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New Study Predicts Sage Grouse To Benefit Significantly from Wyoming Core Policy and Targeted Conservation Easements

A conservation strategy in Wyoming that targets "core" habitats where sage grouse numbers are highest will reduce losses of sage grouse dramatically, according to a study published this week in the scientific journal, PLOS ONE.

"Our study shows that the state's core area policy combined with $250 million worth of targeted conservation easements can cut anticipated losses by roughly half statewide and nearly 62% within sage grouse core breeding areas," said Holly Copeland, of The Nature Conservancy in Wyoming and lead author.

Wyoming's core area policy went into effect in 2008, limiting infrastructure development within areas of high sage grouse population densities. The Bureau of Land Management followed suit in 2012 with similar policies. Conservation easements, agreements with landowners to keep lands intact and not subdivided, serve as a complementary strategy to safeguard private lands within the core areas.

Wyoming plays a key role for a bird that faces a potential listing under the Endangered Species Act, a decision slated for 2015. Thirty-seven percent of the world's population of sage grouse inhabits a state with high oil and gas reserves, excellent potential for wind and solar development, and with surging rural growth.

The intent of Wyoming's core policy is to sustain a growing economy and a species that requires large intact landscapes and little disturbance. The study cites early evidence of a 40 percent reduction in lands leased for oil and gas development within Wyoming's sage grouse strongholds since the core policy went into effect.

Other states that make up the bird's 11-state habitat area are developing conservation plans similar to the Wyoming core area strategy. This big-picture, multistate approach is essential to not just slowing sage

grouse population declines, as predicted by the study, but stabilizing its numbers and avoiding an endangered species listing.

Findings from this study could also be used in concert with the BLM's Resource Management Plan revisions for sage grouse, points out Copeland. Those revisions will guide development on 50 percent of sage-grouse habitat rangewide. How well regulatory mechanisms reduce threats will be one of the major factors when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes its 2015 recommendation.

Dr. David Naugle, Sage Grouse Initiative national science advisor and one of the authors of the article, agreed that the study's findings will be useful beyond Wyoming.

"This science is informative for the 10 other western states crafting policies to proactively conserve sage grouse and maintain healthy economies," he said.

A Natural Resources Conservation Service grant of the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) funded the peer-reviewed study. The Initiative, a large partnership launched by the NRCS in 2010, is pioneering the use of science in documenting the biological benefits of Farm Bill investments, including conservation easements in Wyoming.

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For an overview of the Wyoming Core Area Policy, see the six-minute video:
http://vimeo.com/62762110

Research Article
Measuring the Effectiveness of Conservation: A Novel Framework to Quantify the Benefits of Sage-Grouse Conservation Policy and Easements in Wyoming. Authors: Holly E. Copeland, Amy Pocewicz, David E. Naugle, Tim Griffiths, Doug Keinath, Jeffrey Evans, James Platt
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