

October 25, 2022

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Chair
Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chair
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-146A The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley
Chair
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies Appropriations
131 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree
Chair
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
2007 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment,
and Related Agencies Appropriations
125 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable David Joyce
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members:

Our organizations are dedicated to the conservation of the iconic Greater sage-grouse and its sagebrush habitats. As you and your staff work to finalize FY2023 appropriations legislation, we applaud removal of the longstanding sage-grouse rider from both House and Senate Interior and Environment bills. We urge its exclusion from the final FY2023 bill. We also thank you for funding recommendations and report language in both bills, and request that those recommendations for this species and its habitat be included in the forthcoming Conference Report.

As you know, the Sagebrush Sea—the sagebrush and perennial grass ecosystem home to hundreds of native wildlife and plants—is disappearing in real time. In a just-published report¹, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) mapped the full extent of the sagebrush biome in the United States, which spans thirteen western states. The results paint a stark picture: over half of the country’s sagebrush ecosystem has been lost, and what remains is disappearing at a rate of 1.3 million acres every year. As of 2020, only 13.6% of the ecosystem—just 33.4 million acres—remains ecologically intact and functioning.

Land managers need funding and resources to respond to this crisis. The USGS report warns that “[s]mall incremental changes to the existing amount of conservation delivery and coordination will likely not abate the expected loss in sagebrush ecological integrity and consequently the loss of sagebrush obligates, such as greater sage-grouse.” Its authors call for “substantial investment” to protect core sagebrush areas and restore sagebrush ecosystems—including the 1.3 million acres that are annually lost.

We commend House and Senate appropriations bills for recognizing the need for immediate action. Both bills recommend directing \$71 million of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) funds towards sage-grouse conservation (with the House bill recommending an additional \$10 million for the BLM’s ongoing sage-grouse plan amendment process). These dollars are crucial for protecting and restoring the bird’s sagebrush habitats.

Both bills also exclude the sage-grouse rider, which since 2014 has prevented the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from listing the Greater sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. The consequences of the rider go beyond listing: it has undermined science-based decision-making, and removed an important incentive for federal agencies, western states, and other stakeholders to implement conservation measures sufficient to avoid listing. By keeping the rider out of final appropriations legislation, Congress can reinstate an important backstop against further declines.

We also urge the committees to include the following language in the Senate Report in the final Conference Report:

Bureau of Land Management

Resource Management.—The Committee expects the Bureau to finalize the resource management plan amendments currently underway for Greater sage-grouse conservation. The Committee strongly encourages that the final amendments include designation of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern for priority Greater sage-grouse habitat.

¹ Doherty, K., et al., 2022, A sagebrush conservation design to proactively restore America’s sagebrush biome: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2022–1081, 38 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20221081>.

Wildlife Habitat Management.—Sage-Grouse.—The bill provides no less than \$71,000,000 for sage-grouse conservation activities within Wildlife Habitat Management. Greater sage-grouse conservation funding is set apart because the Committee expects that these funds will result in increased capacity and expertise in ecological restoration, continued implementation of the National Seed Strategy, and reduction of invasive plants through monitoring, early detection, and targeted removal, specific to habitat improvements for sage-grouse. Increasing the success of restoring sagebrush plant communities, particularly after burned events, is critical to conserving the broader sagebrush ecosystem. The Bureau is expected to use the multiple existing and relevant strategies for sagebrush restoration to increase the success of projects that restore burned, degraded, or otherwise unhealthy habitat. Further, the Committee expects the Bureau to only use these funds for native, genetically-appropriate plant species in revegetation and restoration activities in sage-grouse habitat.

U.S. Geological Survey

Land Management Research Program.—The Committee recommends an increase of \$1,000,000 for the Land Management Research Program to investigate the efficacy of vegetation treatments carried out on Interior bureau lands for restoring the integrity of native Sagebrush Sea ecosystems.

U.S. Forest Service

Grazing Management.—[T]he Service shall evaluate the condition of permitted lands with Greater sage-grouse habitat and is directed to modify usage to assure achievement of sage-grouse habitat requirements, taking into account drought, climate change, and its multiple use mandate.

The recent USGS report underscores the importance of the above direction. The report calls for a “Defend the Core” approach to conservation, which aligns with the Senate in strongly encouraging the designation of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs). A network of ACECs that captures the “Core” would allow the BLM to define and protect the remaining areas of high-integrity sagebrush habitat. ACECs also provide clear and long-lasting protections for wildlife and habitat, and thus can satisfy the USGS report’s call for “durable conservation” to help prevent further loss of this vital ecosystem.

Complementing the “Defend the Core” strategy, the USGS report stresses the need to “Grow the Core” by proactively restoring the sagebrush biome. Senate Report language bolsters restoration efforts by calling for the use of native seeds, continued implementation of the Native Seed Strategy, increased BLM capacity and expertise in ecological restoration, and evaluation of the efficacy of restoration treatments, all of which are key if the BLM is to use appropriated funds to best effect.

The Senate Report also addresses the overgrazing of sagebrush rangelands, which leads to cheatgrass invasion, altered firecycles, and other drivers of habitat loss. Report language directs the Forest Service to manage grazing in sage-grouse habitats to ensure allotments maintain ecological function for the bird and other native wildlife.

Once again, we thank both Committees for excluding the sage-grouse rider and for funding recommendations and report language to benefit the Sagebrush Sea and the species it supports. We urge the Committees to exclude the rider once and for all, to retain proposed funding levels in the final FY2023 appropriations legislation, and to incorporate Senate Report directives into the Conference Report.

Sincerely,

Allamakee County Protectors ~ Education Campaign
American Bird Conservancy
Animal Welfare Institute
Arkansas Valley Audubon Society
Audubon Society of Corvallis
Audubon Society of Portland
Bird Conservation Network
BIRD OBSERVER, INC., the New England Birding Journal
Bird Town Pennsylvania
Blue Ridge Audubon Chapter
Born Free USA
California Native Plant Society
Californians for Western Wilderness
Cape Henry Audubon Society
Cascadia Wildlands
Center for Biological Diversity
Central Oregon Bitter Brush Broads Chapter/Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Christian Council of Delmarva
Clean Water Action
ColoradoWild
Compassion for All Living Beings Cooperation Circle, United Religions Initiative
Conservation Northwest
Defenders of Wildlife
Delaware Valley Ornithological Club
Earthjustice
Eastern Mass Hawk Watch
Endangered Habitats League
Endangered Species Coalition

Environment America
EPIC - Environmental Protection Information Center
Evergreen Audubon
FOUR PAWS USA
Friends of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge
Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, Inc.
Friends of Ruth B. Swann Park
Friends of the Earth
Grand Junction Area Broadband - Great Old Broads for Wilderness
Grand Valley Audubon Society
Great Old Broads for Wilderness - Northern San Juan Chapter
Handa Ornithology Lab
Heartwood
Howling For Wolves
Humane Action Pittsburgh
Humane Society Legislative Fund
International Bird Rescue
International Marine Mammal Project of Earth Island Institute
Kettle Range Conservation Group
Lane County Audubon Society
Lassen Forest Preservation Group
League of Conservation Voters
Linnaean Society of New York
Los Angeles Audubon Society
Maricopa Audubon Society
Maryland Ornithological Society
Montgomery Bird Club
Native Songbird Care & Conservation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Natural Resources Law
New Jersey Audubon
New Mexico Audubon Council
No Kill Glynn County
North Cascades Audubon Society
Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society
On A Wing And A Prayer
Onondaga Audubon
Oregon Natural Desert Association
Pennsylvania Historical Society
Portneuf Valley Audubon Society

Potomac Valley Audubon Society
Project Eleven Hundred
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility
#RelistWolves
Resource Renewal Institute
Rocky Mountain Wild
Salem Audubon Society
Sequoia ForestKeeper®
Sheep Mountain Alliance
Sierra Club
Sierra Foothills Audubon Society
Sierra Forest Legacy
Soda Mountain Wilderness Council
Southern Maryland Audubon Society
Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance
Spokane Audubon Society
Tennessee Ornithological Society
The Delaware Valley Ornithological Club
The Humane Society of the United States
The Pew Charitable Trusts
The Urban Wildlands Group
Threatened & Endangered Little Applegate Valley
Tracy Aviary
Tree Fredericksburg
Umpqua Watersheds Inc
Unite the Parks
Washington Crossing Audubon Society
Washington Wildlife First
Waterway Advocates
Western Watersheds Project
Wild Birds Unlimited of Syosset
Wild Nature Institute
WildEarth Guardians
Wilderness Watch
Words for Birds
Wyoming Wildlife Advocates