

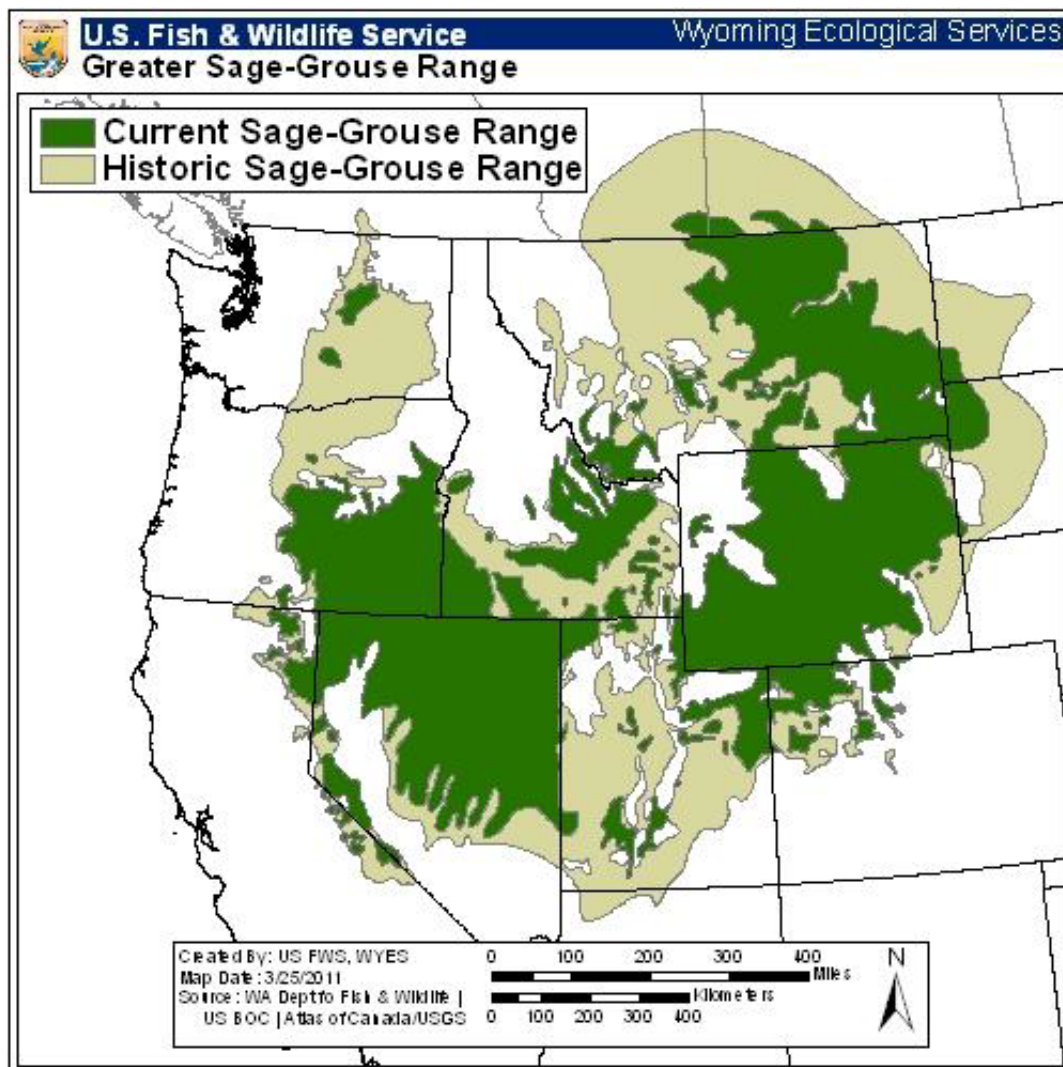
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

MOUNTAIN-PRAIRIE REGION

Greater Sage-grouse -- Conservation Objectives Team Report

Date: March 13, 2013



Contact: Region 6 External Affairs, Marla Trollan, 303-236-4510 or marla_trollan@fws.gov

Summary

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 most 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

- Inform other federal and state partners and other interested parties about the release of Final 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 partners, media, Congressional and public regarding contents of report.

Key Messages and Talking Points

Internal Talking Points –February 20, 2013

BACKGROUND

- In March, 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 Greater 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 Greater 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 Greater 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.
- 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.
- Based on the comments received during the peer review, and new information regarding the impacts of wildfires in late 2012, the draft COT report has been revised. A final report is now complete.

CURRENT STATUS

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- The Service just completed the final Conservation Objectives Team (COT) Report and has coordinated with Task Force Chair regarding process for transmittal and public release.
- After the final 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 report is available on the Service website.
- As this is a final report, no further comments will be solicited.

External Talking Points – February 29, 2013

- The 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 COT Report is built on scientific principles of conservation and outlines a strategy for wide-range conservation of the Greater sage-grouse.
- The final COT report provides guidance on the conservation objectives to be achieved to ensure the long-term conservation of the sage-grouse while allowing for local determinations of how specific threats are to be ameliorated.

Target Audiences

INTERNAL

Regional Leadership
WO Leadership
DOI

EXTERNAL

State agencies
Governors
Federal Agencies
Environmental groups

Communication Deliverables

1. News Release
2. FAQs
3. Talking Points

Contacts

USFWS

Region:

External Affairs ARD: Marla Trollan, 303-236-4510

Deputy EA/Legislative Affairs: Matt Kales, 303-236-4576

Public Affairs: Diane Katzenberger, 303-236-4578

Policy POC: Noreen Walsh, Deputy Regional Director 303-236-7920

Technical POC: Pat Deibert, 307 772 2374 ext. 226

ARD-ES: Mike Thabault, 303-236-4210

Subject Matter Expert: Pat Deibert, 307 772 2374 ext. 226

Action Plan

Target Date	Activity	Responsible	Completed
Jan. 28, 2013	Pre-brief for Director prior to Task Force	Noreen Walsh	Jan. 28, 2013
Jan. 29, 2013	Final COT report overview presented to Task Force	Pat Deibert	Jan. 29, 2013
Feb. 07, 2013	DRAFT COT Report is sent to RO for initial review	Pat Deibert	Feb. 07, 2013
March 14, 2013	Final COT Report sent to Task Force members and Governor's Offices, with transmittal from Director--clear indication of final status	R6 to draft transmittal, letter sent from Director's office	Letter drafted and submitted to RO Feb. 10, 2013.
March 14, 2013 10:00 a.m. MT	Early Notification to Congressional Offices (final press release)	R6 EA in coordination with other Regions	
March 14, 2013 NOON MT	Distribute News Release Post COT Report to Service website	R6 EA in coordination with other Regions	
	Finalize communications products: • Spokespersons • News Release • Talking Points • Internal FAQs • Presentation to Task Force	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

Appendix A – News Release

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228

Contacts:

Noreen Walsh, 303 236 7920
Pat Deibert, 307 772 2374 ext. 226
Leith Edgar, 303-236-4588

NEWS RELEASE

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External Affairs: Leith Edgar, 303-236-4588

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Report To Help Guide Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Objectives

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is making available a final 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 Greater sage-grouse, the nature of the threats facing the species, and objectives to ensure its long-term conservation.

The final 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 was submitted for scientific peer review, and the Service addressed those comments in the final version.

The intent of the report is to provide State, Federal, local and private entities with permitting or land

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management authority information to support conservation actions for the sage-grouse. 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.

“The range of the sage-grouse is broad and encompasses areas with different habitat needs. We commend the Western states for providing their knowledge and expertise in helping us outline the conditions that will ensure the long-term viability of the Greater sage-grouse,” said the Service’s Director Dan Ashe. “Addressing those needs will take the collaborative efforts of federal and state agencies, non-governmental entities and Tribes. This 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.”

The final Conservations Objectives 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.

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 Service fact sheet of frequently asked questions regarding the final report, please click [HERE](#).

The final 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. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at 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>

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Appendix B – Frequently Asked Questions - External

External Q&As

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 pro-active 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.

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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.

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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.

Appendix C – Frequently Asked Questions – Internal Only – Not for Distribution

Elevator Speech: *The COT report identifies key areas for sage-grouse, key threats in those areas, and the extent to which they need to be reduced in order for us to determine that listing is not warranted.*

Internal FAQs:

How will we collaborate with other entities? We will collaborate with Federal, State and private planning efforts to neutralize these key threats across the 11 states in the following ways:

- Energy, mining, agricultural conversion and other projects converting habitat will be sited to the maximum extent possible to avoid core GSG habitat, and all unavoidable impacts to core and low density habitat will be fully mitigated (see below). Government land managers in several states need to identify regulatory provisions to ensure this outcome.
- In many areas grazing is or can be made compatible with long term GSG conservation. The Service will work cooperatively with producers and land managers to implement "GSG-friendly" grazing practices on federal, state, and private lands to maintain high quality rangelands and restore degraded habitat.
- A primary threat to GSG is the loss of habitat to fire and the lack of timely recruitment of habitat after fire. The Service will work proactively with land managers and range scientists to better manage the impacts of fire by reducing ignitions, improving suppression, and restoring burned lands with an emphasis on native plant restoration and research.
- Invasive species pose a similar level of threat. The Service will work with land managers to implement measures that reduce the spread of invasive species and restore currently degraded habitats.
- The Service recognizes that developing streamlined and meaningful mitigation processes is key to offsetting impacts from threats due to development. Implementation of mitigation is necessary to reduce the net effect of these threats on the species. We will develop mitigation tools and procedures that will direct resources to offset these impacts. These offsets may include protection of habitat through acquisition and easement, "Farm Bill" style payments to private landowners for conservation practices, and funding for restoration and research. These measures and processes should be simple, easy to participate in, and demonstrate clear benefits (e.g., reforested areas).

The Service recognizes and expects that Greater sage-grouse populations and habitats will continue to decline due to "ecological inertia" during the next several decades as we implement these measures and work to reverse this centuries-old negative decline. However, if these threat abatement measures are implemented throughout the species' range, we are optimistic that the range-wide sage-grouse population will eventually stabilize and the species will not be threatened with endangerment throughout its range.

For each population, the Service will have to evaluate the degree to which state/federal plans and other mechanisms have either: (1) removed or reduced each stated (or each widespread, significant) threat in each PAC; or (2) put in place plans with PECE-like certainty to remove threats such that we believe the decline is in the process of being stopped or turned around.

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.

Does the report allow for habitat to be restored outside of PACs and exchanged in mitigation for impacts to PACs? The COT report does not address in detail how mitigation relative to PACs might be accomplished but rather defers to the states and any associated conservation plan to make these determinations. States currently retain management authority for the species, and have the local expertise to determine whether or not mitigation will achieve the objective of achieving and maintaining neutral or increasing population trends.

Is the COT report a description of what is needed for a successful 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. The final report does identify scientific uncertainties (e.g. climate change) that may affect long-term persistence, which may influence the outcome of a listing determination if new data are presented prior to 2015 and any necessary management adjustments in response to those data are not made.

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 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.

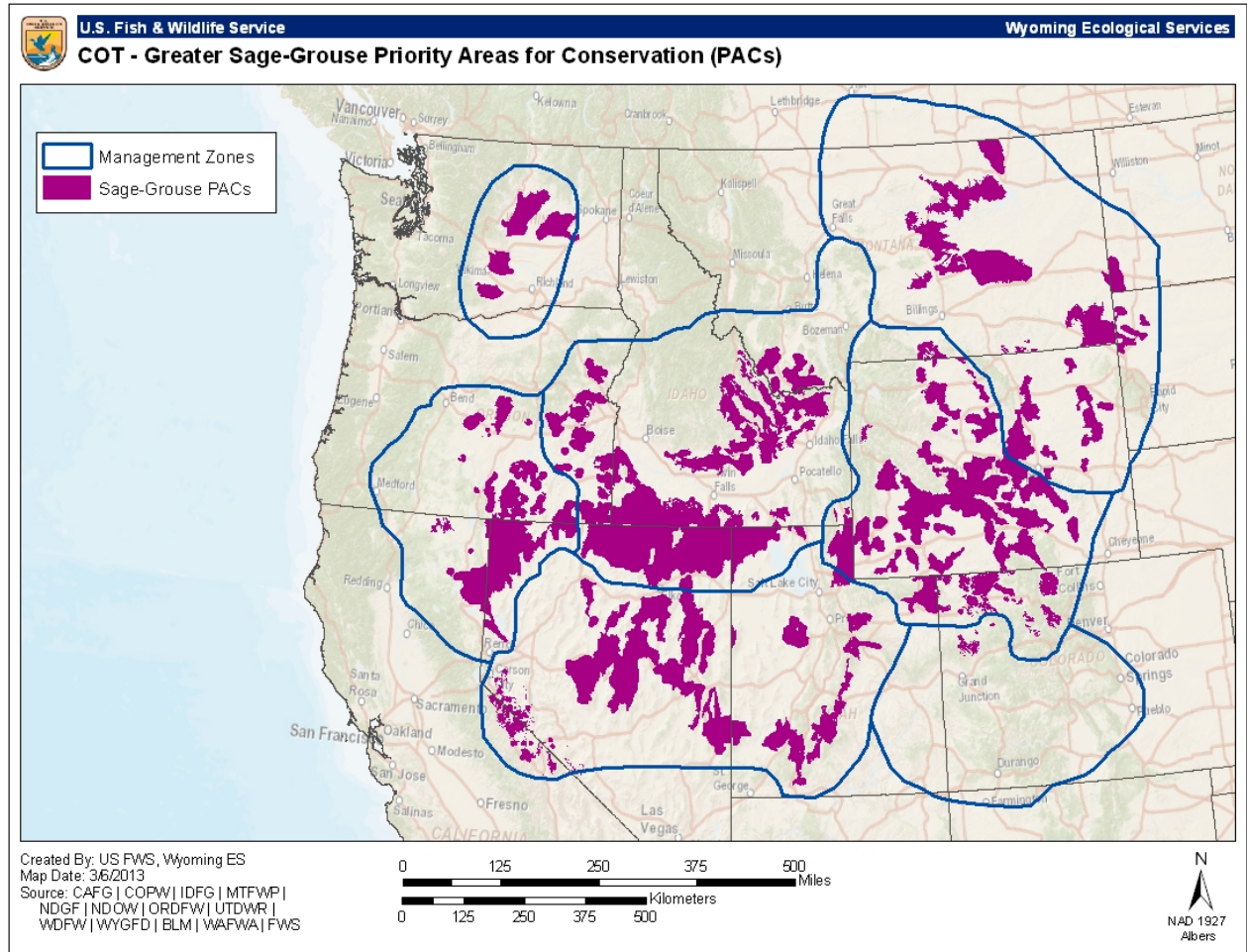
Appendix D – Social Media – Home Page Posting

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is making available a final 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.

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.

To view the draft report, please click [HERE](#).

Appendix E – Map for Web Posting



Contact: Region 6 External Affairs, Marla Trollan, 303-236-4510 or marla_trollan@fws.gov