

[Organizations]

**RE: Please Conserve Greater Sage-Grouse in the Final FY 2020 Interior and Environment Appropriations Bill**

September 30, 2019

Dear Senator/Representative:

On behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we urge you to please ensure that a rider from previous years limiting work by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on greater sage-grouse is excluded from the final FY 2020 appropriations bill for Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. The FY 2020 Senate bill has included this language while the House bill has declined to retain it.

The greater sage-grouse is an imperiled western bird and the charismatic ambassador for the Sagebrush Sea, an ecosystem that is vital to fish and wildlife, recreation, communities, and sustainable economic development in eleven western states. As many as 16 million greater sage-grouse once occurred across 297 million acres of sagebrush grasslands in the West. Today, sage-grouse range is half of what it once was, and populations have declined to less than ten percent of historic numbers.

Sage-grouse populations have experienced sharp declines in recent years. Montana's population has fallen more than 40 percent over the past three years; Utah has seen a 61 percent drop since 2015; and Wyoming has counted 40 percent fewer birds since 2016.<sup>1</sup> Idaho reported a loss of 52 percent since 2016;<sup>2</sup> Nevada's 2019 lek counts found a 33 percent decline from 2016; and Oregon's estimated population has suffered a 24.9 percent decline from just last year.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly half of sage-grouse habitat has been lost to historic development patterns, and less than 3 percent of the bird's current range is federally protected. Remaining habitat is compromised by impacts from oil and gas drilling, livestock grazing, mining, unnatural fire, invasive weeds, off-road vehicles, roads, fences, pipelines, and utility corridors.

In 2010, FWS found that the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but other, higher priorities precluded the agency from proposing a listing rule at that time.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the urgent need for conservation action, the administration took the extraordinary step of amending nearly one hundred federal land use plans across the West with new conservation

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press. "Sage grouse number in West continue to decline after federal protection rejection," *CPR News* (Sept. 13, 2019), <https://www.cpr.org/2019/09/13/sage-grouse-numbers-in-west-continue-to-decline-after-federal-protection-rejection/>.

<sup>2</sup> Sewell, C. "Idaho sage grouse numbers have dropped 52% since 2016. Will management changes help them?," *East Idaho News* (August 11, 2019), <https://www.eastidahonews.com/2019/08/idaho-sage-grouse-numbers-have-dropped-52-since-2016-will-management-changes-help-them/>.

<sup>3</sup> Thuemer, A. M. "Greater sage grouse counts show 3-year downward trend," *Casper Star Tribune* (Aug. 7, 2019), [https://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/greater-sage-grouse-counts-show--year-downward-trend/article\\_7fc4bd5e-bf1c-500f-be2f-dcca80a9a53c.html](https://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/greater-sage-grouse-counts-show--year-downward-trend/article_7fc4bd5e-bf1c-500f-be2f-dcca80a9a53c.html).

<sup>4</sup> 75 Fed. Reg. 13910 (Mar. 23, 2010).

prescriptions for sage-grouse, engaging states and other key stakeholders in a public planning process to enhance habitat while providing for continued resource management across the bird's range. Citing the "National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy" (National Strategy) and relying heavily on its projected conservation outcomes, FWS determined in October 2015 that the sage-grouse did not warrant protection under the ESA at that time.<sup>5</sup> FWS also determined that a status review in 2020 would be necessary to ensure those projected outcomes were sufficiently realized in the ground to keep the bird off the list.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration has reversed course on this unprecedented effort to conserve sage-grouse and its habitat. Both the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service have now rolled back protections in dozens of public lands management plans that comprise the National Strategy, jeopardizing the 4-year, \$45 million planning effort that enjoyed broad support from diverse stakeholders and competing interests. The amended plans reduce or eliminate protective management buffers around breeding and nesting habitat in designated conservation areas and relax critical mitigation and adaptive management requirements. Large-scale leasing in priority sage-grouse areas already is proceeding. These rollbacks fundamentally undermine the assumptions behind the FWS's 2015 not-warranted decision and significantly increase the chances that a listing of the sage-grouse may be required in the near future.

Since 2014, Congress has passed an annual appropriations rider blocking FWS from carrying out its basic responsibilities under the ESA regarding the greater sage-grouse. Our organizations have previously expressed concerns that this Congressional intervention would unduly prevent the FWS from properly assessing the condition of the species and would remove necessary incentives to achieve conservation progress under the National Strategy. With the considerable further risks this Administration's plan amendments and policies pose to sage-grouse populations and habitat, it is now essential that FWS scientists be allowed to do their job regarding the sage-grouse.

Our organizations urge you to ensure that the final FY 2020 Interior appropriations bill is free of the rider restricting FWS ability to fulfill its vital role under the ESA with regard to the sage-grouse. We appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to providing any additional information that might be useful.

Sincerely,

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<sup>5</sup> 80 Fed. Reg. 59857 (Oct. 2, 2015).