

Greater Sage-grouse Update

June 4, 2013

In 2010, the Greater sage-grouse was found warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act but precluded by other, high-priority listing actions. We are required to issue a proposed rule or reverse our previous finding by the end of 2015. (A proposed rule is also due for a separate listable entity, the distinct population segment of the Greater sage-grouse in Nevada and California, known as the Bi-state population, by September 2013.) Primary reasons for the warranted determination for Greater sage-grouse were the threats of loss and fragmentation of habitat and the lack of adequate regulatory mechanisms that protect that habitat.

Several parallel conservation paths for greater sage-grouse are underway:

FEDERAL LAND MANAGEMENT PLANNING: the Service is coordinating closely at both the field and policy levels with the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service to develop effective conservation measures for greater sage-grouse for incorporation into revised land management plans across the range of the species.

STATE CONSERVATION PLANNING: The Service is collaborating with several states in Greater sage-grouse range to support the development of robust state conservation plans and processes. We have recently commented on UT and ID plans, MT is in the early stages of development and WY has been employing their Core Area strategy for several years.

SECRETARY/GOVERNOR TASK FORCE: Eleven states and all federal agencies are participating at an executive level to identify and pursue the most important conservation strategies for sage-grouse. The Task Force is co- chaired by Governor Mead (WY) and Hickenlooper (CO). Steve Ferrell is Governor Mead's lead and a proposed witness at the hearing. He might raise issues related to how the Service intends to roll up all the state efforts into a comprehensive finding, whether the Service will comment on state plans (yes), and potentially the degree to which we consider grazing a threat (grazing managed to meet local ecological standards is not a threat, while improperly managed grazing can be a localized threat.)

STATE/FWS CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES TEAM (COT) REPORT: A joint Service - State report was released in the spring of 2013 to describe the degree to which threats need to be reduced to ensure that the species is no longer in need of federal protection. The report identifies priority areas, key threats in those areas, and objectives for reducing each threat. It does not prescribe actions, it leaves flexibility to the states in determining how to meet objectives. Partners should use the report to guide their planning processes and the Service will use the report in evaluating the status of the species in 2015.

While all of these, and other, efforts are aimed at avoiding the need to list the Greater sage-grouse, the Service must analyze the efficacy of the collective efforts (federal, state, and other) to conserve the species in the face of major threats to its long-term persistence, including invasive species, altered fire regimes, energy development and others. Many efforts are underway to reduce these threats and to provide adequate regulatory mechanisms through federal land management plans. The threat of invasive species (cheatgrass) and its effect of increasing the frequency of wildfire is a particularly challenging threat.