

BLM gets tough on Oregon sage grouse protection to avoid harsher listing



The greater sage grouse, known for its mating dance, is in decline across the West. *(Jeannie Stafford/USFWS)*



By [Rob Davis](#) | rdavis@oregonian.com

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

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The greater sage grouse, the Oregon sagebrush-dwelling bird known for its unique, breast-inflating courtship dance, is in decline across the West.

But to try to prevent the brown-and-white bird with the plumed tail from winding up on the endangered species list, government land managers are taking steps to keep its numbers from dropping in Oregon and other western states.

On Friday, the federal Bureau of Land Management, which oversees 10 million acres across Oregon, released a management plan designed to tighten uses of its land. For the first time, the agency would cap how much human disturbance is allowed on 4.5 million acres of the bird's core habitat in Oregon. It would also require mitigation for activities there, potentially adding costs to projects proposed on the federal land.

The effort, part of a 10-state conservation plan, is big news for cattle ranchers, environmental groups, energy developers and others who lease BLM land.

Just more than 6 percent of the greater sage grouse's range is in Oregon. But it's some of the bird's most intact habitat, said Maggie Langlas Ward, a BLM planning and environmental coordinator. "It's a good stronghold for the greater sage grouse," she said.

The bird's population has been declining because of fire, spreading weeds, grazing and the long-running transition of sagebrush into forested juniper. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates endangered species, said in 2010 that lax regulation was also contributing to the decline.

But the service said it wouldn't consider listing the greater sage grouse as endangered until 2015, giving the BLM an opportunity to tighten rules in a bid to keep the bird from being listed.

An endangered species listing could more seriously restrict land use across the bird's range.

The sage-grouse story evokes similarities to the northern spotted owl, whose 1990 listing as a threatened species led to wide-scale restrictions for logging on federal lands. Dan Morse, conservation director at the Oregon Natural Desert Association in Bend, said he didn't expect a sage-grouse listing have such a severe impact but still gives stakeholders "an aligned interest of preventing the need to list."

Cattle ranchers in eastern Oregon have a lot at stake. The current proposal would close approximately 118,000 acres to grazing and tighten standards for grazing permits. BLM land is vital for cattle ranchers, said John O'Keeffe, treasurer of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and a rancher in Adel.

About half of cows with calves in the West spend part of their lives on BLM land grazing, he said. Cows graze BLM land in the summer while private ranches grow hay.

O'Keeffe said he hadn't reviewed the draft but that his organization plans on "commenting vigorously" on it.

"We firmly believe ranching and sage grouse are compatible," he said.

Environmental groups gave the plan a mixed review. Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with WildEarth Guardians, said he was encouraged by buffer protections for sage-grouse breeding areas near current and proposed geothermal plants. But he criticized the plan's approach to grazing, which he said remains too permissive.

"One of the biggest disappointments is the lack of really tackling grazing issues head on," Molvar said. "If we want to avoid the sage grouse ending up on the endangered species list, these problems have to be addressed successfully."

The 90-day public comment period closes Feb. 20. Interested parties can email comments to sagewest@blm.gov, mail them to Bureau of Land Management, Attn: Joan Suther, 1220 SW Third Ave., Portland, OR 97204 or attend a public meeting.

They're scheduled from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Jan. 6 in Prineville (Crook County Library, 175 NW Meadow Lakes Dr.), Jan. 7 in Burns (Harney County Senior Center, 17 S. Alder Ave.), Jan. 8 in Ontario (Four Rivers Cultural Center, 676 SW 5th Ave.), Jan. 9 in Baker City (Baker County Events Center, 2600 E St.) and Jan. 13 in Lakeview (Lakeview District Office, 1301 South G. St.)

-- Rob Davis