

USDA moves to revise conservation plans for greater sage grouse

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The Agriculture Department is preparing to finalize revisions to Obama-era plans to conserve the greater sage grouse and its habitat in five Western states — changes intended to ease restrictions on grazing livestock and give more flexibility to states to implement local strategies.

The new plans identify the potential environmental impacts on 5.4 million acres of the bird's habitat in national forests in Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming and Utah, and outline how USDA's Forest Service will address them.

“We are sharing the stewardship of the lands with western state governors — their extensive participation throughout this process was the key to landscape-scale conservation that aligns our policies and practices across local, state, and federal jurisdictions,” Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said in a [statement](#) announcing the proposed revisions.

The greater sage grouse population has been dwindling for four decades as its habitat has gradually been lost to energy development and invasive grasses that fuel wildfires. Efforts to protect the birds have been controversial in Western states because of the affect on industries like ranching, mining, oil and gas.

In 2017, USDA and the Interior Department began to reevaluate land-management strategies for sage grouse that were finalized during the Obama administration. The departments identified “potential inefficiencies,” according to an [initial draft](#), and received push-back from certain industries and state officials that argued the plans would hinder economic growth and didn't align with local conservation efforts.

The Forest Service will publish its final environmental impact statement on its [website](#) on Friday. A USDA spokesperson declined to share a copy with POLITICO. The public will be given 60 days to comment, according to a Federal Register [notice](#). USDA said it plans to finalize the changes later this year.