

**US Fish and Wildlife Service, Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation**  
**Questions and Answers re: *Conservation Buffer Distance Estimates for Greater Sage-Grouse: A review***

**If-Asked Statement:**

The Service encourages our federal land management partners to consider this information as they finalize plans to conserve sage-grouse across its 11-state range, nearly 2/3 of which exists on the federal estate. The Service will continue to work with all partners to identify and apply the best available science to support of sage grouse conservation and a healthy, functional sagebrush landscape.

**What is the role of the FWS in sage-grouse conservation?**

In 2010, the FWS determined that based on identified threats, protection of the greater sage-grouse under the ESA was warranted but precluded by higher priorities. The FWS now has a legal obligation to determine by September 30, 2015, whether effective conservation measures that have been or are certain to be implemented have reduced these threats to the extent that protection under the ESA is no longer warranted. The role of the FWS is multifold. One of FWS' roles is to identify threats to sage-grouse and advise others about management strategies or actions that reduce or eliminate impacts that harm sage-grouse habitat and populations. We are also working on multiple fronts – from investing in science and private lands partnerships to delivering dedicated assistance to federal and state conservation planning efforts – to conserve the species and the larger landscapes on which it depends.

**Q&A:**

**Is the USGS report consistent with recommendations in the earlier National Technical Team and Conservation Objectives Team reports?**

Yes. Like the NTT and COT reports, the USGS review concludes that designating conservation buffers around leks, and thus avoiding or minimizing disturbance within those buffers, is an effective strategy to protect sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat. Buffers around lek sites offer one consistent and practical solution for identifying and conserving seasonal habitat for sage-grouse, though they may not protect all important habitats or populations. The USGS report validates the NTT recommendations, which were developed after an independent review of the literature. While the COT report did not identify specific buffer distances, it encouraged measures that avoided or minimized impacts from human activities on important sage-grouse habitats, which is the objective of a buffer strategy.

**Is the USGS report consistent with the recently-developed National Policy Team guidance?**

Yes. The NPT guidance encourages maintaining the viability of sage-grouse habitats by discouraging impacts from new development and infrastructure near important sage-grouse habitats through strategies such as precluding certain activities, establishing No Surface Occupancy stipulations for fluid mineral development, etc. The NPT guidance did not specify buffer distances, however, implementing management recommendations that reduce or minimize disturbance around key habitats would be functionally equivalent to establishing buffers.

**Is the report consistent with FWS recommendations on the BLM/FS sage-grouse conservation planning process?**

Yes. For the past three years, FWS has consistently recommended that our federal land management partners implement the most conservative protective measures to ensure long-term conservation of sage-grouse. The FWS has worked closely with the federal land management agencies to identify and encourage approaches that minimize impacts of permitted development on greater sage-grouse and their habitats. We have recommended our state partners adopt the same approach and have provided states with dedicated technical assistance.

**Will the FWS require use of the buffers identified in the USGS report?**

The FWS' role is to advise. Importantly, the report notes that there is no single number that is an appropriate buffer distance for all populations and habitats across the greater sage-grouse range. Implementation of the recommendations contained in the USGS report will be at the discretion of the land management agencies. The FWS will then determine whether new land management plans eliminate or reduce threats to greater sage-grouse considering many factors including local and regional conditions, habitat quality and the cumulative impact of a suite of conservation and management actions.

**Why does FWS support the Wyoming Core Area Strategy and the buffers in that strategy?**

One of FWS' roles in sage-grouse conservation is to identify threats to the species and advocate for management strategies that reduce or eliminate impacts that harm sage-grouse habitat and populations.

The State of Wyoming's Core Area Strategy is designed to protect birds and habitat within core areas. It relies on a suite of tools and mechanisms that work in concert to conserve sage-grouse by reducing habitat loss and fragmentation. These include lek buffers, disturbance limits, excluded activities, and a sophisticated mapping utility to monitor the amount and density of disturbance. Total disturbance in core areas is limited by strict caps. The CAS applies to all lands within core areas, regardless of land ownership, and is implemented via a gubernatorial Executive Order.

The combined effect of these overlapping and reinforcing mechanisms in the CAS gives FWS confidence that the 0.6 mile lek buffer specified by the CAS for leks inside core areas will be protective of breeding sage-grouse. Without these overlapping and reinforcing mechanisms, the 0.6 mile lek buffer would not be adequate.

The intent of the Wyoming approach is to drive development away from the best habitat where possible. As a result, levels of protection outside core areas are reduced. A 0.25 mile buffer for leks located outside of the core areas provides some protection for birds on non-core leks during lekking season, giving those birds a chance to mate and possibly produce offspring.