Healthy Lands

Meeting both our energy and land health goals requires integrated, landscape-scale habitat protections and resource management.

Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary of the Interior
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America's public lands provide opportunities for recreation, economic prosperity, and some of the world's most magnificent vistas and landscapes. They support local traditions, farming and grazing, as well as tourism and recreational industries. They supply the energy and resources the Nation needs to power industry and enhance energy security. Public lands also provide habitat for numerous species, including listed, candidate, and proposed Federal species.

The Bureau of Land Management undertakes these diverse responsibilities through ongoing operational programs and extensive partnerships with State, tribal, and local governments; communities; industry; and others. As energy activities in the West increase, concerns about maintaining habitat for wildlife at the wildlife-energy interface are also increasing. Increasing human population, local development, and associated infrastructure such as roads, and expanded access with the use of motorized recreational vehicles have added to the pressures on resources in these areas. As a result, it is imperative that resources are managed in a way that protects species at-risk such as the sage grouse to prevent listing and to better assure recovery for those listed as threatened and endangered.

Assuring energy access while maintaining healthy lands requires landscape-scale decisionmaking, new tools that better enable BLM to assure access to energy while protecting habitat and wildlife, more scientific information, improved monitoring, and strengthened partnerships with companies, communities, and conservation organizations. Interior's Healthy Lands Initiative puts in place these building blocks to meet the challenges presented by a growing wildlife-energy interface.

The 2008 budget proposes $22.0 million for this Healthy Lands Initiative. A $15.0 million increase would allow BLM to protect wildlife and restore habitat in energy interface areas and other areas where the needs of wildlife and habitat conservation conflict with energy development on public lands. The Initiative fosters cooperative conservation through partnerships, science, monitoring, and landscape-scale restoration. This Initiative focuses on six areas in the West that encompass important sage grouse habitat or other wildlife habitat. The BLM budget request will leverage funding and matching efforts provided by other Federal agencies; State, local, and tribal governments; philanthropic organizations; advocacy groups; and energy industry partners. Federal activities will also be coordinated with recently completed State wildlife action plans. The State of Wyoming, for example identifies a number of species found in the Green River Basin in its State Comprehensive Wildlife Strategy.

In addition to the BLM funding, the Healthy Lands Initiative includes $2.0 million for Fish and Wildlife activities and $5.0 million for the U.S. Geological Survey. These three agencies will work together

to identify, restore, and protect significant habitat for the benefit of wildlife and energy activities and potentially prevent the listing of species at-risk.

WILDLIFE-ENERGY INTERFACE

Interior plays a critical role in providing access to domestic oil, gas, and other energy sources – both onshore and offshore – to meet the Nation's energy demands. At the same time, Interior serves as the Nation's leading conservation agency. Onshore public lands managed by BLM produce 18 percent of the Nation's natural gas and five percent of its oil. Five basins in Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico contain the largest onshore reserves of natural gas in the country and the second largest domestic resource base after the Outer Continental Shelf. These basins contain an estimated 139 trillion cubic feet of natural gas that can be developed efficiently and expeditiously.

The BLM has significantly improved access to energy resources, resulting in additional oil and gas supplies to the market from these sources. These efforts have been hugely successful as measured by the increasing number of applications for permits to drill processed over the last few years. A comparison of APDs received in these areas between the years 1996 and 2000 and the years 2001 to 2005 shows a 104 percent increase. In 2005, BLM approved more than twice the number of drilling permits approved in 2000. To ensure that this increased activity met all applicable environmental and safety standards, BLM also increased its inspection and monitoring activities.

To maintain energy development and habitat, BLM has been working on vegetative restoration and enhancement initiatives with partners since 2005, generating important species and habitat benefits. Yet most of these initiatives have been small in scale and focused on a site or specific project.

Energy development increasingly occurs in areas with important wildlife habitat. Effective management of these areas demands a more comprehensive, strategic approach. In these wildlife-energy interfaces, numerous listed, candidate, and proposed Federal species coincide with energy-producing areas. The combined effects of energy development, growing populations, and other forces have the potential to cause long-term landscape changes.

The BLM proposes to address these challenges by seeking funds to conduct restoration and enhancement activities on a landscape-scale. At the same time, BLM is developing new tools such as multi-unit environmental impact statements, conservation opportunities, and mitigation measures to assure effective management of energy development and wildlife habitat protection on public lands.

PROTECTING SAGE GROUSE HABITAT

The greater sage grouse presents a particularly significant challenge. Habitat for the sage grouse ranges across ten western States and covers more than 165 million acres, with 72 percent of the acreage under Federal management. In addition to the sage grouse,

WILDLIFE-ENERGY INTERFACE AREAS

	2006 Enacted	2007 Estimate	2008 Plan	Change
Number of BLM acres treated consistent with wildlife management goals within the wildlife-energy interface in specific geographic areas.	86,473	85,927	102,479	16,552

SAGEBRUSH EMPHASIS AREAS

	2006 Enacted	2007 Estimate	2008 Plan	Change
Number of BLM acres treated in sagebrush emphasis areas, consistent with State Sagebrush Conservation Plans and BLM's National Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Strategy.	187,092	192,064	256,925	64,861

sagebrush habitat supports significant numbers of plants and animals that depend on this ecosystem for all or part of their existence, including species that are candidates for listing or are already federally listed threatened or endangered species. The BLM manages more sage grouse habitat than any other entity.

The current range of the greater sage grouse is estimated to be a reduction of nearly 45 percent from the historically occupied range, and it has been petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act several times. In 2004, FWS began a formal status review of the species which included considering all the available scientific and commercial information on the species and its habitats, including the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage grouse and Sagebrush Habitats. In 2005, FWS announced that although a longer-term decline in habitat and population had occurred, the species was not warranted for listing based on the best available science at the time. This scientific information indicated the rate of population decline for the species across its entire range had slowed substantially in the past 20 years, and that populations in several States had slightly increased or generally stabilized. However, in announcing the decision that listing was not warranted, FWS also emphasized the need for continued efforts to conserve sage grouse and sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis. Within their current range, sage grouse populations occur on lands that overlap significant natural resources such as oil and gas, water resources, potential sites for wind power generation, and mineral deposits, as well as ranching, agricultural, and recreational areas. They also are found in habitats at substantial risk of alteration due to exotic weeds, fire, and conifer encroachment.

The situation clearly poses a management challenge, since the public wants wildlife to be maintained and also wants multiple uses on these lands. By being proactive, BLM believes it can protect both the habitat and the species that rely on this land while maintaining current and future energy production for the Nation.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

With so much at stake, BLM is proposing to implement a new model for land management in wildlife-energy interface areas. Rather than continuing to pursue its traditional land management approaches that provide protection of species and habitat on a smaller scale, BLM will focus on habitat conservation on a landscape scale and emphasize cooperative conservation to maximize benefits to large swaths of Federal, State, and private lands. Special emphasis will be placed on efforts that are consistent with State wildlife action plans. The BLM has already successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of this landscape-scale approach to habitat protection and restoration in New Mexico, where this approach has yielded benefits to wildlife, habitat, water quality, invasive species control, and hazardous fuels reduction.

The 2008 budget provides $15.0 million for BLM to continue its efforts in New Mexico and to implement similar landscape-scale projects in five other priority geographic focus areas: the Green River Basin in southwest Wyoming; Snake River plain in southern Idaho; Utah; areas in southeast Oregon and southwest Idaho; northern Nevada; and Colorado. In these six focus areas, project plans have been developed. The requested funding will enable BLM to implement these plans. In all six focus areas, BLM's efforts will leverage significant participation by State, tribal, and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the private-sector. The BLM estimates that 407,000 total acres will be treated with this $15.0 million in Federal funding and $10.0 million in partner investments.

The Healthy Lands Initiative will yield positive results as it:

- Develops and advances partnerships for long-term funding and implementation of projects.
- Concentrates a large number of treatments, in each emphasis area, resulting in a significant amount of improved habitat in an entire watershed or landscape-wide area in three to five years.
- Establishes connectivity of fish and wildlife habitats and landscape level habitat restoration and enhancements.
- Leverages partnership funding at unprecedented levels.
- Establishes or enhances existing partnerships with adjoining landowners, so that a large percent of landowners in the same area treat their lands.
- Reduces overall unit cost due to lower cost per acre.

NEW MEXICO

The BLM's ongoing restoration activities in New Mexico are achieving results using a landscape-scale approach that may be applied throughout the West. In 2006, the New Mexico Office focused restoration funds and expertise in one watershed and, working with partners, treated 65,515 BLM acres and 20,200 State and private acres in the wildlife-energy interface. Compared to traditional approaches used by BLM that treated five to ten acres at a time, this partnership focused on large, landscape-scale projects. In 2005, this traditional approach resulted in a total of only 8,621 BLM acres and 4,949 non-BLM acres being treated. With additional funding in 2008, BLM estimates that a total of 101,000 acres will be treated, 16 miles of streams will be improved, and 149 oil pads reclaimed in the wildlife-energy interface areas in New Mexico alone.

In the geographic focus areas, BLM has been working with partners. These efforts are beginning to show results. Numerous new partners are awaiting an opportunity to participate with BLM.

In southern Idaho, BLM and its partners have formed working groups and partnerships to facilitate healthy landscape restoration projects and improved land management. For example, the State of Idaho's Department of Fish and Game is leading the development of nine local working groups with BLM to focus on sage grouse habitat conservation. Working groups are in place in the Shoshone Basin, the Jarbridge area, the Upper Snake, and the Mud Lake areas. Other local working groups, such as for the Craters of the Moon National Monument, are being formed.

In Utah, a consortium of agencies form the Utah Partners for Conservation and Development. Seven Federal agencies, eight State agencies, private landowners, a university extension service, and nonprofit organizations such as Trout Unlimited are planning to restore sagebrush habitat in focus areas selected for their wildlife value, particularly focusing on sage grouse. The partners have committed more than $8 million to restore public and private land, including 120,000 acres that were completed in 2005. The State of Utah has committed $4.0 million to this effort.

Southwestern Colorado provides habitat for diverse wildlife populations, including seven of the eight remaining populations of Gunnison sage grouse and desert big horn sheep. The BLM, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and other partners working together to restore habitats guided by comprehensive conservation planning documents, including the Gunnison Sage Grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan, Colorado's Comprehensive Wildlife Con-

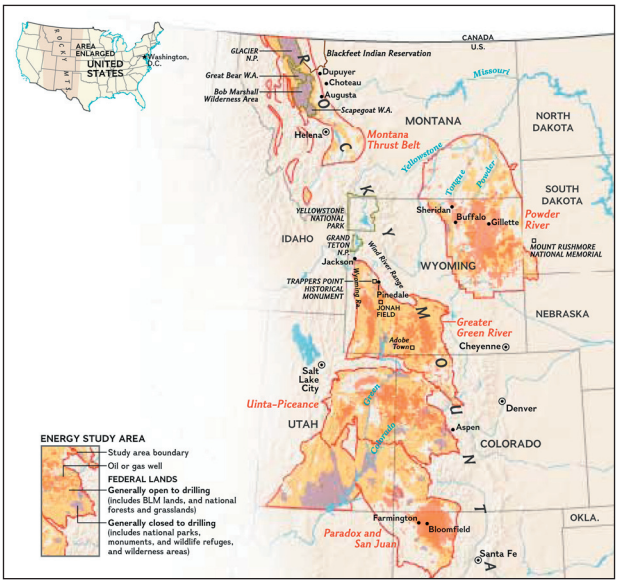
servation Strategy, wildlife action plans, and BLM resource management plans. Two field offices are completing programmatic habitat improvement environmental assessments to streamline future project implementation.

An increase of $5.0 million will enable USGS to provide BLM with the science support needed for adaptive management of energy projects to assure achievement of habitat conservation and restoration goals. The USGS will use the funds to conduct inventories of species and habitats, monitor land and water resources, monitor species, and synthesize habitat and energy information. The USGS will validate, through peer or independent review, six additional watershed and landscape studies in 2008.

A $2.0 million increase will enable FWS to increase assistance to private landowners to improve habitat and protect species on private lands and enhance planning and consultation to ensure energy development impacts to wildlife and habitat are effectively mitigated and listing of species is avoided. The FWS will work with private landowners to protect species through the Candidate Conservation program and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program. Through these programs, FWS will encourage private landowners to conserve candidate species on their lands and restore or enhance 6,640 acres of sage grouse habitat in Wyoming's Green River Basin. The FWS will act early to develop candidate conservation agreements with landowners and will explore the use of other flexible approaches, such as mitigation banks and conservation banks.

The stakes are particularly high in the Green River Basin area of southwest Wyoming, an area of critical wildlife habitat and rapid energy development. The 2008 Healthy Lands Initiative targets the Green River Basin as one area where USGS and FWS would support and complement BLM's habitat conservation efforts.

The Importance of Ensuring Energy Access



The Healthy Lands Initiative will help ensure continued access to the public lands for energy development. The BLM estimates there are 1.9 billion barrels of oil and 57.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas on Federal lands open for development in the area of southwest Wyoming at the wildlife-energy interface. In 2006, about $2.0 billion was collected from mineral development on Federal lands in Wyoming that was shared with States and deposited in the Treasury. This level of production and revenue could be curtailed if a species listing reduces access to these lands. Similar threats of lost production and revenues exist in New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, where habitat restoration projects under the Healthy Lands Initiative would be targeted.

To further ensure the health of lands in the wildlife-energy interface, the 2008 BLM budget includes a $3.1 million increase in BLM's Oil and Gas Management program for increased inspection and monitoring. This funding will allow BLM to keep pace with APD approvals and support additional monitoring called for in recent environmental reviews. Increased capacity is needed for BLM to monitor new well activity and incorporate that information into its landscape restoration projects.

GREEN RIVER, WYOMING

The Green River area in Wyoming has several of the most intact, native ecosystems remaining in the intermountain West, including sagebrush steppe. In addition to sage grouse, Wyoming is home to more than 800 species, of which 279 are considered at-risk and 12 are federally listed as threatened or endangered. The Green River area alone has nine listed species.

This area is also experiencing rapid, large-scale energy development. Until now, conservation and reclamation have focused locally on developing and developed areas. Efforts have not been well coordinated or considered on a scale best suited to ensuring viable wildlife populations in the context of energy and other development.

The first phase of the initiative would focus on approximately 15 million acres west of the continental divide. In the Green River basin, efforts to improve habitat will benefit a total of 71,000 acres using Federal funds leveraged through partnerships. The Healthy Lands Initiative will engage interested partners across land ownerships and jurisdictions within a landscape. This approach would create opportunities to combine financial resources and share land use practices to implement practical, landscape-level solutions. Many partnerships are already in place, including, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the Wyoming Landscape Conservation Initiative, and the Western Governors Association. An environmental assessment has been completed and much of the Federal land-use planning is in place. With this framework already in place, 2008 funding will have an immediate performance benefit.

Restoration and enhancement of sage grouse habitat will also be conducted by FWS in collaboration with BLM. The FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife programs will work with private landowners to restore or enhance 6,640 acres of sage grouse habitat in Wyoming in 2008.

In 2005, BLM administered over 45,000 oil and gas leases and 399 geothermal leases. In addition to managing energy and mineral exploration and development on public lands, BLM provides technical supervision of mineral development on Indian lands. The increased funding requested would provide BLM with the capacity to perform an additional 1,572 inspections by 2009, with 522 additional inspections occurring in 2008. The funding increase would also enable BLM to monitor the effectiveness of oil and gas lease stipulations at 280 locations. In support of the Healthy Lands Initiative, BLM will assess the effectiveness of stipulations intended to address impacts to threatened, endangered, and sensitive species in the areas where energy development is occurring, and to develop wildlife monitoring plans. As new wells are drilled, BLM will be monitoring these operations to determine the effectiveness of lease stipulations and conditions of approval.