

## New plan could help Montana maintain control

**E**arlier this year, Montana took another step toward helping keep the greater sage-grouse from becoming a federally endangered species. Governor Steve Bullock announced in February he was forming an advisory council charged with developing a statewide plan to conserve the sagebrush and prairie habitats that support Montana's sage-grouse.

The 8- to 12-person Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Conservation Advisory Council will comprise representatives of agriculture and ranching; conservation and hunting; energy, mining, and power transmission; local and tribal governments; and the legislature. Over the next year, the council will look at the latest science regarding these large prairie birds and their habitat, and then recommend ways to conserve sagebrush on private property and state school trust lands. These actions would augment conservation work being done on federal and tribal lands.

The plan concept is supported by FWP, energy industries, the Montana Farm Bureau, and the Montana Stockgrowers Association. All interests are aware that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) wants to see proof that Montana has a strategy for conserving sagebrush and, by association, sage-grouse.

Montana has more sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat than any other state except Wyoming. That's mainly due to the vast amounts of naturally occurring sagebrush here and conservation efforts by landowners who have retained large tracts of that habitat.

But enormous areas of sagebrush have been lost throughout the West, including tens of thousands of acres in Montana. Sagebrush continues to be threatened by overgrazing as well as conversion to croplands and housing subdivisions. We've also seen increased habitat fragmentation caused by roads, power lines, and other activities related to oil, gas, mining, and wind development.

More than 50 percent of Montana's original sagebrush steppe ecosystems no longer exist. As a result, sage-grouse numbers have significantly declined in several parts of the state, especially in Meagher, Park, and Hill Counties. If the sage-grouse becomes federally endangered—a distinct possibility due to decreasing populations in parts of Montana and across many other western states—FWP would lose its ability to manage the species. And energy, farm, and livestock interests could face increased federal regulation.

Over the past several years, with funding from upland game bird hunting licenses and federal programs, FWP has purchased 30-year leases from willing property owners who agree not to spray, burn, or plow sagebrush. The department has also bought several conservation easements that contain important sagebrush tracts, thus keeping those habitats intact. In cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, FWP has identified and mapped core sage-grouse habitat areas in



**WHOA** Plans for oil and other energy development on BLM lands would likely require review for potential harm to sage-grouse and sagebrush under a new strategy being developed by the federal agency. To augment the BLM's conservation strategy, a new advisory council in Montana has been charged with developing a sagebrush conservation plan for private and state school trust lands.

Montana. And we have initiated new research on sage-grouse movements and the birds' response to various grazing regimes.

Despite Montana's conservation efforts, the USFWS in 2010 determined that the sage-grouse "warranted" federal protection—though it did not designate the species as endangered because other species were in even worse shape. Under pressure from the Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups, the agency later announced that in October 2014 it will begin a one-year evaluation to determine, once and for all, the status of sage-grouse.

The USFWS has identified three factors as critical to its decision:

- ▶ lack of regulatory mechanisms on BLM and other federal lands to protect sage-grouse habitat,
- ▶ ongoing conversion of sage-grouse habitat, and
- ▶ increased habitat fragmentation.

The BLM is developing a new conservation strategy that addresses some of the USFWS concerns. Among other new regulations, the strategy will likely require that energy development planned for BLM lands first undergo review by biologists to consider the needs of sage-grouse. But the BLM plan won't be enough.

Less than half of Montana's sage-grouse habitat is on federal holdings. That's why we need to develop a statewide habitat plan that identifies ways to conserve sagebrush on private property and state school trust lands, too.

Montanans can be proud that sage-grouse are thriving in many parts of their state. I'm hopeful that the diverse interests represented on the new advisory council can help us maintain that abundance. Their plan needs to prove that Montana is serious about conserving these iconic prairie birds and the diminishing tracts of sagebrush where they live.

—M. Jeff Hagener, Montana FWP Director