

# CONSERVING GREATER SAGE-GROUSE: A SPORTSMEN'S PRIORITY

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As many western states grapple with the need to protect Greater sage-grouse, Wyoming is showing that strong and proactive policies can protect the species while at the same time stabilizing the state's economy. Those policies are providing needed certainty to the oil and gas industry, while conserving much of the core habitat that is essential for the long-term survival of the species. And because many big game species, including mule deer, elk and pronghorn, also benefit from conserving sage-grouse habitat, Wyoming is enhancing hunting opportunities that will boost the state's robust outdoor recreation industry.

It is critical that other states follow Wyoming's example, and in cooperation with their federal partners and other key stakeholders, develop strong and proactive policies to conserve Greater sage-grouse. Although the clock is ticking—the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service (the Service) will determine whether sage-grouse should be listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2015—there is still time for those states to act.

“Something is wrong. The birds are declining. We need to figure it out and stop the slide.”  
- Andrew McKean, editor, Outdoor Life Magazine

## Co-Existence Between the Greater Sage-Grouse and Oil and Gas Development Is Vital

Greater sage-grouse once ranged across seventeen states in the western United States, but due primarily to habitat loss and degradation,<sup>i</sup> their population has dropped by as much as 80 percent.<sup>ii</sup> In 2010, the Service determined that the species “warranted” a listing under the ESA, but doing so was “precluded” by higher priorities. That decision prompted a lawsuit, which the agency settled and committed to making a final listing decision by the end of September 2015.<sup>iii</sup>

A variety of factors are responsible for the loss and degradation of sage-grouse habitat, including energy development, agriculture, wildfires and the spread of invasive species.<sup>iv</sup> Oil and gas development is especially widespread, as within the sagebrush ecosystem lie the five geologic basins that contain most onshore oil and gas reserves in the Intermountain West.<sup>v</sup> Those basins also contain some of the largest and most ecologically intact sagebrush habitats and highest densities of sage-grouse in North America.<sup>vi</sup> Oil and gas development can impact sage-grouse in a variety of ways, but primarily through the fragmentation of their habitat.<sup>vii</sup> The scale of this development is extensive; according to the BLM and U.S. Geological Service, oil and gas development has “influenced” nearly 78 percent of priority habitat for sage-grouse throughout Colorado, Utah and Wyoming.<sup>viii</sup>





Numerous studies have concluded that the impacts of this widespread development on sage-grouse have been significant.<sup>ix</sup> In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, for example, which has been drilled intensively for coal-bed methane, sage-grouse populations have declined by 79 percent.<sup>x</sup> And in the bird's eastern range, which includes Wyoming, the number of producing wells has tripled over the past thirty years—from 11,231 in the 1980s to 33,280 in 2007.<sup>xi</sup> Without new policies to guide oil and gas development (and other uses) throughout sage-grouse's entire range, the Service predicts that oil and gas development will reduce sage-grouse populations even further—by as much as 19 percent.<sup>xiii</sup>

## The Wyoming Strategy: Proactively Managing for Sage-Grouse Conservation and Oil and Gas Development

Wyoming is home to 40 percent of the world's sage-grouse population.<sup>xiii</sup> For that reason, and because of continued conflict with energy development and other economically important industries, then Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal launched an unprecedented effort in 2007 to develop stronger policies for sage-grouse—policies that would sustain and grow Wyoming's economy, while also giving sage-grouse adequate habitat in large, intact landscapes with minimal disturbances. The governor brought many of the key stakeholders to the table, including members of the oil and gas industry, conservation community and local government, as well as the Service and BLM.

In 2008, based on the collaborative efforts of the stakeholder group, Governor Freudenthal issued an executive order establishing the Wyoming "core area" policy.<sup>xiv</sup> Although the policy comes with detailed prescriptions for oil and gas development and other uses, the goals are straightforward: maintain and enhance sage-grouse populations throughout the state by identifying and limiting activities in "core" habitat areas.<sup>xv</sup> The policy requires sacrifices and commitments from all stakeholders, but has so far stood the test of time. It has provided greater certainty to the oil and gas industry (and others), while also limiting the amount of development in "core" habitat.

Penny Bellah, a senior regulatory analyst for Samson Oil and Gas, Wyoming native and member of the governor's stakeholder group, spoke to that certainty, "For my industry, having set rules that are not constantly changing allows us to plan." While the range of interested parties could have caused an impasse in the planning process, she says, "For being a very diverse team with many interests, I thought it went fairly smoothly."<sup>xvi</sup> Rancher, county commissioner and member of the governor's stakeholder group, Douglas Thompson echoed those sentiments, "The plan works because it is a balanced strategy to allow some development, while conserving the most habitat and birds. One set of rules for everyone."<sup>xvii</sup>

"Losing the sage grouse as a regal game bird would be a sad day indeed, much more unfortunate than the complete extinction of the passenger pigeon or dodo bird, because this is 2014. We should know better."

- Jay Hanson, editor Montana Sporting Journal



As for limiting development in “core” habitat, a recent study funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service shows that the state’s policy is having a positive impact.<sup>xxiii</sup> That study uses data from the BLM, which has largely adopted the governor’s “core area” approach for public lands in Wyoming, and concludes that since the policy went into effect, the amount of “core” habitat leased for oil and gas development has declined by 40 percent.<sup>xxix</sup> Additional data from the BLM supports these findings.<sup>xx</sup> All this without sacrificing output, as Wyoming remains only second to Texas in total energy production.<sup>xxi</sup>

With Wyoming’s success in mind, here are three elements found in the Wyoming plan that should be mirrored in other state plans to ensure durable conservation, while allowing flexibility to manage existing multiple uses:

- 1) Develop a state plans with multiple stakeholders input and buy-in on effective conservation measures that will maintain sustainable and harvestable populations;
- 2) Utilize the best available information to identify key habitat areas that must be targeted for protection, restoration or enhancement to meet current and future goals for grouse;
- 3) Institute a statutory body of diverse stakeholders that advises and holds the state accountable for implementing actions, enforcing regulations, and ensuring adequate completion of sage-grouse conservation plans and any proposed and permitted activities in priority habitat.

## Conserving Grouse, Enhancing Hunting and Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

Greater sage-grouse are an “umbrella” species. That means a wide range of other species stand to benefit from efforts to conserve sage-grouse habitat. In Wyoming, there is extensive overlap between sage-grouse habitat and habitat for several important big game species, including elk, mule deer and pronghorn.<sup>xxii</sup> For instance, 45 percent of pronghorn “crucial winter range” (a key seasonal habitat) overlaps with “core” habitat for sage-grouse, while 33 percent of mule deer “crucial winter range” overlaps with “core” habitat.<sup>xxiii</sup>



Conserving and restoring big game habitat means something to the people of Wyoming, where 1 of every 4 citizens identify themselves as a “sportsperson” (a hunter or angler).<sup>xxiv</sup> And big game hunting, in particular, is one of the most popular wildlife-based activities in the state. In 2011, hunters logged almost 1.5 million days pursuing big game in Wyoming.<sup>xxv</sup>



Wildlife-based recreation is also big business in Wyoming, accounting for \$1.1 billion in spending in 2011.<sup>xxvi</sup> Big game hunting was responsible for almost 20 percent of that total.<sup>xxvii</sup> Moreover, hunting is part of a larger outdoor recreation economy that supports 50,000 jobs and generates \$1.1 billion in wages and salaries every year in Wyoming.<sup>xxviii</sup> In Cody, Wyoming alone, wildlife-based recreation is responsible for 1 of every 10 jobs and contributes over \$30 million to the local economy annually.<sup>xxix</sup> Thus, by taking strong, proactive steps to conserve Greater sage-grouse, Wyoming has not only helped secure a better future for this iconic species. It has also invested in the conservation of big game and wildlife-based recreation that generates hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue for the state each year.

## Conclusion

Oil and gas development is one of the primary reasons why sage-grouse are now being considered for an ESA listing. Proactively managing that threat in priority habitats, which are largely on public lands, is essential to the long-term survival of the species. And what protects sage-grouse also benefits big game and the wildlife-based recreation and economies that rely on them.

Wyoming has shown that by proactively engaging with its federal partners and other key stakeholders and enacting strong measures to conserve key habitat, real progress can be made and certainty can be provided for all. The challenge, now, is for the remaining states to follow suit before the final listing decision in 2015. States like Colorado, Montana and Nevada now have the opportunity to act, and engage with the BLM on developing plans that balance needed levels of protection with energy development and other multiple uses of these public lands.

**“Hunters across the West are heartbroken at the prospect of losing sage grouse as part of America’s hunting heritage. It’s not too late to conserve sage grouse and their native habitats. We only have one chance to get this right, and now is the time.”**

-Land Tawney, executive director of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers



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