts versus regulatory mechanisms. If the resources are not available to implement many of the good strategies identified for various objectives, maintaining a sustainable sage-grouse population will be difficult and perhaps not unattainable. Further, as noted in comments on the draft Plan (enclosure), we do not believe there are sufficient regulatory

mechanisms to achieve the conservation objectives identified in the *Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Objectives: Final Report* (COT Report).

The Plan identifies strategies to collect information and data on sage-grouse but it is unclear how that information will feed back into processes that will conserve sage-grouse. Therefore, an adaptive management component that incorporates the annual monitoring and other data collections into future decisions would be value added for the Plan. Finally, we urge the Department to consider an amendment or addendum to the Plan that focuses on mitigation processes or a mitigation framework that can be followed as the Department or others undertake project reviews that may impact sage-grouse or their habitats. A mitigation framework can assist biologists as they review projects to help give structure to the sometimes difficult task of using mitigation sequencing to avoid, minimize or offset impacts to sage-grouse and their habitats.

The final Plan has these improvements over the draft Plan:

- Development of a strategy to implement measures to prevent destructive wildfires during firearm antelope hunting season.
- Development of agreements with SPL, DENR, and PUC to allow Department review and comment on oil and gas leases on SPL lands, oil and gas drilling permits issued by DENR, and certain wind energy permits issued by PUC

These insufficiencies from the draft Plan remain with the final Plan:

- Uncertainty of funding/resources to implement conservation strategies.
- Lack of regulatory mechanisms.
- Lack of a mitigation strategy and incorporation of the SG Range-wide Mitigation Plan.
- Lack of a defined adaptive management component.

Final Plan consistency with COT Report Objectives

We also reviewed the final plan for consistency with the COT Report Objectives and the threats identified in that report for SD sage-grouse populations.

General Conservation Objective 1: *Stop population declines and habitat loss.*

The objective is to eliminate or redesign activities that negatively impact sage-grouse and their habitats and conserve all current core areas through the appropriate level of management.

Strategy 1.3b of the Plan recommends that policy makers utilize the conservation measures in the COT Report, along with other guidance documents, to develop regulatory mechanisms that could reduce negative impacts to sage-grouse habitat. We believe the proposed MOUs will provide the

Department an opportunity to review and comment on other State Agency proposals and applications they process which should be beneficial. Further, the numerous voluntary conservation programs identified in the Plan have merit and may help stem population declines and habitat loss. However, the Plan does not provide specific guidelines on development of regulatory mechanisms or specify appropriate levels of management within the core areas. Therefore, we believe the Plan is unlikely to meet objective #1 in the COT Report or lead to a substantial reduction in the threats to sage-grouse in SD unless sufficient resources are available to incentivize broad participation in the voluntary programs.

Like the Department, we are also concerned with West Nile Virus (WNV) and the precipitous declines in South Dakota sage-grouse populations following outbreaks of that disease in the mid to late 2000's. If WNV continues to impact sage-grouse populations in South Dakota it will add an additional level of complexity to the first part of Objective #1 intended to stop population declines. The Plan identifies three strategies (6.1-6.3) that may assist with questions surrounding WNV but the research component of those strategies needs to be undertaken to help understand how WNV may be impacting SD sage-grouse populations and the steps that may be needed to counteract those impacts.

General Conservation Objective 2: *Implement targeted habitat management and restoration.*

The Plan outlines 14 strategies for habitat management which we believe will benefit sage-grouse but we are concerned that the largely voluntary nature of those actions, even with incentives may not be enough to stop the downward trend in the SD sage-grouse population.

General Conservation Objective 3: *Develop and implement state and federal sage-grouse conservation strategies and associated incentive-based conservation actions and regulatory mechanisms.*

The Plan identifies numerous strategies that provide incentive based conservation for sage step habitats but funding levels or projections of funding are not available for inclusion in the Plan. It is understood this component may need non state funding to facilitate broad implementation and through the Sage Grouse Initiative there has been good landowner participation in incentive-based conservation actions. The regulatory mechanisms component of this COT Report Objective are not addressed in the Plan strategies except in determining the hunting season which is currently closed.

General Conservation Objective 4: *Develop and implement proactive, voluntary conservation actions.*

We believe that the Department and others have contributed to this objective and will continue to do so as indicated by the 14 Strategies in Objective 1 of the Plan. Specifically the Department's private lands habitat program and the collaboration efforts with Natural Resource Conservation Services' Sage Grouse Initiative and the Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologist are in place to continue to put quality conservation actions on the ground to conserve sage-grouse.

General Conservation Objective 5: *Develop and implement monitoring plans to track the success of state and federal conservation strategies and voluntary conservation actions.*

While important monitoring strategies are included in the Plan, the development of an overall monitoring plan that includes an adaptive management aspect to inform future management decisions is lacking.

General Conservation Objective 6: *Prioritize, fund, and implement research to address existing uncertainties.*

The Plan identifies uncertainties regarding WNV. Research projects may be developed and funded in the future but at this time it doesn't look like there are immediate research proposals being evaluated.

Final Plan evaluation of COT Report Threats

We also reviewed the threats identified in the COT Report that are applicable to SD to determine how they were addressed in the Plan. The COT report identified present and widespread threats to the Dakotas' sage-grouse population as: 1. isolated/small population size, 2. fire, 3. energy development, 4. mining, and 5. infrastructure while threats identified as present but localized include: 1. sagebrush elimination, 2. agricultural conversion, 3. weeds/annual grasses, and 4. grazing.

The Plan identifies 31 strategies among six objectives that should lessen the impacts to sage-grouse from threats identified in the COT Report provided there is sufficient funding and good participation by landowners in the voluntary, incentive-based habitat management efforts to conserve sage brush habitats. We also believe the Department may have some success with efforts to increase their review of other state agencies actions such as State mineral leasing, project siting and input into management of School lands. However, with the exception of setting hunting seasons, there is little or no regulatory oversight the Department has available to ensure that the identified strategies will ameliorate the threats identified in the COT Report.

Summary

In summary, we believe that the Plan as currently written does not provide or recommend sufficient regulatory mechanisms to achieve the conservation objectives identified in the COT Report and is unlikely to effectively address the threats to the SD sage-grouse population identified in the COT Report and the greater sage-grouse 12 month finding (USFWS 2010). We recognize it will be difficult to meet the COT Report objective to abate and reverse the decline in sage-grouse numbers and loss of sage-steppe habitat in SD without the assistance of other state and federal agencies that have more regulatory authority or that may bring additional resources to the sage-grouse conservation efforts. While we support the goal, objectives, and strategies identified in the Plan, we believe that absent supporting regulatory mechanisms the goal to maintain a sustainable sage-grouse population will not be realized.

We look forward to continued working with your agency on conservation of sage-grouse and will support the State in this process. Please contact myself or Terry Quesinberry at 605- 224-8693 x 234 if you have any questions regarding these comments.

Sincerely,

Scott Larson
Field Supervisor
South Dakota Field Office

Enclosure

LITERATURE CITED

- South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife. 2014. Sage-grouse management plan for South Dakota 2014-2018. Wildlife Division Report Number 2014-02. South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Pierre, South Dakota. 42 pp.
- U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. 50 CFR Part 17 Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants; 12-month findings for petitions to list the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) as threatened or endangered. 103 pp.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2013. Greater Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) Conservation Objectives: Final Report. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, CO. February 2013. 91 pp.

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