

Sage-Grouse Not Listed as Endangered Species

Livestock groups urge continued monitoring of public lands management decisions.

compiled by **KASEY BROWN**,
associate editor

An unprecedented conservation effort across the western United States has significantly reduced threats to the greater sage-grouse across 90% of the species' breeding habitat and enabled the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to conclude that the rangeland bird does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This collaborative, science-based greater sage-grouse strategy is the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history.

The FWS reached this determination after evaluating the bird's population status, along with the collective efforts by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS), state agencies, private landowners and other partners to conserve its habitat. Despite long-term population declines, sage-grouse remain relatively abundant and well-distributed across the species' 173-million-acre range. After a thorough analysis of scientific information and ongoing key conservation efforts and their projected benefits, the FWS has determined the bird does not face the risk of extinction now or in the foreseeable future and, therefore, does not need protection under the ESA.

"This is truly a historic effort — one that represents extraordinary collaboration across the American West," said U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. "The epic conservation effort will benefit

westerners and hundreds of species that call this iconic landscape home, while giving states, businesses and communities the certainty they need to plan for sustainable economic development."

About 45% of the grouse's habitat is on state and private lands. Efforts by private landowners in undertaking voluntary sage-grouse conservation have been an important element in the campaign.

Through the Natural Resources Conservation Services-led Sage Grouse Initiative, more than 1,100 ranchers have restored or conserved approximately 4.4 million acres of key habitat.

Through the recently announced Sage Grouse Initiative 2.0 strategy, USDA expects voluntary, private land conservation efforts to reach 8 million acres by 2018. On private and federal lands, the FWS and BLM have received commitments on 5.5 million acres through Candidate Conservation Agreements. Many of these projects also improve grazing and water supplies for ranchers, benefitting cattle herds and the long-term future of ranching in the West. States in the sage-grouse's range have also been engaged in this process.

United States Cattlemen's Association (USCA) Public Lands Committee Chairman Bert Paris, from Nevada, commented on the announcement.

"USCA and our members in the West welcome the non-listing decision,

particularly on private lands," he said. "The non-listing decision sets an example for how the next steps on this issue must happen. Instead of relying on a top-down approach to species listings and habitat management, the process must involve landowners and other users."

The Public Lands Council (PLC) and National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) are worried that the

proceeding federal and state land management plans will impede conservation efforts and range management practices already in place.

"The administration came to the logical decision not to list the sage-grouse, but went ahead and forced through their land-use plans, which are just as concerning as a listing," said Brenda Richards, PLC president. "Instead of recognizing the stewardship that land users have voluntarily put in place, they are pushing forward their agenda, which ignores multiple use on our lands."

Richards, who ranches in southern Idaho, said conservation efforts and land-use decisions are best made as close to the ground as possible. Since proper grazing is beneficial to the wildlife habitat, she said the government working in partnership with ranchers makes the most sense for the land and wildlife and is how land management and conservation efforts should be made.



"Secretary Jewell's claim that the ESA is effective and flexible is entirely flawed and misleading," said Richards. "Of the 1,500 domestic species listed since 1973, less than 2% have ever been deemed recovered. Sage-grouse habitat and population is thriving because of the work of the ranchers across the West and the states' efforts, not due to the Environmental Impact Statements, which have yet to even be implemented."

Paris added, "We understand the concerns raised by Congressman Rob Bishop (R-UT) and Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) regarding the BLM and USFS management plans and the fact that they do not recognize the hard work put in at the state level to implement successful conservation and management plans."

"The conservation on private lands in the West signals a clear relationship between the benefits of grazing and grouse habitat. This relationship holds true on public lands and the BLM and Forest Service management plans should reflect that," Paris said. "This decision shows, 'what is good for the herd is truly good for the bird.'"

The House Committee on Natural Resources was scheduled to hold a full committee hearing entitled "Respecting State Authority, Responsibilities and Expertise Regarding Resource Management and Energy Development" Sept. 30.

Editor's Note: This article is compiled from news releases from the Department of the Interior, USCA, NCBA and PLC.