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THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT SUSPENDS SAGEBRUSH FOCUS AREA IMPLEMENTATION

On Wednesday October 11, 2017, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced in the Federal Register that it has canceled its withdrawal application and the withdrawal proposal relating to approximately 10 million acres of public and National Forest system lands located within Sagebrush Focal Areas (SFAs) in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Wyoming. The SFAs were identified as key areas to protect to conserve the species in the BLM 2015 record of decision to implement the greater sage-grouse amendments in the revised BLM Resource Management Plans (RMPs). With this decision, the BLM has also terminated the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement evaluating the proposal.

A U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada ruled that the BLM's designation of Sagebrush Focal Areas in its 2015 greater sage-grouse plan amendment for Nevada was illegal. The RMPs, which were adopted in 2014 and 2015 and included the SFAs, provided guidance

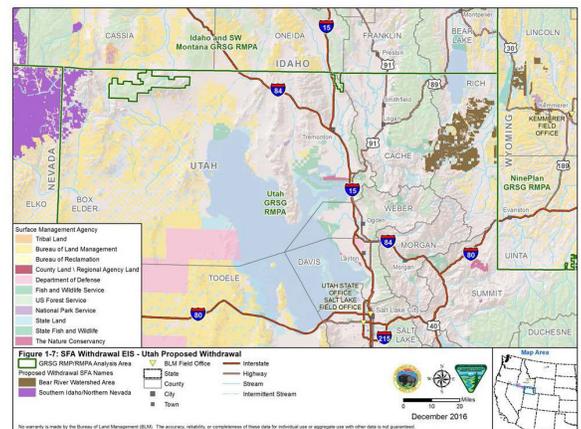


Figure from BLM Sagebrush Focus Areas Withdrawal Draft EIS December 2016.

and direction regarding the management of public lands in California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Montana.

The Federal Register notice offered the public additional opportunity to comment and share issues for its consideration as it explores potential amendments to greater sage-grouse RMPs, to help improve sage-grouse conservation, and to strengthen communication and collaboration between states and the federal government. To comply with the court's order and to address issues raised by various interested parties, and to consider recommendations in the August 4, 2017, report prepared by the Department of the Interior's Greater Sage-Grouse Review Team in Response to Secretary's Order 3353 (SO 3353), the BLM intends to consider amending these plans. The BLM is also seeking input on whether that planning effort should occur through state-by-state amendment processes. The notice can be read on the BLM website: <https://on.doi.gov/2fNuFPt>.

The public can provide comments for 45 days from the date the Federal Register notice (October 11, 2017) using this webpage: <http://bit.ly/GRS-Gplanning>. The BLM will announce any public meetings it plans to hold through local media in each state.

IN THIS ISSUE

THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT SUSPENDS SAGEBRUSH FOCUS AREA IMPLEMENTATION.....1

REEVALUATING UTAH'S GAME PLAN FOR GREATER SAGE-GROUSE.....2

BUILDING A BETTER GREATER SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT MAP.....3

DUCK CREEK ALLOTMENT DECISION OVERTURNED4

CBCP MISSION STATEMENT.....4

REEVALUATING UTAH'S GAME PLAN FOR GREATER SAGE-GROUSE

Ben Nadolski, Sage-grouse Policy Coordinator, State of Utah

When you attend a sporting event — whether it's a high school, collegiate or professional match — you know the coach has a game plan. As the game progresses, the coach adapts to conditions and modifies the plan as needed. Sometimes, it's necessary to change the plan to win the game. Wildlife management is very similar, and even more important, when it comes to wildlife species that were considered as candidate species for listing for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Utah isn't new to the game of greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; sage-grouse) conservation, once an ESA candidate species, but it's now time to take another look at the game plan. In February 2013, Governor Gary Herbert approved the *Utah Conservation Plan for Greater Sage-grouse*. It is a detailed, science-based plan that established goals and measurable objectives for the conservation of sage-grouse in Utah. As a result of Utah's plan and ongoing conservation efforts — and similar state-led efforts across the West — the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced on September 24, 2015, that sage-grouse are not warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act.

So far, Utah's plan has proven to be effective at balancing the conservation needs of sage-grouse with the socio-economic needs of Utah's local communities. However, that plan is nearly 5 years old. Since it went into effect, conservation science, data-gathering technologies, and local knowledge have continued to advance. New information needs to be assessed and may affect how the State of Utah decides to change its tactics for effective sage-grouse conservation.

Utah is committed to continually improving its conservation plan and building upon its past successes. With the help of diverse stakeholders, the state is working to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan and is gathering public feedback. In addition to meeting with various stakeholders to gather input, state officials will also visit every Local Working Group (LWG) in Utah to gather feedback from the people and communities that are closest to the issues.

So, if you want a stake in the game, or you just want to learn more about Utah's efforts to conserve greater sage-grouse, we encourage you to attend your nearest LWG meeting. You can find links to information about LWGs and their upcoming meetings at <https://utahcbcp.org/localworkinggroups/index>.



Photo courtesy of Dave Dahlgren.

BUILDING A BETTER GREATER SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT MAP

By Michel Kohl, Post-doctoral Fellow, Utah State University

Since the early 1990s researchers at Utah State University (USU) and Brigham Young University (BYU) have been studying the ecology of the greater sage-grouse in Utah. The research involved capturing and radio-marking male and female sage-grouse and following them throughout the year to monitor their habitat-use patterns and survival. In the case of the females, they were also interested in nest and brood success. To determine habitat selection and if the habitat they were using affected the survival and/or production of radio-marked sage-grouse, the researchers recorded the characteristics of the habitats where the sage-grouse were re-located.

Over the past 20 years, this research has generated thousands of sage-grouse locations and associated habitat data. These data set the stage for a large-scale effort involving USU, BYU, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, private landowners, and sage-grouse local working groups to better understand the seasonal distribution and habitat needs of sage-grouse. This process known as the Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF) will ensure the conservation of sage-grouse in Utah.

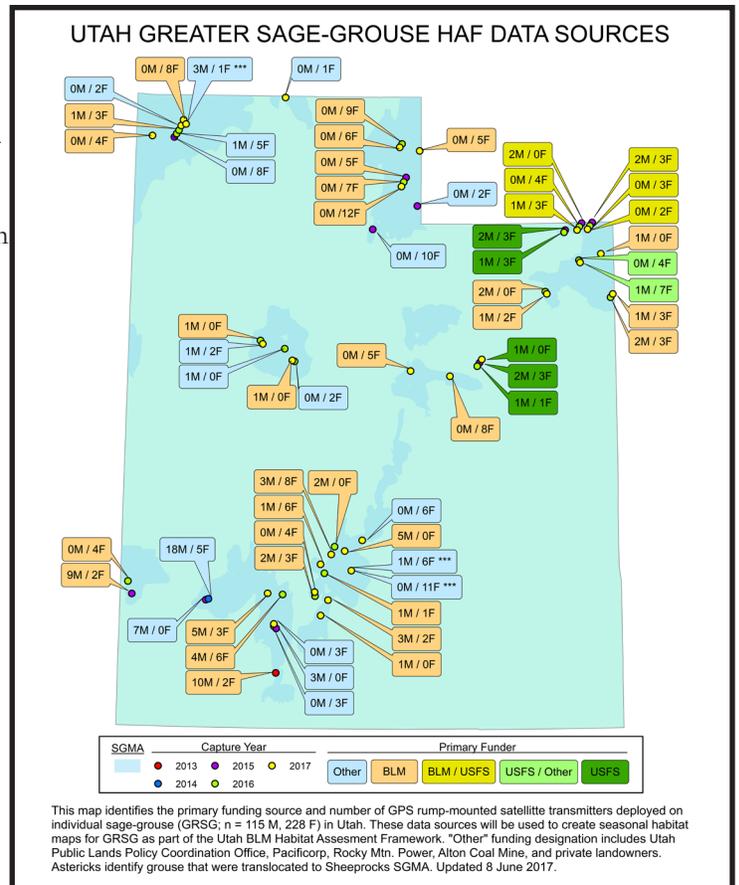
Large-scale conservation of sage-grouse habitat had been hindered by the lack of landscape-scale habitat mapping that could be used to inform on-the-ground management. Completion of the HAF will identify the vegetation characteristics used by sage-grouse within the seasonal habitats. I was hired to serve as the Utah Sage-grouse HAF Coordinator in May 2017. In my role, I will be responsible for facilitating coordination among all the partners to develop the seasonal maps that will direct sage-grouse conservation and management in Utah.

To initiate the HAF, we capitalized on the extensive dataset of sage-grouse telemetry locations housed at USU. This dataset consists of nearly 3,000 individuals trapped throughout the state that were fitted with Very High Frequency (VHF) necklace style radio transmitters. These collars transmit a radio signal that lets field personnel zero in on the location of each bird, but despite providing nearly 20,000 locations over the past 20 years, these VHF transmitters required extensive field work that was often limited to daytime hours, accessible locations, and weather-permitting conditions.

To add to this database, researchers began deploying rump-mounted Global Positioning System (GPS) units on sage-grouse throughout the state in 2013 in an effort to augment the VHF dataset. Since that time, we have deployed 343 GPS units spread across 9 of the 11 Sage-Grouse Management Areas in a large-scale effort to map the seasonal distribution of the species (Figure 1). Although costs of GPS units exceed those of VHF units, they provide multiple locations/day (5-10) throughout the year which means we will be more efficient in our field monitoring while also being provided with a greater understanding of sage-grouse winter use and night-time patterns.

Furthermore, the ability to track sage-grouse via satellites has provided us with a new appreciation for the distances these birds can migrate since birds fitted with VHF transmitters often travelled far outside of the monitoring areas of most researchers. For example, GPS technology has allowed us to follow birds that breed in the area around Henefer, Utah, to their winter range south of Lake Jordanelle; a distance greater than 35 miles and a wintering area we likely would have not considered prior to the use of GPS technology.

Upon completion in 2019, the HAF seasonal habitat maps will operate as the sage-grouse distribution maps for both UDWR and BLM. With the state and federal agencies in Utah both using these distribution maps, we can be assured that sage-grouse management and conservation in Utah will be better suited to meet future challenges.



If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.

DUCK CREEK ALLOTMENT DECISION OVERTURNED

By Beth Burritt, Utah State University Extension

Several years ago, livestock permittees in Rich County asked Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to alter grazing practices on the Duck Creek Allotment, located in the county. The BLM then conducted an environmental assessment and made a decision to move forward to implement the new grazing system. BLM's Final Decision authorized a four-pasture deferred rotational grazing system, and range improvements for Duck Creek.

Once the decision was announced, Western Watersheds Project (WWP) and Wild Utah Project appealed the BLM's Final Decision to stop the change in grazing practices. To successfully appeal a Final Decision, WWP had to show the Decision was arbitrary and capricious or by a preponderance of the evidence, that it was based on an error in BLM's methods, data, analysis, or conclusions.

In 2013, an Administrative Court ruled that the rotational grazing system could not be adopted by BLM on the Duck Creek Allotment because the BLM did not follow proper procedure and did not consider all of the environmental impacts of the proposed action. The Court then remanded the decision back BLM to do further analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The BLM appealed the decision to the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA). The IBLA reversed the Court's decision and affirmed the BLM's Decision for the Duck Creek Allotment. The IBLA ruled that WWP introduced no evidence to show how additional data would have altered BLM's Decision, stating the Court failed to recognize the depth and value of the evidence provided by BLM, especially compared to that of the WWP's experts. Overall, the IBLA found WWP did not have the evidence to support its claims. For more information about this decision and how it may affect future decisions regarding federal grazing allotments in Utah visit <http://publiclandgrazing.org/duck-creek/>.



Photo courtesy of Todd Black.

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kenneth L. White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

Notice

A second 30-day public comment period for the updated Utah Sage-grouse Compensatory Mitigation Program will open sometime in November. If you are interested in reviewing this document, keep an eye out for our email next month.