

December 2, 2011

INFORMATON MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY

FROM: Dan Ashe, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Bob Abbey, Director, U.S. Bureau of Land Management

SUBJECT: Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Efforts in Wyoming

I. SUMMARY

On December 9, 2011, Secretary Salazar is scheduled to co-host a meeting with Wyoming's Governor Mead with Governors from States where Greater sage-grouse occur to discuss the need for action on Greater sage-grouse conservation. Wyoming's core area strategy will be discussed at that meeting, as will the aspects of the strategy that may be incorporated in, or replace other State Greater sage-grouse strategies. The Service has supported the Wyoming Core Area Strategy and its principles provide an approach to consider in other States, however, potential limitations of replicating exactly Wyoming's core area approach exist in other States.

II. DISCUSSION

In 2007, Wyoming Governor Freudenthal identified both energy development and greater sage-grouse conservation as critical issues for the State of Wyoming. He convened a team of affected stakeholders and tasked them with developing a plan that would enhance and preserve the habitat in Wyoming, while allowing for energy development. The resulting core area strategy protects key habitats of the greater sage-grouse while allowing for relatively unencumbered energy development outside these areas. Core areas in Wyoming encompass approximately 23% of all sage-grouse habitat while conserving approximately 84% of all the breeding birds in the State.

In March 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published its listing decision for the Greater sage-grouse as "Warranted but Precluded." Loss and modification of habitat and the inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms were identified as the two primary threats resulting in the decision.

In June 3, 2011, Wyoming's Governor Matthew Mead signed an updated version of Wyoming's Sage-Grouse Core Area Protection Executive Order, which provided more flexibility for management in the core areas and added language requiring continual reevaluation of the science and data for sage-grouse management.

The Service's and Bureau of Land Management's position on Wyoming's core area strategy is that it is a plan with a strong biological foundation that meets the social and economic needs of Wyoming. If it is fully implemented, it should result in long-term conservation of the Greater sage-grouse and the landscapes on which it depends in Wyoming.

BLM adds that the Wyoming strategy adopted the State's core area strategy into an Instructional Memorandum for the short term, and the strategy is being evaluated as an alternative that will potentially be adopted into BLM's Resource Management Plans in Wyoming for the longer term.

While it may not be directly exportable to other States within the range of this species, the biological and management principles on which Wyoming's core area strategy are constructed may provide a template for developing similar strategies in other States. It is not critical that States have identical efforts, rather, their efforts must provide for the long-term conservation of the species. Wyoming's core area strategy is being widely considered in other States, but may not be directly replicated by all States for the following reasons:

- Wyoming has robust populations and expansive areas of good, high quality habitat. Therefore the breeding populations within the core area have the ability to "recover" from declines resulting from normal ecological processes (e.g., drought) as well as low intensity anthropogenic disturbances. In States where the populations and habitats are not as robust, a higher percentage of the species and its habitats may need to be conserved, potentially resulting in more restrictive use of protected areas. In States where causal factors of loss and fragmentation are not directly the result of anthropogenic activities (e.g., wildfires), pro-active management of fragmentation is very difficult. In these areas, less anthropogenic development can be tolerated to achieve success in conservation.
- In Wyoming, much sagebrush habitat is managed by BLM. In some States, Federal land management agencies manage relatively small amounts of sagebrush habitats. In States with large amounts of private lands, a different strategy may be needed to more heavily emphasize proactive and cooperative management options with private landowners and a more conservative approach on public land.
- Wyoming's core area strategy was a collaborative effort amongst a diverse group of stakeholders, which required months of team-building. This approach may not work where collaboration cannot be achieved, or is limited by timing constraints.

There are currently no legal challenges to Wyoming's core-area strategy. A legal challenge to the Service's "warranted but precluded" finding is ongoing.