

Oregon's All Lands – All Threats Sage Grouse Conservation Action Plan

Working Draft
Version __
Last updated December 11, 2014

Forward/Acknowledgements/Message from the SageCon Conveners

[TO BE ADDED]

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SECTION 1: OVERVIEW

A Call to Action

This action plan presents Oregon's vision for how it will continue to conserve Greater sage-grouse in the eleven Oregon counties containing sage-grouse habitat. While the focus of this action plan is on non-federal lands, the plan describes how a range of partners will work together, including how they will coordinate with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This action plan was developed through a collaborative effort of local landowners, other private interests, counties, conservation organizations, the State of Oregon, BLM, the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). That collaborative effort has been led by the Oregon Sage Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon), but also encompasses other key efforts including the work of the Oregon Cattlemen and the Harney County Soil and Water Conservation District to develop conservation agreements on federal and non-federal rangelands. This Action Plan documents those important conservation actions, as well as other existing and planned actions in Oregon.

The purpose of Oregon's All-Lands All-Threats (ALAT) Sage Grouse Plan is to document how Oregon is conserving the Greater Sage Grouse and its habitat. The Plan has been designed in a manner that aligns conservation with the economic and social health of Oregon communities. The plan addresses both the forthcoming USFWS's sage grouse listing decision in 2015, and supports long-term community and economic sustainability in central and eastern Oregon. By addressing identified threats to sage-grouse habitat, the ALAT Sage Grouse Plan conserves not only sage grouse, but other species dependent on the same landscape, while also working to support traditional ranching and farming communities and emerging industries such as mining and renewable energy.

Oregon's eastern landscape is one of rich ecological and cultural heritage. Working lands are the primary economic driver of the region, and the glue for. There are millions of acres of sagebrush in eastern Oregon, with playas, deep cut river canyons, and forests. Pronghorn, elk, grouse, shorebirds, trout, salmon and kit fox are interwoven with cattle, sheep and stock and feral horses. Sage-grouse are an iconic species that have co-existed with tribes, ranchers, and communities since humans arrived in Oregon.

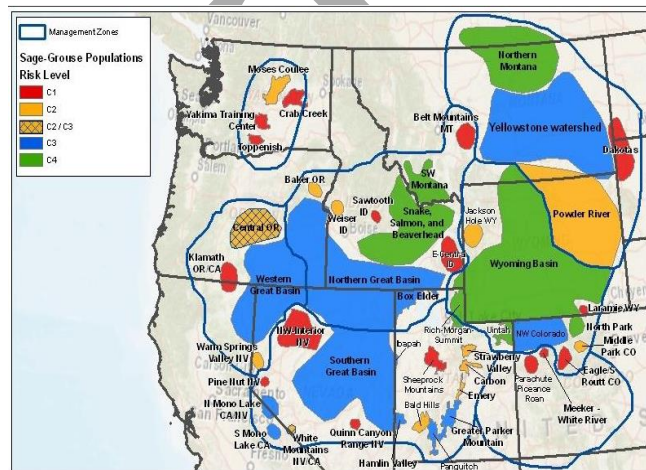
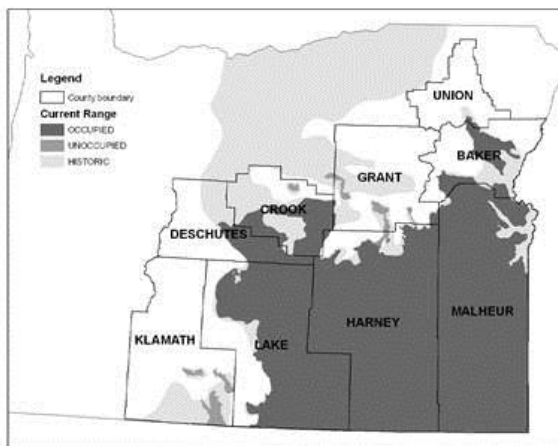
This Plan is a call to action. It recognizes that the health of eastern Oregon communities are tied inextricably with a healthy sage-grouse habitat has the Greater Sage Grouse that depend on it. It recognizes that sage-grouse conservation will succeed only if the grouse are recognized as an asset that will benefit communities and landowners as they become healthier.

Overview: Greater Sage Grouse Population and Habitat Trends in Oregon

The USFWS (utilizing work of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA)) has identified two management zones for Greater Sage-grouse that include areas in Oregon: the Snake River Plain (Management Zone IV), and the Northern Great Basin (Management Zone V). 75 FR 13919 (2010). The population in the Snake River Plain is

estimated to be in long-term decline (1965-2003). 75 FR 13922. In the Northern Great Basin there is no statistically detectable trend in population. 75 FR 13922 (2010). Since 1980, the overall population in Oregon has declined somewhat, but has been cyclical. Statewide spring population trends were relatively stable for the assessment period (1980-2010) with population increases in most areas from the mid 1990s through 2006. There have been wide fluctuations in annual counts of males during this period. It is important that planning and evaluation account for this variation. Currently, the statewide population for sage grouse in Oregon is below the benchmark in the ODFW Sage Grouse Conservation Strategy, but it has not reached levels that are outside the range of natural variation.

Sage-Grouse Habitat: Oregon and the Region



Since 2005, there has been a gross decrease of nearly 3% in sagebrush due primarily to wildfire (Table 23). However, the net loss when offset by the acres juniper removal is approximately 1% (Table 24), notwithstanding the total acres lost is noteworthy. Thus, statewide the habitat goal is being maintained or at least within a margin of measurement error. In 2009, ODFW and NRCS embarked on a strategic plan to effectively spend Farm Bill Program funding (Environmental Quality Incentives Program [EQIP], Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program [WHIP]). This effort was led through the NRCS’s National Sage-grouse Initiative.

Overview: Primary and Secondary Threats to the Greater Sage Grouse in Oregon

This Plan utilizes several sources of information to identify the primary and secondary threats to Greater Sage-grouse in Oregon. Those sources include the Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon (2011, ODFW), the Greater Sage-grouse Conservation Objectives Team: Final Report (USFWS, 2013), and the Warranted But Precluded determination of the USFWS in 2010 (75 FR 13910, USFWS 2010).

The primary threats to the Greater Sage Grouse and its habitat in Oregon stem from the combination of wildfire, the spread of exotic grasses, and the spread of juniper. Juniper encroachment adds to fuel loads and reduces soil moisture, leading to a vicious cycle that both increases the likelihood and severity of fire, and reduces the likelihood of reestablishment of sagebrush. To a large extent, detrimental impacts from these threats vary spatially along an elevational gradient. Encroaching juniper and other conifers primarily affect mid-to-upper elevations where sufficient precipitation allows tree establishment, while altered fire regimes and annual grasses are of most concern at low elevation, warm and dry sites where ecosystem resilience to disturbance and resistance to invasion are low (Chambers et al., *In Press*).

Secondary threats to sage grouse include disturbance from infrastructure (fences, roads, and electrical lines) and associated noise and predation. In the past, conversion of sagebrush to cultivated fields has reduced the extent of sagebrush habitat. However, cultivated agriculture is not expected to expand significantly into sage brush areas in the future. Renewable energy development and associated infrastructure was initially identified as a potential future threat for sage grouse, but changes in energy markets and the lack of significant transmission capacity in the part of Oregon make that threat less likely. Mining is another potential long-term threat to sage grouse and sagebrush habitat, however there is relatively little current activity. The full range of threats that have been identified in Oregon are described in Table X.

Overview: Ecological Approach

The Greater Sage Grouse is a wide ranging species that requires a variety of plant community types within sagebrush habitat to meet the needs of its annual life cycle: lekking habitat (areas used for communal breeding displays) often contains little to no shrub component, a strong perennial grass component is needed for nesting habitat, forb rich communities are needed for brood rearing, and relatively dense stands of sagebrush are required during winter months. This Plan, while it concentrates on the habitat needs of sage-grouse, also addresses sagebrush habitats, which are important to a number of other species (Maser et al. 1984, Rowland et al. 2005, Hanser and Knick 2011). From an ecological perspective, this Plan works to promote intact and functioning sagebrush landscapes.

In addressing the conservation of sage-grouse, the Plan recognizes that its geographic range overlaps the ranges of many other species, some of which are federally-listed as threatened or endangered, are candidates for listing, or are closely associated with sagebrush communities. Consequently, other species associated with sagebrush were considered in developing this Plan. The Plan considers the relative benefits to other species in developing conservation measures for sage-grouse. Examples of species that could benefit from the suggested approach include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus hemionus*), pronghorn (*Antilocarpa americana*), pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*), black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*), sagebrush vole (*Lemmiscus curtatus*), Brewers sparrow (*Spizella breweri*), black-throated sparrow (*Amphispiza bilineata*), sage thrasher (*Oreoscoptes motanus*), sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli*), loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*), horned lark (*Chondestes grammacus*), western meadowlark

(*Sturnella neglecta*), northern sagebrush lizard (*Sceloporus graciosus*), and short-horned lizard (*Phrynosoma douglassi*). Maintaining connectivity and reduction of fragmentation of sagebrush habitats is key to the long-term welfare of all these sagebrush associated species (Connelly et al. 2004, Hanser and Knick 2011).

Core Areas represent ecologically-based conservation tools. Conservation of habitat within Core Areas is designed to maintain a viable and connected set of populations (Doherty et al 2011). If conservation recommendations are fully implemented in Core Areas they will protect approximately 90% of the breeding populations of sage-grouse in Oregon, while covering only 38% of the species' range. Thus, this approach identifies the most productive landscapes for sage-grouse, ones that occupy only a fraction of the sagebrush biome in which they occur. The Core Area approach and associated maps provide the ecological basis for land use planners, land managers and the public to conserve the areas of greatest biological importance to the persistence sage-grouse populations. These areas are targeted for conservation actions. Low Density Areas are sagebrush habitat where impacts to sage-grouse populations are less of a risk, and where there are opportunities for mitigation Reducing Threats - Oregon's Strategic Approach

Large-scale threats (e.g., conifer encroachment, invasive annual grasses, and catastrophic wildfire), and limited resources to address them, necessitate a strategic approach to conservation implementation that uses the best available science to target actions where sage-grouse benefits can be maximized. Spatial analyses of both sage-grouse population data and key threats show that neither is randomly distributed across the landscape (Hagen 2011,). Oregon's strategic approach to address these threats combines this information to help focus conservation actions in the right places.

Core areas provide a strong ecological foundation to help focus threat reduction efforts where sage-grouse are most likely to benefit (Hagen 2011). The USFWS has indicated its support for the core area strategy by explicitly calling for PACs (i.e., core areas) to be the primary focus of targeted conservation efforts (USFWS 2013). PACs are key habitats identified by state sage-grouse conservation plans or through other sage-grouse conservation efforts (USFWS 2013). Low density habitat areas outside core represent a lower priority for conservation action but in some cases will be important for improved connectivity between PACs (e.g., genetic and habitat linkages) and seasonal habitats that are essential to meeting the year-round needs of sage-grouse.

SageCon's ALAT approach prioritizes actions in and around sage-grouse core areas to help maintain large and intact sagebrush landscapes and maximize biological benefits to sage-grouse populations. Where resources allow, low density areas outside core will be addressed to expand, secure, and connect priority habitat. In addition to focusing on key threats where they are most problematic, strategies prioritize prevention of further habitat fragmentation on relatively intact sites over restoration of lands where undesirable shifts in vegetation have already occurred. Taking action to prevent damaging ecological thresholds from being crossed is more likely to be effective, and less costly, than restoring degraded sites (Davies et al. 2011, Arkle et al. 2014).

Overview: Collaboration

True to Oregon's heritage and spirit of cooperation to overcome a challenge, it will take many people working together to reach our goals of a sustainable population of sage-grouse across the sagebrush range consistent with a healthy rural economy and thriving communities. In eastern Oregon, BLM manages 75% of the core area of sage grouse habitat, and BLM lands contain 68% of sage grouse leks. Ranchers, Tribes, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD's), the NRCS, and conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA), the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) and others are already working hard to conserve the Greater Sage Grouse in Oregon.

For generations, livestock and sage-grouse have shared the landscape to the benefit of all. As described in this Plan, and as documented in the Harney SWCD CCAA and the Oregon Cattlemens' CCA, ranching is *not* inconsistent with healthy sagebrush habitat. In fact, the agreements the USFWS has developed, and the All-Lands All-Threat Mitigation Program, are both designed to align sage-grouse conservation with economic returns to ranchers.

More broadly, as the natural resources of eastern Oregon are utilized for energy, mining, infrastructure and other uses, those activities can be shaped and guided to avoid adverse effects on the Greater Sage Grouse. That economic activity also provides the opportunity to partner with the private sector in generating resources for conservation measures that address the primary threats – fire and invasive weeds, grasses and juniper. By designing a program around Core Areas that protect 86% of the population in 36% of the habitat, this Plan creates a framework for improving the social, economic and ecological conditions in eastern Oregon.

In 2010, the Oregon Governor's Office and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) began convening meetings in response to the USFWS determination that listing the Greater Sage Grouse as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) was "warranted but precluded." These meetings led to the formation of the Renewable Energy and Eastern Oregon Landscape Conservation Partnership (the "REECon Partnership"). However, with the USFWS review of the listing status for sage-grouse eminent, the REECon Partnership recognized there was an immediate need to broaden their work to include a wider range of interests, including other natural and anthropogenic threats across the landscape. The evolution of REECon into the Sage Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon) has led to a much broader effort to support sage-grouse conservation. Building on two years of the REECon Partnership's efforts related to renewable energy development, the SageCon Partnership was initiated in September 2012 to widen the scope of that effort and address other potential threats to sage-grouse habitat and conservation in eastern Oregon. This Action Plan is the result of that collaboration.

Into the Future - Implementing the Plan

Implementing the All-Lands All-Threats Conservation Action Plan will require the sustained work of many people and organizations over a long period of time. To succeed, these efforts need to be tracked, coordinated, and (where needed) modified as more information becomes available and as conditions change. The Oregon ALAT Plan will continue to be a collaborative effort between the BLM, NRCS, ODFW, other state agencies, counties, land owners and managers, and conservation interests. This work will be coordinated through a Memorandum of Agreement between the partners as the basis for several implementing mechanism. Those mechanisms are summarized in the table below, and are described in more detail in section 4.

Level One: Intergovernmental Coordination
Memorandum of Agreement for Coordination and Governance: State of Oregon, Oregon Counties, Bureau of Land Management, Fish & Wildlife Service.
Key Elements of Agreement:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performance outcomes:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Population metrics<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Maintain or enhance abundance and distribution at the 2003 spring breeding population level - approximately 30,000 birds – over the next 50 years, based on a 5-year moving average▪ Regional population objectives for five regions○ Habitat metrics<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Maintain core areas containing 90 percent of the breeding population▪ Maintain ≥70% of sage-grouse range as sagebrush habitat in advanced structural stages (classes 3, 4 or 5, with an emphasis on classes 4 & 5)▪ Disturbance threshold for large-scale uses of three percent in core areas▪ Residential, rangeland, and agricultural uses are exempt from any threshold, but are subject to existing regulations and are monitored• Mitigation Framework: Consistent use of a statewide, all lands, mitigation framework by all permitting and land management entities (BLM, DSL, DLCD, DEQ, DOGAMI, ODOE, counties). Includes:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Avoid, minimize and mitigate hierarchy○ Consistent debiting and crediting metrics• Coordination, Monitoring and Reporting: Central governance board to coordinate federal, state and local efforts, along with central registry for monitoring

Level Two: State/Regional/Local Actions

LCDC Regional Sage Grouse Backstop/Safe Harbor

- State rule assures that avoid, minimize and mitigate hierarchy is applied consistently, that all disturbance changes to sage grouse habitat are monitored, and that if disturbance in any PAC is growing rapidly or exceeds thresholds, adaptive changes occur to slow or reverse trend.

County land use programs

- Counties may either: (a) develop county-specific programs consistent with the state framework; or (b) rely on the regional safe harbor.

State agency programs

- Permitting and land management agencies make regulatory decisions and management actions consistent with state framework.

In addition to the overall management of the All-Lands All-Threats Program, Oregon is working with the BLM and a range of partners to administer a mitigation program that provides consistent direction across federal, state and non-federal lands. The following figure summarizes how the All-Lands Mitigation Program will be administered.

Organizational Structure of the Oregon Sage-Grouse Program

