

## Imperiled Species Fact Sheet: Greater Sage-Grouse

### Species Background:

The greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is an imperiled western bird and ambassador for the Sagebrush Sea, a landscape that is vital to fish and wildlife, recreation, western communities and sustainable economic development. Conserving this iconic bird will help protect a quintessential western landscape and hundreds of other species that also depend on it. As many as 16 million greater sage-grouse once ranged across 297 million acres of sagebrush grasslands in the West. Today, sage-grouse range is little more than half of what it once was and populations have declined more than 90 percent from historical levels, according to some estimates. Remaining sage-grouse populations are threatened by habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation. Nearly half of sage-grouse habitat has been lost to agriculture and development, and less than 3 percent of the bird's current range is federally protected. The remainder is compromised by poorly managed oil and gas drilling, livestock grazing, mining, unnatural fire, invasive weeds, off-road vehicles, roads, fences, pipelines and utility corridors.



In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) found that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the ESA, but other, higher priorities precluded the agency from proposing a listing rule at that time.<sup>1</sup> The 2010 finding identified the primary threat to the species as the loss and fragmentation of sagebrush grasslands, coupled with a lack of regulatory mechanisms to protect habitat across the bird's range. Recognizing the urgent need for conservation action, the Obama administration took the extraordinary step of amending nearly one hundred land use plans across the West with new conservation prescriptions for sage-grouse. The new plans, developed with public input and in coordination with western states, ensures continued land use and development of public lands and resources while also improving management of more than 60 million acres in the Sagebrush Sea. Citing these final plans and other factors, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined in October 2015 that the sage-grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act at this time.<sup>2</sup>

### Congressional Actions:

In the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, there have been a dozen legislative attempts to delay a potential listing for the greater sage-grouse or interfere with the federal planning process to conserve the bird. For the second time, the omnibus bill to fund the government in FY 2016 (H.R. 2029, Consolidated Appropriations Act) included a rider preventing a listing for greater-sage-grouse for at least a year. Language inserted into the FY 2017 House National Defense Authorization Act for (H.R. 4909) would eviscerate the new federal land use plans by subjecting sage-grouse conservation to weaker and inconsistent state guidance, effectively abrogating control of tens of millions of acres of public lands to western state governors. The legislation would also grant governors power to veto the Department of the Interior's current proposal to withdraw essential sage-grouse habitat from hardrock mining, which is a critical component of the national conservation strategy.

Enacting this or similar legislation would almost certainly lead to future declines in sage-grouse populations, yet the same bill would also prohibit the Service from considering the species for listing under the Endangered Species Act for at least a decade. This legislation would upend years of work by federal agencies, states, and local stakeholders to revise the federal land use plans and throw management of these lands into chaos. The end result: At least \$45 million tax dollars wasted on federal planning processes and the grouse facing extinction again.

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<sup>1</sup> 75 Fed. Reg. 13910 (March 23, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> 80 Fed. Reg. 59857 (October 2, 2015).