

FWS urges protection of 16.5M acres for sage grouse

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The Fish and Wildlife Service advised its fellow land management agencies to impose the most stringent protections on roughly 16.5 million acres of high-value sage grouse habitat in order to save the bird from the threat of extinction.

The recommendation came from FWS Director Dan Ashe in an Oct. 27 internal [memo](#) to the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service that was obtained by Greenwire. It will likely inform BLM as it finalizes land-use plans covering 67 million acres in the bird's 11-state Western range in hopes of preventing its demise.

The areas FWS mapped in the Great Basin, western Wyoming and north-central Montana are "a subset of priority habitat most vital to the species persistence, within which we recommend the strongest levels of protection," Ashe wrote in the memo to BLM Director Neil Kornze and Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell.

The recommended sage grouse "strongholds" have been found to contain the highest densities of birds, are the most resistant and resilient to stressors like invasive species and wildfire, and are least susceptible to climate change, Ashe said. They're also predominantly located on federal lands.

They are a subset of the 75 million priority areas for conservation (PACs) that Fish and Wildlife [identified](#) as key to the bird's long-term survival and worthy of the government's limited conservation resources. Conservationists privy to FWS's internal sage grouse work are calling the areas "super PACs."

"Strong, durable, and meaningful protection of federally administered lands in these areas will provide additional certainty and help obtain confidence for long-term sage-grouse persistence," Ashe wrote. "The attached maps highlight areas where it is most important that BLM and Forest Service institutionalize the highest degree of protection to help promote persistence of the species."

BLM's land-use plan amendments, set to be finalized in late summer, will be a key factor in September when Fish and Wildlife scientists decide whether the charismatic, chest-puffing bird is in need of federal protections. More than 63 percent of the bird's 165 million acres of habitat is on federal lands, most of it managed by BLM.

Ashe yesterday told Greenwire that protection of strongholds, or lack thereof, will be a criterion in FWS's listing decision. But they're only recommendations. While Congress in December prohibited FWS from preparing an official listing rule during fiscal 2015, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell has said her department will continue to act "with urgency" to keep key sage brush habitats intact.

The listing prohibition, passed at the behest of oil and gas, mining, and ranching interests, puts a temporary block on the most stringent Endangered Species Act protections, but it has not

stopped BLM from pursuing administrative protections that conservationists say are vital for sage grouse and hundreds of other species that depend on its habitat.

The effort has required unprecedented collaboration between BLM, whose mandate requires both wildlife protections and resource extraction on its 250-million-acre estate, and FWS, whose mandate is much more focused -- to preserve wildlife and prevent extinction.

BLM calls the shots on how sage grouse habitat is managed, but FWS will likely make the final call as to whether sage grouse are listed under the Endangered Species Act, a decision that could tie BLM's hands for many years to come. Interior Department and White House officials will undoubtedly play a decisionmaking role, too.

It's against this backdrop that BLM in October asked FWS for more specific guidelines on lands it could protect to preclude the need for a listing. BLM's final resource management plans are due out in late spring.

FWS's proposed strongholds are concentrated along Nevada's border with Oregon and Idaho, an area that includes federally designated wilderness and key habitat for bighorn sheep, as well as in north-central Idaho, an area anchored by Craters of the Moon National Monument. They also include the Bear River Watershed in northeastern Utah and north-central Montana along the Missouri River, where sage grouse migrate from Canada during winter.

Ashe said many of the strongholds also provide important habitat for shrub-steppe passerine birds and mule deer winter range.

While BLM and the Forest Service are under no obligation to heed FWS's advice, Ashe said "both [have] been extraordinary in this process in consulting with us and listening to our advice."

FWS has recommended ways for BLM to reduce disturbance within the strongholds, Ashe said, while declining to discuss specifics.

BLM's draft land-use plans already contemplate a range of possible protections.

Plans in Utah would include a 4-mile buffer around sage grouse breeding grounds for new oil and gas developments. A proposed plan for Oregon would designate 5.1 million acres of "focal" areas of prime grouse habitat where conservation is focused and development is discouraged.

'It is a mistake'

"It makes sense to us that there are certain places in the core habitat area that warrant the strongest protection standards," said Ed Arnett, a biologist with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership who directs the partnership's Center for Responsible Energy Development. "Conservation plans must be sufficient to not only halt the decline of greater sage grouse but also to recover habitat conditions and increase populations."

Arnett said development in or near priority and core habitat should be restricted through "no surface occupancy," and for some areas, management should include closures and withdrawals.

Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with WildEarth Guardians, said the sage grouse strongholds must act as buffers against extinction, able to replenish a rangewide population that has fallen drastically from historical levels.

Overhead power lines could be buried, road densities could be reduced to reconnect habitat and livestock grazing could be reduced to increase cover for sage grouse, he said.

"It's worth noting that back in the 1800s, there were flocks of sage grouse that darkened the skies," Molvar said. "It appears FWS is trying to move the needle of sage grouse protection in a positive direction."

But the FWS stronghold proposal has drawn concern from Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead (R), who argued the Cowboy State's strategy to limit disturbances near core sage grouse breeding grounds already offers sufficient protections.

Wyoming's core sage grouse conservation plan, crafted by former Gov. Dave Freudenthal (D) and affirmed by Mead, has been widely touted as one of the most protective in the Western states and has already been endorsed in one BLM land-use plan. The state identified about 15 million acres of core habitat that are managed for only one activity per square mile and no more than 5 percent disturbance from all sources, Mead said.

FWS's proposed strongholds cover about 7 million acres in Wyoming and generally overlap with its core areas, Mead said. Tougher restrictions on federal lands within the core areas could push development to private lands and disrupt a delicate conservation balance currently supported by Wyoming's regulated community, Mead said.

"The designation of super-core areas or other layered restrictions will challenge and erode the partnerships built over the past eight years," Mead said in a Nov. 20 [letter](#) to Ashe obtained by Greenwire under the Freedom of Information Act. "It is a mistake to sacrifice this great collaborative effort to meet an academic exercise in mapping."

Kathleen Sgamma, vice president of government and public affairs at the Western Energy Alliance, said the stronghold maps in Ashe's memo lack enough resolution to determine possible impacts on oil and gas developers. But she called the FWS proposal reflective of Obama administration attempts to impose management uniformity in the West, despite locally tailored state plans.

"The states have been saying, 'We're different. We know how to protect the species in our states better than the federal government does,'" Sgamma said. "The federal government, in typical one-size-fits-all fashion, is pushing back against that."