

Memorandum, May 2, 2013

To: Regional Director, Mountain-Prairie

From: Greater Sage-grouse Mitigation Technical Team

Re: Advancing and Operationalizing Mitigation Strategies for Greater Sage-Grouse

This memorandum is to (a) provide you with an update on the activities of the Mitigation Technical Team and (b) recommend near-term actions for advancing mitigation strategies in sage-grouse range to offset development impacts on the species and its habitat.

One of the actions emerging from the Service's February, 2013 Tri-regional Greater Sage-grouse Summit was the establishment of a Mitigation Technical Team (Team) to operate under the auspices of the existing Field Management Team. The charge for this team, which is staffed by Service personnel from field and regional offices in Regions 1 and 6, is to develop a range-wide mitigation strategy and a menu of turnkey mitigation opportunities for developers, such as energy producers, whose activities in sagebrush habitat may adversely affect sage grouse. By combining landscape-level conservation planning with mitigation hierarchy principles (*avoid, minimize, restore, offset*) offers the Service, states, and others working in sage-grouse habitat can deploy an additional tool with which to balance conservation with development impacts.

Mitigating for unavoidable impacts of development in a way that demonstrates measureable conservation benefits, it follows, is of direct interest not only to the Service and our land and our wildlife management partners as we work to conserve the species, but also to developers, who face a more restrictive regulatory environment should the Service ultimately determine listing the greater sage-grouse is warranted. Further, such "pre-listing mitigation" could contribute to development of streamlined review and permitting processes, incentivize voluntary offset actions by developers, increase financial incentives for private landowners to engage in such conservation actions and, ultimately, provide effective conservation for the species. This approach complements emerging policy-level efforts at the Service's Headquarters to promote and enhance voluntary conservation actions in advance of potential listing decisions. Indeed, the Team is hopeful that its efforts can serve as a "pilot" effort through which the Service tests the efficacy of this emerging policy.

The Team held its first meeting by telephone on April 30 and identified a number of next steps, including development of a greater sage-grouse mitigation "prospectus" for Service leadership and a step-down mechanism(s), such as guidelines, templates or other applications that ensure consistency across the range but also allow for sufficient flexibility based on location, activity, and other variables (including existing and developing state mitigation frameworks). These products will pose and answer three essential questions affecting our collective ability to operationalize mitigation strategies for greater sage-grouse:

1. What do (and don't) we currently know about mitigation efforts in sage-grouse range, specifically what tools and techniques are employed on the landscape and by whom?
2. What is the current effect of mitigation efforts in sage-grouse range, i.e., what net effect is it having on habitat and populations?
3. How do we optimize development and delivery of mitigation strategies such that they are embraced by our partners and also allow states and the Service to measure, and potentially credit, implementation, and focus interest of potential partners on areas and strategies that will optimize pre-listing conservation benefit to the species?

By way of this memo, the Team recommends Service leadership support the Team's pursuit of the above next steps, specifically the production of a mitigation prospectus and associated step-down document(s). The Team welcomes your feedback on this recommendation and our proposed approach and can provide additional materials as necessary to inform your decision.