

Draft "2st revisions"



MILES CITY SAGE-GROUSE LOCAL WORKING GROUP

ACTION PLAN 2011-2014

Note to readers: The following is prepared primarily for use by the local working group, but it is also anticipated that others outside of the local working group may have interest in this document. So, it is written to provide some basic information to persons who may not be familiar with the local geography, surroundings, and issues.

BACKGROUND

Introduction

The Miles City area Sage-grouse Local working group (SG-LWG) is one of 4 working groups currently operating in Montana originally identified in the "Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage-Grouse in Montana-2005."

The Miles City Sage-grouse Local Working Group began meeting in December of 2003. Meetings were open to all and participants included agricultural interests, sportsmen, power companies, and representatives of state, federal, and tribal agencies and nongovernmental organizations. The SG-LWG first met in December 2003, and has continued to meet 3-4 times per year since. The primary focus of the meetings has been to review the goals and conservation actions recommended by the Montana state management plan for greater sage-grouse conservation, review programs providing financial assistance to landowners for sage-grouse-related improvements and conservation measures, review pending activities that may impact habitats and populations, host expert presentations on the results of scientific research, review state and federal conservation planning, and to begin on-the-ground projects.

The Montana SG-LWG boundaries were determined at an Executive Committee meeting of the Montana State Sage-grouse Working Group Committee on October 3, 2007.

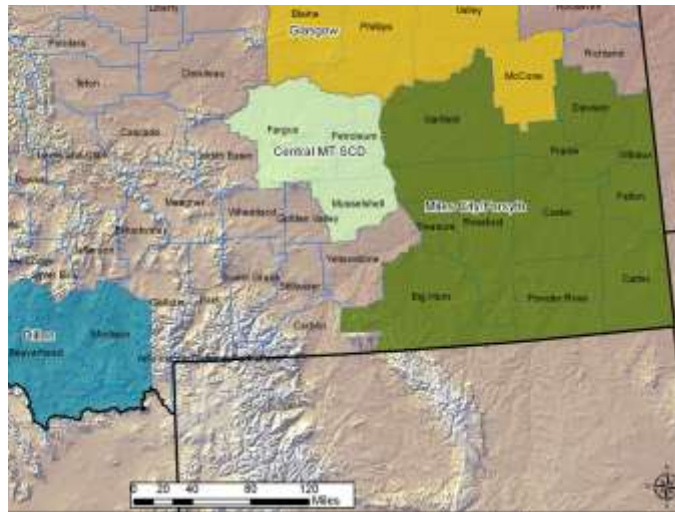


Figure 1

Blue – Dillon, Gold – Glasgow, Green – Miles City Light green – Central
Central - Conservation Districts not an official SG-LWG however is proactive functioning as one.

Geographic Area

Participants in meetings have included persons from Big Horn, Rosebud, Carter, Custer, Powder River, and Prairie Counties in Montana and from locations in Wyoming as well. A general boundary was offered at a statewide committee meeting in Billings October 3, 2007.

Landownership and public land management in this portion of Montana include:

- Private landownership
- Land and minerals managed by the Bureau of Land Management
- Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation
- Crow Indian Reservation
- Lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service
- Lands managed by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
- C. M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

General Description of Habitat

Southeastern Montana is within the Wyoming Big Sagebrush-Silver Sagebrush ecotype, which extends over most of eastern Montana. In this part of Montana, sagebrush steppe occurs at elevations ranging from 2000-3500 feet on nearly level landscape or gentle slopes. The sagebrush steppe landscape is dissected by locally steep river breaks.

Stands of ponderosa pine are intermixed with prairie across the landscape. Major drainages include the Yellowstone, Tongue, and Powder Rivers.

Land uses in the area include livestock grazing, energy development, farming (grains and hay on dry land and beets, corn, beans, and other crops in irrigated valleys). Conversion to residential use is not prevalent—this is an area of Montana that has been experiencing population declines over the past few decades. There is little residential development in the area outside of established towns and recreational area locations (such as on the Tongue River Reservoir).

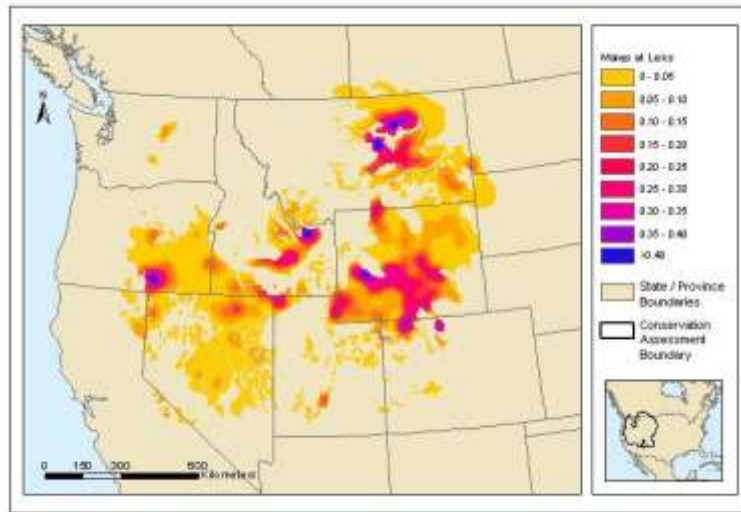
General Description of Sage-Grouse Population

Based on available data and anecdotal information, sage grouse populations in these counties experienced declines in the latter half of the 20th century, but more recently appear to have stabilized based on lek counts.

Despite harsh winters that can occur in this part of Montana, sage-grouse survive winters well, especially compared to other upland game birds. Sage-grouse use sagebrush for food and shelter during the winter months. (Refer to the “Management Plan” for more information on seasonal habitat needs. Also refer to Brendan Moynihan’s Ph.D. dissertation on importance of winter habitat in northern Montana.)

Research on habitat and sage-grouse populations is being conducted by FWP, BLM, and the U.S. Forest Service in the Miles City Sage-grouse Local Working Group Area. This includes work on mapping habitat and research on potential effects of coalbed methane gas development.

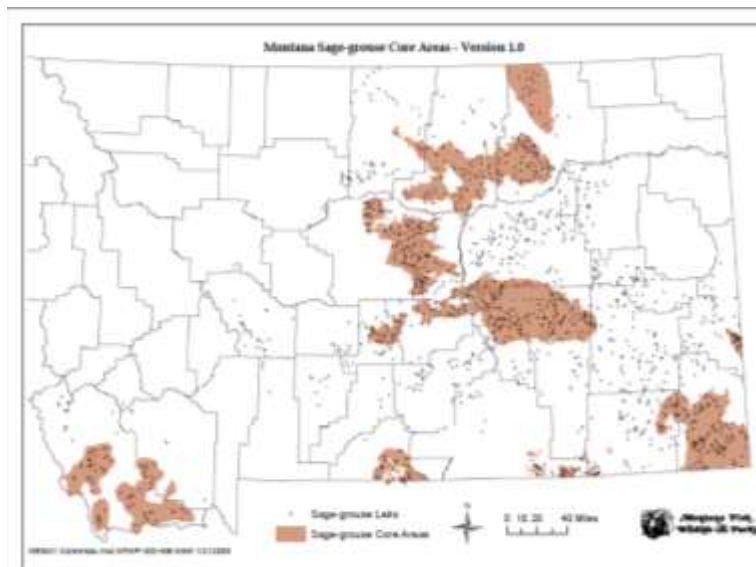
Figure 2. Strongholds for breeding populations of sage-grouse in western North America



Darker shades represent the greatest densities of males/km².

SOURCE: Connelly, J. W., S. T. Knick, M. A. Schroeder, and S. J. Stiver. 2004. Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats. Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Unpublished Report. Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Figure 2: Montana Sage-grouse Core Areas – Version 1.0



SOURCE: In 2009 the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks (MDFWP) released the greater sage-grouse core area map of Montana.

Key Issues for Sage Grouse in the West

After thoroughly analyzing the best scientific and commercial information available, the Fish and Wildlife Service concluded in March 2010 that the greater sage-grouse warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act. However, the Service has determined that listing the species for protection is precluded by the need to take action on other species facing more immediate and severe extinction threats. As a result, the sage-grouse will be added to the list of species that are candidates for Endangered Species Act protection. The Service will review the status of the sage-grouse annually to determine whether it warrants more immediate attention.

The Service analyzed five factors in making their evaluation for listing. Two of the factors were judged to be warranted these were; the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of habitat or range and the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms. Some potential factors that may affect the habitat or range of the greater sage-grouse and result in habitat loss or fragmentation are wildfire, energy development, urbanization, agricultural conversion, infrastructure development and conifer encroachment are the primary threats to the species.

Greater sage-grouse populations have been declining since the 1960s. Population projections and our analysis of threats suggest the declining population trend will continue across the species' range, and extirpation is anticipated in areas affected by energy development and increased wildfire frequency within the next 30 to 100 years. The resulting landscape is likely to consist of scattered sage-grouse populations across the species range with minimal, if any, connectivity placing the species in danger of extinction.

Invasive plants are also a serious rangewide threat to greater sage-grouse habitat because they can out-compete sagebrush and are increasing wildfire frequencies, further contributing to direct loss of habitat. Once established, invasive plants reduce and eliminate vegetation essential for greater sage-grouse to use as food and cover. Sagebrush restoration techniques are limited and have generally been ineffective.

Federal agencies manage the majority of greater sage-grouse habitat in the United States. Overall, the ability of these agencies to adequately address the issues of wildfire and invasive plants across the landscape is limited. However, the Service believes new mechanisms could be adopted to target the protection of greater sage-grouse habitats from fire. Energy development and its associated infrastructure are expected to continue. Protective measures and strategic siting of energy developments away from core sage grouse habitats are needed to reduce threats into the future.

Substantial new information on West Nile virus (WNV) and impacts on the greater sage-grouse has emerged since 2005. The virus is now distributed throughout the species' range, and affected sage-grouse populations experience high mortality rates with resultant, often large reductions in local population numbers. Infections in northeastern Wyoming, southeastern Montana, and the Dakotas seem to be the most persistent, with

mortalities recorded in that area every year since WNV was first detected in sage-grouse. Infection rates vary between years, with hotter summers promoting the highest observed mortality rates.

Limited information suggests that sage-grouse may be able to survive an infection; however, because of the apparent low level of immunity and continuing changes within the virus, widespread resistance is unlikely.

Issues Identified by Miles City Sage-grouse Local Working Group

The Miles City SG-LWG identified the following as priority issues for their area.

Key issues are focused on the objectives of the state plan—sage grouse populations and sage grouse habitat. It is assumed that primary emphasis will be given to those populations that are known or suspected to be at risk, or where future actions could create new risk factors. Areas with stable populations will be less of a focus (except where future actions could be a problem).

- Consider populations at risk:
 - Are there populations known or suspected to be declining?
- Identify future actions or situations that could create new risk factors for population viability. In this area this includes:
 - Increased energy development and related infrastructure
 - West Nile Virus (known to kill birds that contract the disease, first surfaced in Montana in late summer 2003; cool weather conditions in 2004 did not lend themselves to production of mosquito that carries the disease)
 - Conversion, other?
- Actions that reduce or minimize sage brush habitat. In this area this includes:
 - New conversion of sage brush land to cropland
 - Eliminating sage brush (including burning, plowing, or use of herbicides) as part of efforts to promote grass growth, or other
 - Wildfire
- Adequate seasonal habitat
 - Drought and other factors can affect forb and insect production, both of which are important food sources for young sage grouse
 - Water availability (especially during drought)
- Effects of predation and hunting on sage grouse populations

Actions Taken To-Date

- October 3, 2007 participated in an executive committee meeting of the State Sage-grouse Committee
- The Miles City SG-LWG has held 20 meeting since 2007

- The Miles City SG-LWG was successful in incorporating sage-grouse into the statewide Range Days agenda which was held June 15th – 17th 2009 in Miles
- The Montana Range Days attracted people from across the state which provided a great opportunity for the local committee to reach a large audience.
- Sage-grouse were again incorporated into Montana Range Days activities in 2010 with the participation and guidance of the Miles City SG-LWG. The Montana Range Days attracted people from across the state which provided a great opportunity for the local committee to reach a large audience.
- The *Juniper Treatment Project CX Ranch Big Horn County June 1, 2009*. Treated 143 acres of juniper encroachment.
- The Miles City SG-LWG held a sage-grouse outreach conference October 29, 2009 at Fort Keogh in Miles City
- Cooperated in the development and publications *Greater Sage-grouse Field Indicator Guide* an informational brochure for the general public informing them about sage-grouse.
- The Miles City SG-LWG participated in Montana Extension Service program in Broadus January 26th, 2010
- The Miles City SG-LWG sponsored an informational meeting on sage-grouse in Alzada February 18th, 2010
- Numerous public articles appeared in the local paper covering sage-grouse events and meetings were announced in local papers and radio.

ACTION PLAN

The Miles City SG-LWG, in additions to holding regular meeting, has undertaken several actions to assist sage-grouse conservation

1. Meetings

The Sage-grouse Local Working Group will meet at least once during the year and will also conduct an annual field tour. Purpose of the meeting(s) will be to:

- 1) provide updates on various projects, studies, statewide and multi-state regional sage grouse conservation efforts
- 2) provide information and training on financial assistance programs for sage grouse conservation efforts
- 3) identify any new developments (actions or other) resulting in new impacts for sage grouse in the local area
- 4) identify opportunities for the SG-LWG to provide information to the public regarding the SG-LWG's goals, efforts, and accomplishments, and build support for those actions
- 5) identify new projects or actions of the SG-LWG
- 6) elect co-chairs
- 7) monitor effectiveness of ongoing projects

Co-chairs may call other meetings as relevant, including for purposes of project planning, implementation, and monitoring.

2. Executive Committee

An executive committee will be established to provide support to the co-chairs between meetings and will include representation from the state and federal agencies (NRCS, BLM, and FWP). The Executive Committee will meet as necessary between meetings of the local working group.

3. Logistical Support

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will coordinate with co-chairs to provide the following logistical support:

- 1) Preparation and distribution of meeting announcements and written meeting summaries
- 2) Management of the Local Working Group mailing list data base
- 3) Preparation of news releases
- 4) Meeting logistics (e.g., meeting location, refreshments, etc.)
- 5) Preparation of draft annual progress report (as draft to be reviewed by local working group and then submitted to MDFWP. Annual progress reports are to be submitted MDFWP.

4. Action Items

Between January 1, 2011 and January 1, 2014, The Local Working Group will:

- 1) Identify and Implement at least one project
- 2) Provide at least one public information session (e.g., presentation at a conservation district meeting, *grazing district*, public meeting, other)
- 3) Update the action plan for 2011-2014 (including identifying other projects for subsequent years and role of local working group)
- 4) Provide written information to agencies on local working group consensus items of relevance to agency actions (e.g., supporting specific agency projects)
- 5) Assist and facilitate NRCS Sage-grouse initiative outreach, communications, and education
- 6) Provide outreach outside of Miles City to increase recruitment and exposure to new members
- 7) Identify funding opportunities to help support our activities