

Preferred sage grouse plans wouldn't close Idaho grazing



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Preferred alternatives for managing federal land to protect sage grouse in Idaho and a small portion of Montana would not close grazing allotments, federal officials say.

POCATELLO, Idaho — No allotments in Idaho or southeast Montana would be closed to grazing under the two preferred land management alternatives being considered to protect declining sage grouse populations, federal land managers said during a Jan. 13 public meeting.

The Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service are updating about 120 land management plans throughout 11 western states to better protect sage grouse.

In 2010, in response to a lawsuit, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ruled western sage grouse warranted listing, but action was precluded by higher priorities. USFWS identified primary threats as inadequate protective regulatory mechanisms and habitat concerns. Updating the plans should allay a major USFWS concern before the agency rules on an endangered species listing in Jan. 2015.

For Idaho and southeast Montana, the BLM and Forest Service released a draft environmental impact statement last November with six management alternatives, starting a 90-day public comment period that ends Jan. 29. The draft includes a no-action alternative, a no-grazing alternative and preferred alternatives created by the BLM and Forest Service and a task force appointed by Gov. Butch Otter. The agencies will factor the input in a final EIS due by early summer.

In addition to the Pocatello public meeting, Idaho meetings were scheduled for Jan. 6 in Murphy, Jan. 7 in Idaho Falls, Jan. 8 in Salmon, Jan. 14 in Twin Falls and Jan. 15 in Boise. A meeting was also hosted Jan. 9 in Dillon, Mont.

In an emailed newsletter, Idaho Cattle Association Executive Director Wyatt Prescott encouraged members to offer their comments.

“Our key message is that we support the state’s efforts and the state’s alternative, which paves the way for the continuance of grazing,” said Prescott, whose organization was active in Otter’s task force.

USFWS identified wildfires as the greatest threat to sage grouse in the Great Basin.

“We’ve had fires between 20,000 acres and 300,000 acres in the middle of critical habitat,” said Forest Service wildlife biologist Chris Colt.

Caribou Targhee National Forest Supervisor Brent Larson hopes to minimize wildfire impacts by creating fire breaks or planting fire-resistant vegetation and strategically locating fire-suppression resources for a quicker response.

Though grazing can reduce fire fuels, USFWS also named grazing as a sage grouse threat due to potential ground-cover disturbances, explained Rob Mickelsen, Forest Service liaison for sage grouse planning.

Mickelsen explained the preferred alternatives offer three designations regarding the importance of habitat, with the greatest protections imposed on 4.8 million acres of core habitat under the governor’s plan and 6.8 million acres of priority habitat under the BLM and Forest Service plan. Both alternatives require including sage grouse management objectives in grazing permits and imposing case-by-case changes in grazing practices if permit renewal reviews show adverse impacts to sage grouse.

Doug Balfour, an attorney representing southeast Idaho growers affected by the proposed Gateway West transmission line, asked the agencies to include recent results of a 10-year University of Nevada study showing a high-power transmission line had no adverse affects on the bird. Balfour emphasized both preferred alternatives would allow his clients’ proposed route for the line through general sage grouse habitat.

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