

From: [Davis, Dawn](#)  
To: [Matt Kales](#)  
Cc: [FW6 Sage-grouse FMT](#); [Kris Tita](#); [Theodore Stein](#); [Anna Harris](#); [Daniel Hottle](#); [Will Weeks](#)  
Subject: Re: FW: GRSG: communications for our recent stronghold map/memo  
Date: Friday, February 13, 2015 11:30:05 AM

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All,

My understanding is that the intent of the stronghold mapping effort was, in part, to ensure these areas are well conserved and specifically addressed locatable minerals. I just spoke with Vicki Herren and the BLM is currently discussing the application of FIAT assessments in strongholds (or what the BLM is referring to as sagebrush focal areas) and she questioned whether their prioritization of funding and projects will change in those areas where FIAT assessments overlap strongholds? Do the recommendations outlined in the strongholds memo limit treatments (e.g., fuels management) that can be applied - specifically, what is meant by "strongest levels of protection?" And looking ahead, how do strongholds affect implementation and prioritization of treatments/management strategies identified in the FIAT assessments? What do we want to see in terms of vegetation management? For example, one of the strongholds identified was impacted by the 2012 Holloway and Long Draw fires in SE Oregon - should the prioritization continue to focus on suppression or habitat restoration and recovery?

Do we have any talking points or guidance that specifically address fire suppression in strongholds?

Thanks,

On Fri, Feb 13, 2015 at 7:42 AM, Matt Kales <[matt\\_kales@fws.gov](mailto:matt_kales@fws.gov)> wrote:

Folks,

Thanks for your time on our FMT call yesterday. As discussed, please see below a resend of the original communications materials we developed for our stronghold mapping effort.

Together with the text of the memo

(<http://www.fws.gov/greatersagegrouse/documents/ESA%20Process/GRSG%20Strongholds%20memo%20to%20BLM%20and%20USFS%20102714.pdf>) and Dan's statements in the recent E&E piece (see pasted text, below), these products represent the sideboards of any public statements you want/need to make about strongholds.

Please let Theo or I know if you have immediate questions or need further support. Thanks. Matt

Folks,

Per our discussion on last week's FMT call, please see attached the subject information. Here are the topline messages re: what this product is and why we developed and provided it to BLM and FS:

o **As we await final land use allocation and other important planning decisions from BLM and Forest Service, we have provided our federal partners an additional product: A series of landscape-scale maps identifying highly important areas for sage-grouse conservation (i.e., strongholds). Within these areas, we suggested that BLM and Forest Service ensure the areas are well conserved and we noted that one threat not otherwise addressed at all via the planning process is that of locatable minerals (e.g., gold, uranium, etc.). We suggested the land management agencies consider withdrawal to mineral entry in these areas. These maps, which are not intended to supersede or otherwise alter the PACS or to diminish the conservation priority of the PACs as a whole simply highlight those places on the landscape that contain the following criteria:**

- Existing high-quality sagebrush habitat for sage-grouse;
- Highest breeding densities of sage-grouse;
- Areas identified in the literature as essential to conservation and persistence of the species
- (Knick and Hanser 2011); and,
- A preponderance of current federal ownership, and in some cases, adjacent protected areas that serve to anchor the conservation importance of the landscape.

Please use this and the attached content to communicate as necessary with external partners and please let me know if you have immediate questions or need additional information. (I will follow up with those of you who have recently contacted me on related, specific issues separately.)

Thanks.

Matt

#### ENDANGERED SPECIES:

FWS urges protection of 16.5M acres for sage grouse

Phil Taylor, E&E reporter

The Fish and Wildlife Service advised its fellow land management agencies to impose the most stringent protections on roughly 16.5 million acres of high-value sage grouse habitat in order to save the bird from the threat of extinction.

The recommendation came from FWS Director Dan Ashe in an Oct. 27 internal memo to the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service that was obtained by Greenwire. It will likely inform BLM as it finalizes land-use plans covering 67 million acres in the bird's 11-state Western range in hopes of preventing its demise.

The areas FWS mapped in the Great Basin, western Wyoming and north-central Montana are "a subset of priority habitat most vital to the species persistence, within which we recommend the strongest levels of protection," Ashe wrote in the memo to BLM Director Neil Kornze and Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell.

The recommended sage grouse "strongholds" have been found to contain the highest densities of birds, are the most resistant and resilient to stressors like invasive species and wildfire, and are least susceptible to climate change, Ashe said. They're also predominantly located on federal lands.

They are a subset of the 75 million priority areas for conservation (PACs) that Fish and Wildlife identified as key to the bird's long-term survival and worthy of the government's limited conservation resources. Conservationists privy to FWS's internal sage grouse work are calling the areas "super PACs."

"Strong, durable, and meaningful protection of federally administered lands in these areas will provide additional certainty and help obtain confidence for long-term sage-grouse persistence," Ashe wrote. "The attached maps highlight areas where it is most important that BLM and Forest Service institutionalize the highest degree of protection to help promote persistence of the species."

BLM's land-use plan amendments, set to be finalized in late summer, will be a key factor in September when Fish and Wildlife scientists decide whether the charismatic, chest-puffing bird is in need of federal protections. More than 63 percent of the bird's 165 million acres of habitat is on federal lands, most of it managed by BLM.

Ashe yesterday told Greenwire that protection of strongholds, or lack thereof, will be a criterion in FWS's listing decision. But they're only recommendations.

While Congress in December prohibited FWS from preparing an official listing rule during fiscal 2015, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell has said her department will continue to act "with urgency" to keep key sage brush habitats intact.

The listing prohibition, passed at the behest of oil and gas, mining, and ranching interests, puts a temporary block on the most stringent Endangered Species Act protections, but it has not stopped BLM from pursuing administrative protections that conservationists say are vital for sage grouse and hundreds of other species that depend on its habitat.

The effort has required unprecedented collaboration between BLM, whose mandate requires both wildlife protections and resource extraction on its 250-million-acre estate, and FWS, whose mandate is much more focused -- to preserve wildlife and prevent extinction.

BLM calls the shots on how sage grouse habitat is managed, but FWS will likely make the final call as to whether sage grouse are listed under the Endangered Species Act, a decision that could tie BLM's hands for many years to come. Interior Department and White House officials will undoubtedly play a decisionmaking role, too.

It's against this backdrop that BLM in October asked FWS for more specific guidelines on lands it could protect to preclude the need for a listing. BLM's final resource management plans are due out in late spring.

FWS's proposed strongholds are concentrated along Nevada's border with Oregon and Idaho, an area that includes federally designated wilderness and key habitat for bighorn sheep, as well as in north-central Idaho, an area anchored by Craters of the Moon National Monument. They also include the Bear River Watershed in northeastern Utah and north-central Montana along the Missouri River, where sage grouse migrate from Canada during winter.

Ashe said many of the strongholds also provide important habitat for shrub-steppe passerine birds and mule deer winter range.

While BLM and the Forest Service are under no obligation to heed FWS's advice, Ashe said "both [have] been extraordinary in this process in consulting with us and listening to our advice."

FWS has recommended ways for BLM to reduce disturbance within the strongholds, Ashe said, while declining to discuss specifics.

BLM's draft land-use plans already contemplate a range of possible protections.

Plans in Utah would include a 4-mile buffer around sage grouse breeding grounds for new oil and gas developments. A proposed plan for Oregon would designate 5.1 million acres of "focal" areas of prime grouse habitat where conservation is focused and development is discouraged.

'It is a mistake'

"It makes sense to us that there are certain places in the core habitat area that warrant the strongest protection standards," said Ed Arnett, a biologist with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership who directs the partnership's Center for Responsible Energy Development. "Conservation plans must be sufficient to not only halt the decline of greater sage grouse but also to recover habitat conditions and increase populations."

Arnett said development in or near priority and core habitat should be restricted through "no surface occupancy," and for some areas, management should include closures and withdrawals.

Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with WildEarth Guardians, said the sage grouse strongholds must act as buffers against extinction, able to replenish a rangewide population that has fallen drastically from historical levels.

Overhead power lines could be buried, road densities could be reduced to reconnect habitat and livestock grazing could be reduced to increase cover for sage grouse, he said.

"It's worth noting that back in the 1800s, there were flocks of sage grouse that darkened the skies," Molvar said. "It appears FWS is trying to move the needle of sage grouse protection in a positive direction."

But the FWS stronghold proposal has drawn concern from Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead (R), who argued the Cowboy State's strategy to limit disturbances near core sage grouse breeding grounds already offers sufficient protections.

Wyoming's core sage grouse conservation plan, crafted by former Gov. Dave Freudenthal (D) and affirmed by Mead, has been widely touted as one of the most protective in the Western states and has already been endorsed in one BLM land-use plan. The state identified about 15 million acres of core habitat that are managed for only one activity per square mile and no more than 5 percent disturbance from all sources, Mead said.

FWS's proposed strongholds cover about 7 million acres in Wyoming and generally overlap with its core areas, Mead said. Tougher restrictions on federal lands within the core areas could push development to private lands and disrupt a delicate conservation balance currently supported by Wyoming's regulated community, Mead said.

"The designation of super-core areas or other layered restrictions will challenge and erode the partnerships built over the past eight years," Mead said in a Nov. 20 letter to Ashe obtained by Greenwire under the Freedom of Information Act. "It is a mistake to sacrifice this great collaborative effort to meet an academic exercise in mapping."

Kathleen Sgamma, vice president of government and public affairs at the Western Energy Alliance, said the stronghold maps in Ashe's memo lack enough resolution to determine possible impacts on oil and gas developers. But she called the FWS proposal reflective of Obama administration attempts to impose management uniformity in the West, despite locally tailored state plans.

"The states have been saying, 'We're different. We know how to protect the species in our states better than the federal government does,'" Sgamma said. "The federal government, in typical one-size-fits-all fashion, is pushing back against that."

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