

Senate Subcommittee holds hearing on federal sage grouse conservation plans

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The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, and Mining held a hearing to evaluate the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) sage grouse conservation amendments and address concerns over the incorporation of individual state plans into the federal initiative.

The greater sage grouse is an obligate species, meaning that it depends on a particular habitat for survival—in this case, sagebrush. As the sagebrush declines, so too does the greater sage grouse, making it the “canary in a coal mine” for the entire sagebrush steppe ecosystem, which is home to more than 350 other wildlife species and is currently one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the U.S.

This chicken-sized bird was once prolific in the west, but its population has declined from 16 million to approximately 500,000 in recent years, and it occupies only 56 percent of its original range. The decline largely reflects the increase of a flammable, invasive plant known as cheatgrass, which fuels more intense wildfires, as well as conifer encroachment, excessive grazing, and habitat fragmentation.

In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined that due to habitat loss and the absence of legal protections, the greater sage grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Fearing the economic implications of an endangered status, federal agencies, states, and private landowners have attempted to block the sage grouse's listing under the ESA. This has led to state conservation efforts, such as the Oregon Greater Sage Grouse Action Plan.

In September 2015, BLM and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) issued amendments and revisions to 98 land use plans that would guide land management on 67 million acres of the grouse's habitat on BLM-administered lands in 11 western states.

The final BLM Greater Sage Grouse plans offer the highest level of protection in Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) considered essential for species survival, where new land use will be extremely limited. More flexible land and resource management will be allowed in lesser priority habitat. The plan also aims to improve habitat conditions and reduce fire threats through cheatgrass management.

At the Senate hearing, Jim Lyons of the Department of the Interior described the effort as a “landscape-scale, science-based, collaborative conservation strategy,” that will provide “sufficient consistency and certainty... [as a] range-wide conservation strategy.” Lyons also emphasized collaboration with local stakeholders in order to “[provide] the necessary flexibility to be responsive to unique landscapes, habitats, priorities, and approaches in each state.”

Acknowledging state and BLM conservation efforts, FWS, BLM, and USFS decided against listing the greater sage grouse as “endangered” on September 22, 2015.

However, nine months after the announcement, “no instruction memoranda have been finalized, no final field guides have been made public,” and agency staff have not begun to implement the BLM plans, according to Committee Chairman John Barrasso (R-WY).

Moreover, Chairman Barrasso and several panelists expressed concern that BLM's “one size fits all policy” ignores sound science behind individual state plans and disregards decades-long efforts already in place.

For example, Brenda Richards, President of Public Lands Council in Idaho, credited efforts of the Sage Grouse Local Working Group, established by concerned ranchers in 1995, for successful habitat management in Owyhee County. Similarly, Kathleen Clark, Director of the Utah Public Land Policy Coordinating Office, noted her state's \$50 million investment since 2006 into sage grouse conservation efforts.

The success of these local and state programs has led to thousands of acres of habitat restored or protected and increases in grouse populations by 58 percent since 2013, according to Clark.

Concern was also raised that federal programs would come at the expense of grazing, mineral extraction, oil and natural gas

production, and other land uses. According to Clark, in Utah alone, \$2.5 billion comes from economic activity in sage grouse habitat annually, much of which would be banned or severely restricted based on BLM's proposed habitat classification scheme. Already, over 480,000 acres of oil and gas leases were deferred in 2015 due to federal sage grouse plans, argued Clark. Richards voiced concerns from the livestock industry, arguing that many of the proposed restrictions target grazing, even though grazing is not a primary threat and may be used as a management tool to reduce fire fuel loads.

The federal plans also call for the withdrawal 10 million acres from new mining operations, based on claims that the lands are not highly prospective; however, Katie Sweeney of the National Mining Association (NMA) argued that USGS data and 6,000 existing mining claims in the area rebut this assertion. According to Sweeney, these claims represent only 1 percent of the 10 million acre area withdrawn and affect less land than a single large wildfire, "call[ing] into question the necessity of the entire withdrawal."

Lyons defended BLM's collaborative work and economic considerations, testifying that extra coordination with states and stakeholders affected by the plans was the source of unexpected delays.

Chairman Barrasso summarized the hearing with a single thought: "serious concerns remain."

Sources: Bureau of Land Management, National Mining Association, National Public Radio, Oregon Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Policy Analysis Center for Western Public Lands, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Western Energy Alliance

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