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Idaho Governor's Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Strategy - 2015

Background

- In March 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) determined that Greater Sage-Grouse (GRSG) across its entire 11 western-state range was "warranted" for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but "precluded" because of other higher priorities.
- This decision placed GRSG on a "candidate" list, whereby due to court order, the Service must address its conservation status and decide whether to list the species by September 30, 2015.
- The Service identified habitat fragmentation due to wildfire, invasive species, infrastructure and energy development, as well as inadequate regulatory mechanisms as primary threats to the species.
- The Service also identified multiple secondary threats and put them in the proper context.
- Many of these secondary threats are more localized in nature and are best addressed on a local scale.
- The Service found many Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land-use plans (LUPs) to be deficient with regards to GRSG conservation actions and therefore "inadequate regulatory mechanisms".
- In 2011, to help address the deficiencies within these federal LUPs, the Secretary of the Interior invited states within the range of GRSG to develop their own alternatives for GRSG conservation on federal lands and for incorporation into the federal land-use planning effort.

Governor's Sage-Grouse Alternative (Alternative E)

- The Governor's Alternative, referred to as "Alternative E" within the federal planning effort is based on recommendations of a diverse 15-member Sage-Grouse Task Force comprised of stakeholders representing sage-grouse Local Working Groups (LWGs), industry, sportsmen and conservation groups, as well as state and local officials. The Task Force was created pursuant to a Governor's Executive Order in March 2012.
- The Task Force was advised primarily by sage-grouse scientists with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, along with other state, federal and academic advisors.
- Threats addressed by Alternative E include: wildfire and invasive species, large-scale infrastructure, and some secondary threats.
- Alternative E provides increased flexibility for land-use activities by dividing the range of GRSG in Idaho into four Conservation Areas, each with three distinct habitat zones (see map on page 3). These zones operate as a management continuum whereby flexibility for land-use activities increases as you move from the Core Habitat Zone to the General Habitat Zone within a Conservation Area. This allows BLM and the USFS to focus its priorities and resources on the most important habitat for GRSG.

- The Core Habitat Zone (CHZ) contains 5.6 million acres encompassing 65% of the active sage-grouse leks and 73% of the population. CHZ is the most important habitat and provides the highest level of protection for the bird.
- The Important Habitat Zone (IHZ) contains 4 million acres encompassing 30% of the active leks and 22% of the population. The IHZ acts as a buffer zone, with more flexibility afforded to new land-use activities than CHZ and has the potential to operate as CHZ if necessary.
- The General Habitat Zone (GHZ) contains 5.5 million acres encompassing 10% of the active leks and 5% of the sage-grouse population. The GHZ provides the most flexibility for land management of all three zones.
- Alternative E uses a robust adaptive management strategy to focus resources on the most urgent threats to sage-grouse.
 - Alternative E includes a habitat and population “trigger” mechanism in each of its four conservation areas to allow land managers to respond to habitat and population losses.
 - If a trigger is activated within a Conservation Area, IHZ will then be managed as managed as CHZ.
- Alternative E has an aggressive approach to fire and fuels management.
 - Alternative E incorporates livestock grazing as a mechanism for fuels reduction.
 - Alternative E highlights the significance of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) and encourages the creation of additional RFPAs within the Sage-Grouse Management Area.
 - These RFPAs, comprised of ranchers, landowners and others have helped to decrease wildfire response time and provide faster and better coordinated initial attack on range fires within GRSG habitat.
 - Wildfire prevention and restoration actions are also priorities within Alternative E.
- Alternative E appropriately addresses large-scale infrastructure by focusing new development in areas outside of CHZ, or co-located within the right-of-way of existing infrastructure. However, Alternative E provides flexibility to allow some limited new development in CHZ under an exemption process if criteria are met and mitigation is provided.
- Alternative E puts ***secondary*** threats in an appropriate context.
- The grazing management component of Alternative E centers on meeting the Idaho Rangeland Health Standards (IRHS). However, the strategy includes habitat characteristics to be incorporated into relevant grazing permits as guidelines upon permit renewal. These guidelines will assist livestock producers in ensuring that their operations remain compatible with the needs of GRSG.
- In April 2013, the Service “concurred” with many elements of Alternative E indicating that Alternative E in many ways adequately provides for the needs of greater sage-grouse.
- In October of 2013, the State of Idaho was notified that the BLM was moving forward with incorporating Alternative E as a “co-preferred” alternative for the Idaho and Southwest Montana Subregional Sage-grouse Draft EIS.
- The state (IDFG and OSC) have been at the table with Idaho BLM to ensure a proper blending of the Governor’s Alternative and the BLM subregional alternative for the final EIS.

- Recently, however the Interior Department has proposed additional top-down guidance for insertion in the federal planning effort. The state takes issue with this last minute direction and the state has reached out to the Interior Department in an attempt to resolve its concerns.
- The Final EIS for the Idaho and Southwest Montana subregion was released in late May 2015.
- Federal plan will be signed in September 2015.

State Endowment Lands

- The State of Idaho recently completed a sage-grouse conservation plan for state endowment lands that complements Governor Otter’s plan for conservation on federal lands.
- The State lands plan was approved by the Idaho Board of Land Commissioners and the Idaho Oil and Gas Conservation Commission in April 2015.
- The Plan includes both permit stipulations and voluntary best management practices for GRSG on 600,000 acres in Idaho, which equates to 6% of the GRSG habitat within the State.
- This plan balances GRSG conservation and ensuring compliance with the state constitutional mandate to maximize revenue generation on these lands.

Private Lands Conservation Efforts

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been very active in Idaho through the implementation of the Sage-grouse Initiative (SGI) on private lands with voluntary landowners.
- Between 2010-2014: 249,653 acres were put into a grazing system, 69,609 acres of easements were completed, 47,830 acres of conifers removed and 79 miles of fence marked or removed.

