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## BLM, USFS Plans for Western Public Lands Provide for Greater Sage-Grouse Protection, Balanced Development

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**Vital tools in the historic, collaborative effort to conserve America's sagebrush habitat balance demands of growing West**

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**CHEYENNE, Wyo.** – The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) today released final environmental reviews for proposed land use plans that will help conserve greater sage-grouse habitat and support sustainable economic development on portions of public lands in 10 states across the West. The land management plans, developed during the past three years in partnership with the states and with input from local partners, will benefit wildlife, outdoor recreation, ranching and other traditional land uses that rely on a healthy sagebrush landscape.

The updated plans are an essential element of an unprecedented and proactive strategy to respond to the deteriorating health of the American West's sagebrush landscapes and declining population of the greater sage-grouse, a ground-dwelling bird under consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The collaborative federal-state effort includes three key elements to conserve the sagebrush landscape, which faces

threats from fire, invasive species and encroaching development: a comprehensive strategy to fight rangeland fire, strong conservation plans for federal public lands, and conservation actions on state and private lands.

"The West is rapidly changing – with increasingly intense wildfires, invasive species and development altering the sagebrush landscape and threatening wildlife, ranching and our outdoor heritage," said U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. "As land managers of two-thirds of greater sage-grouse habitat, we have a responsibility to take action that ensures a bright future for wildlife and a thriving western economy. Together with conservation efforts from states and private landowners, we are laying an important foundation to save the disappearing sagebrush landscape of the American West."

"Federal and state governments and private landowners recognize that a healthy sagebrush landscape means a healthy western economy," said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. "We are working with local partners to design innovative, long-term conservation plans. Together, we can put effective conservation measures in place that not only benefit the greater sage-grouse, but also preserve the western way of life, help improve grazing lands and bolster rural economies."

The 14 final Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) and proposed plans released today, in addition to the Lander Resource Management Plan released last May, will guide land management on BLM and USFS-administered resources in 10 western states. The final EISs are the result of a robust, multi-year public process, including public scoping sessions, public meetings and public comment periods on each of the draft EISs. The plans are now undergoing a 60-day Governor's Consistency Review period and concurrent 30-day protest period, after which Records of Decisions will be signed.

The plans address issues identified by the Service in a 2010 determination that found the greater sage-grouse was deserving of protection under the ESA due to the inadequacy of regulatory protections to prevent further sagebrush habitat fragmentation, placing the bird in danger of extinction. Federal protection was deferred because of higher priorities; however, the Service is required to revisit the determination by September 30, 2015.

With the shared goal of taking actions to avoid the need to list the bird, in 2011, then-Secretary Ken Salazar and western governors, led by Wyoming Governor Matt Mead and Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, formed the Sage-Grouse Task Force to develop a cooperative approach to conserving the species across the West.

The proposed plans are grounded in the best available science and address threats identified in a peer-reviewed report written by state and federal wildlife biologists, known as the Conservation Objectives Team (COT) report.

The plans provide a layered management approach that offers the highest level of protection in the most valuable habitat, known as Priority Habitat Management Areas. Within priority habitat, the plans seek to limit or eliminate new surface disturbance, particularly in Sagebrush Focal Areas, identified by the Service as “stronghold” areas essential for the species’ survival. The proposed plans seek to minimize disturbance in General Habitat Management Areas, which are lands that require some special management to sustain greater sage-grouse populations, but are not considered as important as priority habitat.

Importantly, the plans will honor all valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects.

The plan measures only apply to BLM and USFS-managed lands and minerals.

The plans contain three common approaches:

1. **Minimizing new or additional surface disturbance** – The plans seek to reduce habitat fragmentation and protect intact habitat by implementing surface disturbance caps on development, minimizing surface occupancy from energy development, and identifying buffer distances around leks – areas critical to the sage-grouse life-cycle – to be considered during project implementation.

2. **Improving habitat condition** – While restoring lost sagebrush habitat is difficult in the short term, it is often possible to enhance habitat quality through purposeful management. Where there are unavoidable impacts to habitat from development, the plans will require mitigation to enhance and improve sage-grouse habitat.

3. **Reduce threat of rangeland fire** – Rangeland fire can lead to the conversion of previously healthy sagebrush habitat into non-native, cheatgrass-dominated landscapes. Experts have identified wildfire as one of the greatest threats to sagebrush habitat, particularly in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California. The plans seek to fight the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive species, position wildland fire management resources for more effective rangeland fire response, and accelerate the restoration of fire-impacted landscapes to native grasses and sagebrush.

Individual proposed plans contain variations where different approaches or priorities were consistent with overall conservation objectives. To learn more about the BLM-USFS plans for each state, visit <http://www.blm.gov/sagegrouse>.

The vast majority of federal lands within the priority sage-grouse habitat have zero to low potential for oil and gas, solar, and wind energy development. The plans limit surface occupancy within priority habitat areas for oil and gas; however, technological advances in horizontal drilling make it possible to conserve sensitive habitats while still developing subsurface resources. A fact sheet on the proposed plans is available [here](#).

Over the last four years, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its partners in the [Sage-Grouse Initiative](#) have worked with more than 1,100 private landowners to restore 4.4 million acres of habitat for sage-grouse while maintaining working landscapes.

More than 350 other species rely on a healthy sagebrush habitat, including elk, mule deer, pronghorn and golden eagles. Greater sage-grouse habitat currently covers 165 million acres across 11 states in the West, representing a loss of 56 percent of the species' historic range. At one time, the greater sage-grouse population likely numbered in the millions, but is estimated to have dwindled to 200,000 to 500,000 birds range-wide.

For more information, please visit <http://www.blm.gov/sagegrouse>.