

Oregon's Sage-grouse Action Plan

Land use and development

Fish Creek on Steens Mountain (Harney County)

Oregon's land use system has done a good job

With a few exceptions, urban, residential and industrial development are not a major threat to sage-grouse in Oregon. Oregon's land use system has done a good job of containing development and maintaining the wide-open spaces that support sage-grouse in eastern Oregon.

Development is one of the few threats to sage-grouse the state can directly control. To avoid new restrictions under the federal Endangered Species Act, Oregon needs to show it can effectively manage development to protect sage-grouse.

Focus on protecting priority areas for conservation (PACs)

Habitat protection measures will focus most heavily on "priority areas for conservation" (PACs). These are core areas that encompass about one-third of Oregon's sage-grouse habitat but support more than 90 percent of the bird's populations.

Strengthening state land use rules will limit development in PACs and require compensation for impacts on any sage-grouse habitat through conservation investments. These are designed to provide a net conservation benefit for sage-grouse through a combined federal-state mitigation program.

These land use rules will provide stronger protection for sage-grouse habitat with greater flexibility to accommodate needed development than is available under current policies. The rules will address the potential for a small set of large scale development activity that could occur in sage-grouse habitat.

Avoid, Minimize, Mitigate

To be permitted, projects must demonstrate that impacts cannot be avoided; seek to minimize the impacts; and compensate for any remaining unavoidable impacts through mitigation (e.g., habitat restoration or enhancement) that provides a net conservation benefit for sage-grouse.

Oregon will manage its land use system to ensure development in PACs does not exceed three percent, with increments of allowable development metered over time based on trends in sage-grouse population and habitat availability. Sage-grouse are not typically found in areas where levels of human development exceed three percent. Current levels of development in core habitat are less than 1.5 percent in most of Oregon's 20 PACs.



Strengthening Oregon's land use rules will provide more protection for sage-grouse habitat with greater flexibility to accommodate needed development in rural communities.

Counties and the state working together

Sage-grouse counties (primarily Harney, Malheur, Lake, Crook, Deschutes, Grant and Baker) are working closely with the DLCD and ODFW to develop rules to guide a small set of potential future development.

Local governments can retain responsibility for permitting projects in sage-grouse habitat under local land use ordinances if their processes meet standards in the Land Conservation and Development Commission's new rule. Alternatively, local governments may decide to let the state take on permitting responsibilities.

Implications for future development

Development pressure is generally low across most of southeast Oregon's remaining sage-grouse habitat. Existing laws strictly limit most forms of development outside urban growth boundaries. Most sage-grouse habitat is under little pressure for development because PACs in particular tend to be found in relatively remote areas with few roads or residences and little surface water.

Energy development may face conflicts with sage-grouse conservation needs in a few areas, but the state's analysis suggests that major new renewable energy projects are unlikely in the next 10 years.

Oregon's high desert offers abundant opportunities for development of solar – and to a lesser extent, wind – facilities outside of sage-grouse habitat. Potential for development of oil and gas and new mining operations is low in most areas. Major new electrical transmission lines may face challenges in avoiding sage-grouse habitat (e.g., the proposed Boardman to Hemingway project's route across Baker and Malheur counties) but the state's plan is designed to accommodate essential infrastructure projects.

Rural residential and agricultural development are expected to have negligible impacts on sage-grouse habitat in the near future and effects of the new regulations on these uses will be minimal.



Elkhorn Wind Farm (Baker County)

Development pressure is generally low across most of southeast Oregon's remaining sage-grouse habitat.



Roaring Springs Ranch (Harney County)



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Why care about sage-grouse?

Three Forks, Malheur County

Once abundant across much of eastern Oregon, sage-grouse today are in serious trouble – for reasons that have significant implications for ranchers and rural communities and a wide variety of other wildlife.

Fire and invasive species threaten sage-grouse and communities

Large fires have burned through almost two million acres of Oregon sage-grouse habitat in recent years, fueled in part by the spread of cheatgrass and other invasive, non-native weeds.

Expansion of juniper and other conifers into formerly wide-open rangelands across millions of acres has further reduced habitat for sage-grouse, which avoid areas with even a few trees.

Fires and invasive species also pose threats to ranching operations that depend on healthy native rangelands for forage for their livestock. Declining rangeland health undermines the financial viability of agricultural businesses that are the historic foundation of the rural economy in southeast Oregon.

Pending Endangered Species Act decision

A pending decision on listing sage-grouse under the federal Endangered Species Act could trigger expansive new regulatory constraints on private landowners and public land management activities. Uncertainty around an ESA listing puts a cloud over existing operations and future economic development opportunities in a large part of rural Oregon.



Sage-grouse are a compelling ecological indicator of what's happening in the wide-open sagebrush landscape that spans one-third of the state.





Why Oregon needs to act now

Unprecedented collaboration among private and public stakeholders has put Oregon in a strong position to implement a comprehensive “all lands, all threats” strategy to conserve sage-grouse and create more resilient habitats and communities across southeast Oregon.

Oregon’s innovative approach has already won widespread recognition and will weigh heavily in the ultimate decision on any ESA listing. By acting now, the state can take the lead in responding to these issues before they become a full-blown crisis and preserve its uniquely Oregon approach to stewardship of our natural heritage.



By acting now,
Oregon is
taking the lead
to respond to
the threats to
sage-grouse
and rural
communities.



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Fire and invasives

Juniper expansion into sagebrush steppe on Horse Ridge (Deschutes County)

Fire and invasive species: The biggest threats in Oregon

The biggest threats to sage-grouse in Oregon are fire and invasive species.

Large wildfires in recent years have eliminated vast expanses of the sagebrush that sage-grouse depend on for their survival. Invasion of sagebrush habitat by non-native annual grasses and native juniper has made large areas unsuitable for sage-grouse.

Exotic annual grasses like cheatgrass and other weeds fuel more frequent sagebrush fires and crowd out native species. Juniper's expansion into sagebrush steppe, in part a result of decades of fire suppression, results in abandonment by sage-grouse, which typically avoid areas with trees.

With more frequent and larger fires, and juniper continuing its dramatic expansion, sage-grouse today are dependent on a dwindling base of habitat.

Fire and invasives, driven largely by natural forces operating on a landscape scale, are not particularly susceptible to traditional government regulatory strategies. Instead, scientists say, Oregon will need to invest in strategic actions designed to protect and restore the health of the sagebrush ecosystem.

Early action is key

State and federal investments in on-the-ground work to address fire and invasive species (non-native annual grasses and juniper) will be targeted strategically to priority areas and actions that are most likely to generate sustainable benefits for sage-grouse.



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Cheatgrass-dominated sagebrush steppe in Malheur County

Managing for resilient landscapes

Management strategies will be tailored to fit site-specific needs based on the land's inherent ecological resilience to disturbance and resistance to invasive species. Under this science-based framework, resilience refers to a sagebrush ecosystem's ability to bounce back from disturbances like fire and grazing; resistance is the system's natural ability to keep out invading plant species.

Addressing Invasive species

Building on past strategic efforts for juniper removal near leks, habitat restoration efforts will target sagebrush habitats in areas that are more resistant and resilient. These are typically cooler and wetter sites, often at higher elevation or on north-facing slopes. Juniper removal and replanting of native bunchgrasses have much higher success rates on these sites.

Addressing Fire

Measures to limit the spread of fires and invasive weeds will focus on areas with lower natural resistance and resilience. Restoring sagebrush habitat at lower elevations in hotter, drier settings is extremely difficult, reinforcing the importance of protecting intact habitats in these areas. Increased support for local Rangeland Fire Protection Districts, strategically placed fuel breaks, and improved post-fire re-seeding practices will help limit large fires and reduce the risk of invasion by non-native annual grasses.

Early investments are critical

State and federal agencies are targeting funding to the highest priorities across public and private ownerships. Oregon brought together federal, state and local agencies, landowners and other stakeholders to develop and implement a sage-grouse conservation approach that aligns funding from multiple sources. A joint state-federal mitigation program will steer funding from development fees toward projects that have potential to generate larger-scale habitat benefits.

The Governor's proposed 2015-17 budget proposes a significant investment of resources to address fire and invasives, including strengthening local Rangeland Fire Protection Districts. The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's new Focused Investments Program will consider a six-year, multi-million dollar commitment to local sage-grouse conservation efforts. In addition, stakeholders are advancing proposals in the 2015 legislature to create new funding sources, including taxes on wild bird seed and mineral supplements used by livestock producers.



Post-fire cheatgrass in Trout Creek Mountains (Harney County)



Juniper cutting near Drewsey (Harney County)



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Agriculture has an important role

Well-managed livestock grazing and other traditional ranching practices are not considered major threats to sage-grouse in Oregon. Agriculture, the dominant land use in sage-grouse habitat, has an important role in the state's sage-grouse conservation strategy.

Most sage-grouse habitat has a long history of grazing, and most livestock operations involve grazing on both public and private lands. Although sage-grouse use sagebrush habitats throughout the year, the birds depend on seasonal wetlands in late spring and summer to rear their young. Most of the wet meadows and flood irrigated hay fields are in private ownership.

Ranchers and public lands managers are the primary stewards of sage-grouse habitat and are important partners in implementing conservation efforts. Private landowners have a lot to lose if sage-grouse declines lead to new regulatory constraints.

Private landowners and public land managers must take a leading role in combatting the two biggest threats to sage-grouse in Oregon – fires and invasive species. Most of that work is expected to also improve grazing opportunities. As the cattleman say: what's good for the bird is good for the herd.

Oregon's approach - CCAAs

Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), ranchers and other stakeholders have developed umbrella conservation agreements. The agreements protect participating landowners from more restrictions under the Endangered Species Act if they commit to managing livestock grazing and other land uses in ways that help conserve sage-grouse and their habitat.



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Local, State, and Federal partners working together

Formally known as “candidate conservation agreements with assurances” (CCAAs) this approach was pioneered in Harney County where 50 land owners have already signed up more than 330,000 acres. With many landowners in Crook, Deschutes, Malheur, Lake and Baker counties developing agreements following Harney County’s lead. The Oregon Department of State Lands is developing a CCAA to cover state-owned rangelands, and the Bureau of Land Management and the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association have participated in a similar agreement with the USFWS covering grazing on federal lands.

Adaptive management builds on local knowledge

Instead of dictating specific grazing regimes, CCAAs require adaptive management based on regular monitoring and evaluation to maintain or improve conditions for sage-grouse. Site-specific plans identify conservation measures to address threats to sage-grouse and include a requirement to maintain contiguous blocks of habitat and avoid further fragmentation. In return, the USFWS gives landowners legal assurances that current ranching practices can continue even if sage-grouse are listed under the ESA.

The management strategies embodied in the CCAAs are grounded in research done by scientists at the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center in Burns. These ecological models provide a framework for understanding what factors contribute to ecological conditions and trends on any particular site and how lands can be managed to improve habitat values for sage-grouse.



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CCAAs will protect participating landowners from more restrictions under the Endangered Species Act if they commit to managing livestock grazing and other land uses in ways that help conserve sage-grouse.



John O'Keeffe President-Elect Oregon Cattlemen's Association

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 3334

It has been inspiring to watch everyone pull together to prevent the need to list the Greater Sage Grouse.

Candidate Conservation agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, Sage Con All lands all threats effort, LCDC rulemaking, ODFW rulemaking, NRCS Sage Grouse Initiative, west wide BLM RMP amendment process, much has been done. There is much left to do. Much has been planned, now we must implement.

Dedicated funding has an especially key place in the listing decision process. Funding in place for Sage Grouse conservation will help the Service make a decision that Listing is not warranted. Oregon has come a long ways, to put this issue to bed we must go a little farther.

We appreciate Rep Bentz's intent to ensure a dedicated funding stream we want to make sure everyone understands that the threats to the bird are also threats to communities and ranchers requiring resources from multiple sources to support local implementation such as for RFPAs to address fire and for SWCDs to implement conservation measures on the ground. It is important that we continue to show a coordinated approach across state, local and private lands and not rely on one source of funds. OWEB has been and continues to be a strong partner and we have every reason to believe that they will continue to make sage grouse an investment priority.

Funding is always controversial, maybe now more than ever. However I am convinced that money spent ahead of a listing, to keep Oregon in control of its destiny will be money much better spent than the money we could spend in the future to comply with burdensome restrictive regulatory mechanisms that would come with a listing.

Added to that would be the lost economic opportunities. We can have economic development in Eastern Oregon, but it will be easier, more locally controlled and ultimately more productive, in the absence of a listing.

Thank you for your consideration.

