



ENDANGERED SPECIES:

Forest Service trying new effort to save sage grouse in N.D. grasslands

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The Forest Service is evaluating changes in the way it manages the nation's largest grassland in western North Dakota as part of an effort conservation leaders say is long overdue to save the greater sage grouse and its dwindling habitat.

The Forest Service announced in a notice published in today's *Federal Register* that it will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) that evaluates amending the land and resource management plan for the Little Missouri National Grassland in western North Dakota. The announcement kicks off a 45-day public scoping period that officials say will help guide the study.

The Forest Service anticipates completing a draft EIS by November and a final EIS in June 2015, according to the notice.

Encompassing a little more than 1 million acres, the Little Missouri National Grassland is the nation's largest, and it includes small sections of North Dakota's best remaining sage grouse habitat.

The possible land and resource management plan amendments would focus on about 96,000 acres in the national grassland that's home to a unique population of grouse that lives among the tall grasses but is under threat of extinction. The Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department will participate on the effort as cooperating agencies.

The Forest Service EIS, among other things, will evaluate whether to place protective buffers around sage grouse breeding grounds, called leks, as well as adopt possible seasonal restrictions on activities during grouse breeding and nesting seasons.

Some of the land management decisions that result from the EIS could involve "changes in the lands available for oil and gas leasing, as well as changes in the stipulations applied to lands that

are made available for leasing," according to the *Federal Register* notice, though most of the oil drilling associated with the Bakken play is on private lands well north of the grassland.

Decisions could also result in "changes to the lands determined suitable for linear rights-of-way corridors for powerlines and pipelines," the notice states.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has named the greater sage grouse a "candidate species" for listing under the Endangered Species Act, but is under a court order to make a final decision whether to propose listing the bird by 2015. Federal, state and local leaders are desperately trying to keep the bird off the endangered species list, fearing that such a listing would create a host of problems that would hurt the energy, agriculture and ranching industries across the West.

North Dakota is home to a small population of greater sage grouse on the fringe of the bird's 11-state Western range. The North Dakota Game and Fish Department counted 50 breeding males in its latest annual spring survey of grouse. The grouse population in the state was nearly wiped out by a West Nile virus outbreak in 2007.

The latest Forest Service effort comes just months after BLM released a draft EIS and proposed resource management plan amendments that would establish nearly 33,000 acres of priority grouse habitat in southwestern North Dakota, limiting some energy development, road building and off-highway vehicle use but exempting new wind power development ([Greenwire](#), Oct. 2, 2013).

The Forest Service management revisions to be studied in the EIS cover as much as 66,000 acres as priority habitat for the grouse.

The effort is long overdue, as the sage grouse population in North Dakota is on the brink of extinction, said Mark Salvo, director of federal lands conservation for Defenders of Wildlife in Washington, D.C.

"Every acre counts for greater sage grouse," Salvo said in an email. "While we wish the Forest Service had begun planning for sage-grouse on the grasslands sooner, we welcome this new effort on behalf of the species."

Though small in size, North Dakota's grouse population is very important to the overall health of the bird, said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with WildEarth Guardians in Laramie, Wyo.

And the Forest Service's involvement in active sage grouse conservation is important in North Dakota, as the service probably presides over more priority grouse habitat in the state than BLM, Molvar said.

"Most all of the habitat in the North Dakota area is priority habitat, because they have so little habitat left," he said. "There are less than 50 breeding males in the state, and that indicates an all-hands-on-deck approach needs to occur to make sure this population does not wink out."

He added, "The population in North Dakota is so small that I don't think we can afford to lose a single sage grouse or a single acre of nesting habitat."