

This document describes the Service's approach to a status assessment for the greater sage grouse. Our guiding principles for this evaluation include:

Transparency

Best Available Science

Legal Defensibility

Provide a clear rationale for decision making

Effective communications with Federal, State and Tribal partners

Use Service capacity efficiently

In addition to the guiding principles, the Service will rely on a number of foundational elements for the status assessment as we move forward. Those elements include policy approaches utilized in the proposed rule for bi-state population of sage grouse, as well as similar species (i.e., prairie chicken) the Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report, the 2010 finding for the greater sage grouse, and any relevant policies or guidelines or other policy considerations, including DPS, SPR, and foreseeable future. The Service will rely on these foundational elements to determine how the Service might evaluate conservation actions, as well as how these items relate to the definitions of threatened or endangered. At the appropriate time in the decision framework process the Service would then apply those policies to determine the appropriate outcomes.

Other elements include keeping our commitment to evaluate conservation measures against the objectives laid out in the COT report. The Service needs to take a consistent approach when evaluating measures regardless of state or district boundaries. The COT report identified the most important geographies for the long-term persistence of the species. These have been identified as Primary Areas of Conservation, also known as PACs. These PACs have been identified by the participants of the COT as areas with the highest density of birds on the landscape with the range of the greater sage-grouse. Another factor identified on the COT report were discretely identifiable populations and the principle threats that might be acting on each of those populations that need to be ameliorated to ensure the long-term persistence of each population. The Service is proposing to utilize the COT report in establishing much of the baseline for the analytical framework to follow. The Service does anticipate utilizing the population densities within the PAC geographies and populations to evaluate current and future conditions for the species as well as looking at PAC areas or populations that have higher degree of population density and risk of threats to those areas.

The principle factors leading to the 2010 finding were habitat fragmentation, principally due to invasive species and fire, energy development and associated infrastructure, and sage brush conversion due agricultural practices, along with a lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms to address those threats. This will be the starting point for any analysis we conduct for the species status assessment. The Service will be quantifying, to the extent the data allows, regulatory