

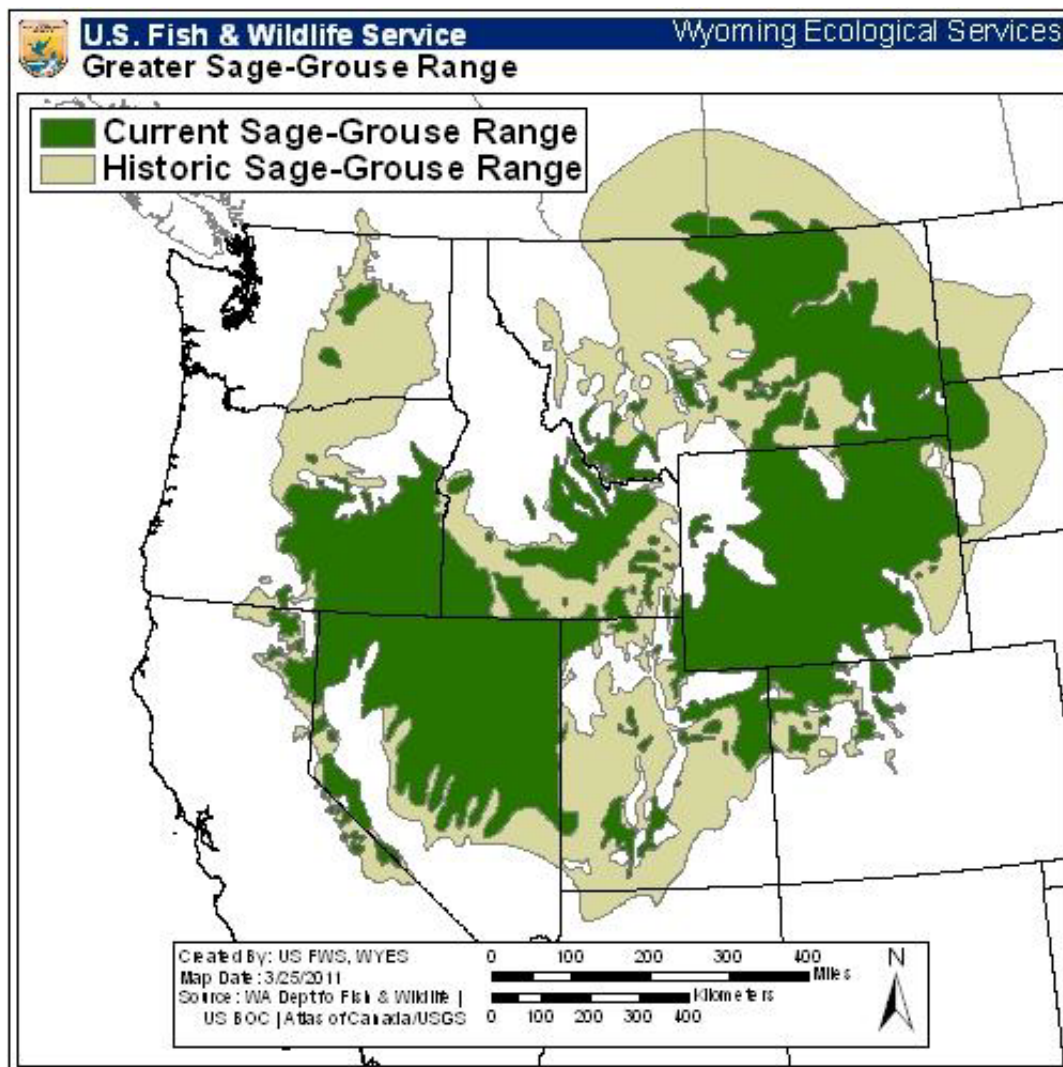
# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

### MOUNTAIN-PRAIRIE REGION

#### Greater Sage-grouse -- Conservation Objectives Team

Date: August 16, 2012



**Contact:** Region 6 External Affairs, Marla Trollan, 303-236-4510 or [marla\\_trollan@fws.gov](mailto:marla_trollan@fws.gov)

## Summary

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Greater sage-grouse are found in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, eastern California, Nevada, Utah, western Colorado, South Dakota and Wyoming and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan and occupy approximately 56 percent of their historical range. They are found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet and are highly dependent on sagebrush for cover and food.

Greater sage-grouse populations fluctuate, but in general have been declining for decades. Potential listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is a topic that has come up on a regular basis for more than ten years. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) determined in 2010 that listing was warranted but precluded. As part of the MDL settlement, we must issue a proposed rule by the end of FY 2015 or change our determination.

The Greater sage-grouse is a large, rounded-winged, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches long and two feet tall, weighing from two to seven pounds. Females are a mottled brown, black and white. Males are larger, spike-tailed, and have a big white ruff around their neck and bright yellow air sacs on their chest, which come in handy when trying to catch the eye of a female. They have a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes. They fluff themselves up, inflate their air sacs, make a loud, rhythmic huffing sound, and go through an elaborate courtship display. After mating, the males take off and the females are left to raise the young. A sage-grouse lek (Lek: a place where wildlife gathers to court) may have dozens of hopeful males strutting their stuff, but only a few males actually are chosen by the females for mating. The same lek may be used for years.

The birds are heavily dependent on sagebrush for food and cover year-round. In fact, they are so dependent on sagebrush that without this important food source and cover, the birds may be effectively eliminated from the area.

The Greater sage-grouse population as a whole remains large enough and is distributed across a large portion of the western United States that the immediate threat of extinction is low. The Service has assigned it a listing priority number of 8, which indicated relatively lower priority when compared with most of the species on the candidate list. At one time, the Greater sage-grouse population likely numbered in the millions. Estimates today are that 200,000 to 500,000 Greater sage-grouse are left range-wide.

Evidence suggests that habitat fragmentation and destruction across much of the species' range has contributed to significant population declines over the past century. If current trends persist, many local populations may disappear in the next several decades, with the remaining fragmented population vulnerable to extinction.

It is crucial that all state and federal partners work together to guarantee healthy populations of the greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species in the future.

## Communication Objectives

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- Inform other federal and state partners and other interested parties about the release of Draft Conservation Objectives Team Report. Emphasize that the Report is based on scientific principles of conservation biology and has been submitted for scientific peer review.
- Inform interested parties as to where we are in the process of developing a final report.

## Key Messages and Talking Points

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### Internal Talking Points – August 13, 2012

#### BACKGROUND

- These talking points are intended to inform U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) staff, other federal agency partners, and interested parties about the existence and role of this team, their draft report, and to provide a common language to improve consistency of understanding across all partners concerned about sage-grouse conservation.
- In April, 2012, the Service Director convened a team of Service and state employees to provide advice on conservation objectives for the greater sage-grouse. The team was named the Sage-grouse Conservation Objectives Team.
- The greater sage-grouse is a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act, which means that it has been determined to warrant listing under the Act, and a proposed rule or change in determination must be made by the end of fiscal year 2015.
- Primary threats to the sage-grouse have been identified as habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, and a lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms that would protect their habitat.
- The objective of the team was to define the degree to which the threats to the sage-grouse need to be ameliorated in order to conserve this candidate species so that it is no longer in danger of extinction or likely to become in danger of extinction.
- This team's work can also help inform conservation objectives for the bi-state population of greater sage-grouse, which is a distinct population segment that occurs in California and Nevada. The bi-state population is also a candidate for listing under the Act and a proposed rule for this candidate is due before the end of fiscal year 2013.
- The team was composed of members from the Service and state agencies within the range of the sage-grouse. Members have significant expertise and experience in sage-grouse biology, sagebrush ecosystems, and natural resource policy.
- The team produced their advice and recommendations in the form of a draft report on August 1, 2012.

#### CURRENT STATUS

- The Service just received the DRAFT Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report and has

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- coordinated with Task Force Chair regarding process for transmittal and public release.
- The Task Force will be asked to provide comments to the Service on the draft report.
- After the draft report is transmitted to Task Force members, it will also be made available to the public via the R6 Service website.
- The Service will distribute a news release to inform the public that the draft report is available on the Service website.
- The DRAFT Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report will undergo peer review beginning early August and likely take until the beginning of October, 2012.
- The DRAFT COT Report will not be finalized until the peer review process is complete and the team determines how to respond to peer review and Task Force comments.

### **External Talking Points - August 13, 2012**

- The draft Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report identifies priority areas for conservation and discusses the primary threats to the Greater sage-grouse which need to be reduced in those areas in order to ensure conservation of the species.
- The COT Report was a collaborative effort of Federal and State partners.
- The draft COT Report is built on scientific principles of conservation and outlines a strategy for wide-range conservation of the Greater sage-grouse.
- The draft COT Report has been submitted for scientific peer review, the results of which are due to the Service in early October.

## **Target Audiences**

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### **INTERNAL**

Regional Leadership  
WO Leadership  
DOI

### **EXTERNAL**

State agencies  
Governors  
Federal Agencies  
Environmental groups

## **Communication Deliverables**

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1. News Release
2. FAQs
3. Talking Points
4. Powerpoint for Task Force presentation

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## Contacts

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### USFWS

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## Action Plan

Target Date	Activity	Responsible	Completed
Aug. 1, 2012	DRAFT COT Report is sent to RO for initial review	Pat Deibert	Aug. 1, 2012
Aug. 6	DRAFT COT Report is sent for peer review	Mike Thabault	Aug. 9, 2012
Aug. 10	Coordinate with Task Force Chair regarding process	Noreen Walsh	Aug. 10, 2012
Aug. 17 or sooner	Draft Report sent to Task Force members, with transmittal from Director, clear indication of draft status, and request for consolidated comments.	R6 to draft transmittal, letter sent from Director's office	Letter drafted and revised, final revision to WO Aug. 13, 2012
Aug. 23?	Distribute News Release Post Draft COT Report to Service website	R6 External Affairs	
Aug. 1-17	Finalize communications products: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spokespersons</li> <li>• News Release</li> <li>• Talking Points</li> <li>• Internal FAQs</li> <li>• Presentation to Task Force</li> </ul>	News release: EA FAQs: ES with EA TPs: ES with EA Presentation: Pat Deibert	Appendix A: Draft news release Appendix B: External FAQs Appendix C: Internal FAQs
Aug. 20, 2012	Pre-brief for Director prior to Task Force	Noreen Walsh	
Aug. 23	COT members provide overview presentation of draft report; Director leads discussion of DRAFT COT Report with Greater sage-grouse Task Force	Pat Deibert, COT members, to prepare presentation.	

## Appendix A – News Release

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### NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
Mountain-Prairie Region  
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#### **FWS Releases Draft Report to Help Guide Sage-Grouse Conservation Objectives**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is making available a draft report that is designed to help guide the efforts of the States and other partners to conserve the greater sage-grouse with a landscape level strategy that will benefit the species while maintaining a robust economy in the West. The report, prepared by state and federal scientists and sage-grouse experts, identifies the conservation status of the sage-grouse, the nature of the threats facing the species, and objectives to ensure its long-term conservation.

The draft report is a collaborative state and federal effort to evaluate species conservation before the Service is required to make a decision in 2015 on whether to propose protecting the species under the Endangered Species Act. The draft report has been submitted for scientific peer review, the results of which are due to the Service in the fall.

“This report represents an unprecedented joint effort with the states, and we commend them for helping to outline conditions that will ensure the viability of the species,” said the Service’s Director Dan Ashe. “The challenges facing the greater sage-grouse and the conservation of its sagebrush habitat are at a scale that cannot be addressed by any one federal or state agency, non-governmental organization, or Tribe. This draft report is an important step in our collective efforts to protect, manage, and restore sagebrush habitat for the benefit of sage-grouse and the health of this important landscape.”

In April of 2012, Director Ashe convened a team of Service and state experts to provide advice on conservation objectives for the greater sage-grouse. The resulting draft report is based on scientific principles of conservation biology and uses information and conservation strategies provided by the States to identify key areas of habitat across the species’ range, as well as the threats operating within each population that need to be mitigated to conserve the species over the long term. Given the differences across the sage-grouse range, the report allows flexibility for States or other agencies to determine and develop the measures that will best achieve conservation success.

The Service has asked the Greater Sage-grouse Task Force to provide their comments on the draft report, which will be evaluated together with the scientific peer review comments. Co-chaired by Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado, Gov. Matt Mead of Wyoming and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the

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task force was created in December of 2011 after Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Gov. Matt Mead met with officials from states that contain greater sage-grouse habitat agreed to collaboratively identify actions that could avoid the need to list the sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act.

Greater sage-grouse are found in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, eastern California, Nevada, Utah, western Colorado, South Dakota and Wyoming and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. A large ground-dwelling bird, the decline of the sage-grouse population has been a result of primary threats such as habitat loss and fragmentation due to wildfire, energy development and invasive plant species. The birds currently occupy approximately 56 percent of their historical range. Based on a 12-month status review pursuant to the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service determined that the listing of the species was warranted but precluded by higher priorities. For a FWS fact sheet of frequently asked questions regarding the draft report, please click [HERE](#).

The draft report is available on at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/sagegrouse/>

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov). Connect with our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/usfws](http://www.facebook.com/usfws), follow our tweets at [www.twitter.com/usfwshq](http://www.twitter.com/usfwshq), watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>

-FWS-



## Appendix B – Frequently Asked Questions - External

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### External Q&As

**Background:** The greater sage-grouse is a candidate species under the Endangered Species Act, which means that it has been determined to warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act (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 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 draft 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.

Is the COT's work completed or is there more to do? The COT has provided a draft report which is being evaluated via a scientific peer review process. The COT will evaluate the results of the peer review and determine how to finalize the report.

The COT report talks about "ameliorating" threats. What is meant by the word "amelioration?" Amelioration is improvement to a condition or situation. For the greater sage-grouse, threat amelioration would reduce or remove threats so as to improve the status of the species and/or its habitats.

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.

The report says that "the COT recommends that impacts be avoided to the maximum extent possible" in each Priority Area of Conservation (PAC). What is meant by the phrase "maximum extent possible?" The objective is to reduce threats to the point that there are no impacts to the population of greater sage-grouse. There may still be impacts to individuals, but long-term population trends should be stable, or preferably increasing.

What percent of the PACs are in federal ownership (e.g. BLM, FS)? 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.

How will the COT's recommendations affect ongoing conservation efforts for the greater sage-grouse?

Individual states either have completed or are in the process of completing state plans that will guide conservation efforts for the greater sage-grouse. The draft 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.

## Appendix C – Frequently Asked Questions

### Internal Only – Not for Distribution

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#### Internal FAQs:

The report says that when avoidance of impacts is not possible, minimization and mitigation should be implemented. Who determines whether avoidance is possible?

The decision on whether avoidance is possible will be up to the permitting or regulating agency or party implementing a project or activity, considering all associated factors in making such decisions. The intent of recommending minimization and mitigation when avoidance is not possible is for catastrophic events that negatively affect greater sage-grouse (e.g. a wildfire); or for activities already in progress (e.g. a wind facility already under construction in greater sage-grouse habitats), or for activities for which pre-existing rights have already been issued and the project cannot be re-located or minimized. Activities that could have been avoided and are not will negatively impact the ability to reach the stated conservation objectives and will therefore negatively impact our collective ability to conserve the species without the protection of the ESA.

How much flexibility do states have to trade C4 PAC areas for other areas in a mitigation strategy?

This issue has not been addressed in the COT report. The Service hesitates to answer this question until the peer review is completed. The COT may find that the peer review will inform that question.

Does the report allow for habitat to be restored outside of PACs and exchanged in mitigation for impacts to PACs?

As currently written, the report does allow for these discussions to occur on a local level, because the Team's intent was to provide for local flexibility to meet the stated objectives. However, the COT report does not address in detail how mitigation relative to PACs might be accomplished. Further discussions regarding mitigation will be timely after the peer review is completed and the report adjusted accordingly.

Is the COT report a description of what is needed for a success full long-term conservation strategy or what is needed to preclude the need to list in 2015?

The COT report describes conditions that should be met to ensure viability of the species into the future. Although much attention is focused on whether the species will be listed under the ESA in 2015, the ESA directs us to look at the status of the species at the current moment and into the foreseeable future to make that decision. Therefore, the draft report attempts to describe conditions that, if met, would provide a high degree of certainty that the species is conserved into the foreseeable future.

How will the Service determine whether the intent of the COT report is met in 2015?

The Service will evaluate all threats to the greater sage –grouse in accordance with the Endangered Species Act in making its 2015 listing determination. As part of the analysis the Service is required to consider existing regulatory mechanisms and other conservation efforts that are intended to address these threats. The Service will use the concepts outlined in our Policy for the Evaluation of Conservation Efforts (PECE) to evaluate whether the known threats to the species have been ameliorated as suggested in the COT draft report. This policy directs the Service to look at the certainty of implementation of conservation efforts as well as the certainty of implementation of those efforts. The higher the degree of

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certainty on both counts, the higher the likelihood that the species conservation is assured without the need for protection under the ESA. While regulatory mechanisms that protect the species are by their nature more certain to be implemented, we also evaluate the likelihood of their effectiveness. Nothing in the report should be construed as limiting the application of additional conservation efforts for the greater sage-grouse or sagebrush ecosystems beyond what is recommended in the report, nor should this report be used to curtail or eliminate any conservation efforts for greater sage-grouse.

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