

## Imperiled Species Fact Sheet: Greater Sage-Grouse

**SPECIES BACKGROUND:** The greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is an imperiled western bird and charismatic ambassador for the Sagebrush Sea, an ecosystem that is vital to fish and wildlife, recreation, communities and sustainable economic development in eleven western states. Conserving this iconic bird will help protect a quintessential landscape and hundreds of other species that also depend on it. As many as 16 million greater sage-grouse once ranged across 297 million acres of sagebrush grasslands in the West. Today, sage-grouse range is little more than half of what it once was and populations have declined more than 90 percent from historical levels, according to some estimates. Remaining sage-grouse populations are threatened by habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation. Nearly half of sage-grouse habitat has been lost to agriculture and development, and less than 3 percent of the bird's current range is federally protected. The remainder is compromised by poorly managed oil and gas drilling, livestock grazing, mining, unnatural fire, invasive weeds, off-road vehicles, roads, fences, pipelines and utility corridors.



In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) found that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but other, higher priorities precluded the agency from proposing a listing rule at that time.<sup>1</sup> The 2010 finding identified habitat loss and fragmentation as a primary threat to the species, as well as a lack of regulatory mechanisms to protect remaining habitat across the bird's range. Recognizing the urgent need for conservation action, the Obama administration took the extraordinary step of amending nearly one hundred land use plans across the West with new conservation prescriptions for sage-grouse. The "National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy" was informed by robust public input and coordination with western states and ensured continued land use and development of public lands and resources, while also improving management of more than 60 million acres in the Sagebrush Sea. Citing these final plans and other factors, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined in October 2015 that the sage-grouse did not warrant protection under the ESA at that time.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has reversed course on the effort to conserve sage-grouse, citing concerns that the National Strategy is "out of balance" for failing to provide more opportunities for industrial development on public lands. The Department of the Interior is now finalizing revisions to dozens of public lands management plans that comprise the National Strategy, jeopardizing the 4-year, \$45 million planning effort that enjoyed broad support from diverse stakeholders and competing interests. The new plan amendments would allow for more oil and gas drilling, mining and other land uses in essential sage-grouse habitat, including downsizing protected areas and reducing restrictive buffers around breeding and nesting habitat.

**CONGRESSIONAL ACTIONS:** The 114<sup>th</sup> Congress saw a dozen legislative attempts to delay a potential listing for the greater sage-grouse or interfere with the federal planning process to conserve the bird. The 115<sup>th</sup> Congress similarly dealt with eleven separate measures aimed at blocking conservation efforts for sage-grouse. One of these legislative riders has slipped through each of the last four years. Since 2015, Congress has passed an annual rider blocking FWS from even considering sage-grouse for protection under the ESA. Potential listing under the ESA may become increasingly important as the administration continues to reduce and eliminate protections for the grouse and its habitat. Moreover, legislation blocking ESA listing—the impetus for many, current conservation strategies for the bird—could ultimately contribute to the long-term decline of the species. This rider should be removed from the FY 2020 appropriations bills and any subsequent legislation.

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<sup>1</sup> 75 Fed. Reg. 13910 (March 23, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> 80 Fed. Reg. 59857 (October 2, 2015).