Greater Sage-Grouse Rider Messaging Doc – October 2019

Top Messages:

* Since 2014, Interior and Environment Appropriations bills have included an unrelated and inappropriate “rider” that prevents the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) from considering the greater sage-grouse for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
* This anti-conservation rider disregards science, the ESA and interferes with the agency’s ability to comply with the law and imperils an iconic western bird that has suffered an estimated 90 percent population decline from historical levels.
* Even as the sage-grouse continues to decline in every state where it occurs, the Trump administration has reversed strong conservation prescriptions for the bird which had been put in place by the Obama administration.
* The sage-grouse rider prohibits FWS from writing or issuing proposed or final rules to list greater sage-grouse under the ESA. The rider is bad for sage-grouse, bad for public lands, bad for stakeholders and bad government.
* Defenders of Wildlife urges members of Congress to oppose the sage grouse rider and all legislation that interferes with science-based decision making and undermines the ESA.

**Background:**

*State of the Sage-Grouse*

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. Protecting the sage-grouse and its habitat would benefit more than 350 other species of conservation concern that are found in the Sagebrush Sea including Pronghorn, elk, mule deer, native trout and nearly 200 migratory and Western bird species. 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.

* Grouse numbers have dropped substantially since the federal government declined to list the species under the ESA -- in Oregon (24.9%), [Montana](https://www.cpr.org/2019/09/13/sage-grouse-numbers-in-west-continue-to-decline-after-federal-protection-rejection/) (42%), [Idaho](https://coloradosun.com/2019/08/12/sage-grouse-endangered-species-decline-idaho/) (52%), Nevada (33%), Utah (61%) and Wyoming (40%).

*National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy*

* The National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy, released in 2015, is the most comprehensive land use planning process ever undertaken by the Bureau of Land Management. It recognizes the importance of conserving large expanses of sagebrush grasslands for sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species, designating tens of millions of acres as priority habitat on federal lands.
* Costing more than $45 million, the strategy is designed to conserve hundreds of fish and wildlife species, support a billion-dollar recreation economy, and provide for multiple uses on public lands in 11 Western states. Public opinion polling shows that large majorities of voters in these states support efforts to protect sage-grouse in this region, including listing this native western bird under the Endangered Species Act, if necessary.
* The Trump administration has been working to upend this carefully crafted approach, rolling back critical conservation protections to allow for more oil and gas drilling and mining in essential sage-grouse habitat.

Preliminary Injunction

* On October 16, 2019, a federal judge [blocked](https://www.westernwatersheds.org/2019/10/sage-grouse-preliminary-injunction-order-10-16-19/) the Trump administration’s plan amendments that would allow expanded drilling, miming, livestock grazing and other destructive activities across 51 million acres of sage-grouse habitat.
* While the federal court has enjoined implementation of the latest Bureau of Land Management greater sage-grouse plan amendments, the Trump administration had already issued separate directives and policy weakening and overriding important protections in the underlying National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy.
* This allowed federal agencies to lease millions of acres of sage-grouse habitat for oil and gas development in the last two years—which will have devastating effects on sage-grouse for decades to come. Even as federal managers sort out which plans are now in effect on public lands, sage-grouse populations continue to decline precipitously across the West.

*Mass Extinction Crisis*

* Scientists recognize that we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction crisis, with species disappearing 100 times faster than normal due to human activities ranging from habitat destruction to overharvest to threats from invasive species. Half of all species may become in danger of extinction in the next century.
* In May, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment (IPBES) released the most comprehensive report of the status and trends of biodiversity to date and declared around 1 million species are threatened with extinction.
* More recently, a [study](https://science.sciencemag.org/content/366/6461/120) published in *Science* revealed that since 1970, bird populations in the U.S. and Canada have declined by 29 percent, or the equivalent of nearly 3 million birds.