

ENDANGERED SPECIES:

BLM to boost sage grouse protections on millions of acres

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The Interior Department is planning new protections on millions of acres of public lands to forestall an Endangered Species Act listing for the sage grouse that could be devastating to oil and gas development, wind farms and ranchers.

The agency's Bureau of Land Management will soon announce updates to as many as 98 resource management plans (RMPs) in 68 planning areas across the West, a process that will likely take years to complete.

The agency will also issue an instruction memorandum providing short-term protections for the bird until the new resource plans are finished.

The interim protections will apply to all actions and projects, including land-use authorizations, on BLM areas within occupied habitat for the greater sage grouse, according to a [draft](#) of the memorandum obtained by *E&ENews PM*.

The memorandum outlines steps that can be taken to minimize impacts from activities including oil and gas drilling, geothermal exploration, fence building, grazing, transmission line and renewable energy rights of way, and vegetative management, among others.

"Emphasis for protecting and managing greater sage grouse habitat incorporates the following principles: 1) protecting intact habitats, 2) minimizing habitat loss, and 3) managing habitats to maintain or restore desired conditions," the draft says.

A BLM spokesman said some changes likely have been made to the Sept. 30 draft in recent months. The agency has shared a draft with state wildlife officials and a cattle ranching group and will be discussing their comments at a meeting Friday with Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, the spokesman said.

The interim protections, along with the RMP amendments, aim to strengthen regulatory protections to prevent the bird from becoming endangered.

The Fish and Wildlife Service under a legal settlement this summer with environmental groups has until 2015 to issue a final listing decision. The football-sized bird was granted "candidate" status for federal protection in March 2010.

Since then, BLM has already begun updating or amending dozens of RMPs and screened hundreds of oil and gas leases for potential impacts.

The forthcoming memorandum today drew concern from Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.), who warned that onerous regulations could further harm employment in his state.

"It is my hope that as you work towards finalization of the IM, you will take into careful consideration the potential impacts of the proposed changes on the economy," Heller wrote in a [letter](#) to Salazar. "Species and habitat protection is a laudable goal. It is also important to remember that wildlife protection and economic activity are not mutually exclusive."

Jon Marvel, executive director of the Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, which opposes public lands ranching, said the draft IM is controversial because it has very few mandatory protections.

Marvel noted that FWS in 2010 found there were inadequate regulatory mechanisms to protect even the remaining high-quality habitat for sage grouse. "In the interim, there's only direction, and nothing more," he said.

The Western Watersheds Project won a major legal victory this fall, when a federal district judge in Boise, Idaho, ruled that BLM failed to consider the impacts to sage grouse from oil and gas drilling in southwest Wyoming and on a national monument in Idaho ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 30).

The group has pending cases challenging 14 other RMPs on similar grounds.