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Subject: IPA white paper
Date: Tuesday, January 20, 2015 11:12:54 AM
Attachments: [map white paper \(2\).docx](#)

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Identification of Important Priority Areas for the purpose of conducting the status review

October 30, 2014

Pre-decisional Document for review and editing only – DO NOT DISTRIBUTE

Purpose: Updates in the delineation of some Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) are necessary due to the emergence of new biological information since completion of the 2013 Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report. Additional areas of high conservation value to Greater sage-grouse have also been identified, but not officially designated as PACs. Ensuring the FWS is working with the best available information for the modeling efforts related to the status review and for understanding the efficacy of conservation efforts in removing threats in key areas, an interim strategy is needed to address this updated mapping issues.

Background: In development of the 2013 COT report, PACs were identified in each state by our State partners as key habitats necessary for long-term sage-grouse persistence and conservation in their state. A range-wide PAC map was subsequently compiled and reviewed by the entire COT team to determine the adequacy of these areas in cumulatively ensuring long-term sage-grouse persistence and conservation on a range-wide basis. The final PAC map released in the 2013 COT report reflects their determination. Evaluating the efficacy of efforts to maintain the integrity of PACs is key to informing our 2015 listing determination.

New Information affecting PACs: We have received additional information since 2013 regarding PACs and other important priority areas for sage-grouse conservation for three states - Montana, Utah and Nevada.

- **Montana:** The State of Montana has designated an additional state-determined PAC since completion of the COT report. After review of the biological information used to support the new state area, FWS has also identified the new state area as a PAC as defined by the COT report. That new PAC area has been added to our existing PAC data layer, with agreement from that state, and will be used in our status review efforts.
- **Utah:** Two additional areas of high sage-grouse value have been identified in NE Utah – West Tavaputs and Anthro Mountain. Conversations with the BLM indicate that those areas have been designated as preliminary priority management areas, and are likely to receive the associated management actions in their final planning documents. Our Ecological Services (ES) field office in UT agrees these are valuable areas for conservation, but the State of Utah has declined to identify these areas as PACs. Given the conservation value of these areas, particularly on a range-wide basis, we are including them as Important Priority Areas (IPAs) for the purposes of our status review efforts. Conservation efforts in these areas will be given similar consideration to PACs during our 2015 status review and will be included in the associated modeling efforts and conservation efforts database analyses.
- **Nevada:** The PAC designations provided to FWS from the state of NV for the COT report were based in part on habitat maps developed in 2012 by the Nevada Department of Wildlife. New habitat mapping has been completed by USGS under contract with the state which refines the original NDOW habitat maps and more accurately identifies important areas for sage-grouse conservation. These maps have been published in a USGS Open File Report (OFR) on August 1,

2014. While additional refinement is anticipated over the next 4 to 5 months, significant changes are not anticipated. NV BLM has opted to use these new habitat maps, rather than the PACs identified in the COT report, to guide management decisions key to their planning efforts. Although still draft, these new maps are currently the best information available for identifying sage-grouse habitats in NV.

The State of NV has indicated that they are not yet ready to delineate new PAC boundaries but agree that the PAC map provided for the COT report is no longer the best information available to inform conservation. Therefore, FWS will work with the new USGS mapping information and our staff in the NV ES office (which assisted with the new mapping effort) to delineate IPAs for the state. These IPAs will be used to assist in our status review efforts and in assessing the efficacy of actions provided through our CED. While our preference would be to wait for completion of the final maps, limitations with the remaining time to complete our status review preclude this option.

Next Steps:

- We will continue to work with NV to delineate the final PAC maps based on the best scientific information available. After this collaboration we will make final PAC designations as appropriate. We will also continue working with the BLM to encourage complete overlap between IPAs (and any new PACs) with priority areas.
- We will review the information in UT to make a final determination, based on the best scientific information available, on the PAC status of the IPAs.

Summary: The best available information regarding important areas for sage-grouse conservation has been updated since completion of the 2013 COT report. Based on this new information FWS has added a newly designated PAC in MT, and is designating Important Priority Areas (IPAs) in UT and NV for the purposes of completing analyses for our status review of the Greater sage-grouse.