

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Issuance of Endangered Species Act Section 10(a)(1)(A) Enhancement of Survival Permit and Implementation of a Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for the Greater Sage-Grouse

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed implementation of a Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) for the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; sage-grouse) in the West Central Planning Area (WCPA) of Idaho. In association with the CCAA, the Service proposes to issue an Enhancement of Survival Permit (Permit), pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act (Act), to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG). The IDFG will then issue Certificates of Inclusion to non-federal property owners who enroll their lands and implement covered activities consistent with the terms of the programmatic CCAA and the Permit. The EA describes the probable effects of this action on the human environment under three alternatives: the preferred alternative, the no-action alternative, and a landowner-by-landowner alternative.

Decision

Based on a comprehensive review and analysis of the programmatic CCAA and the findings presented in the EA, the Service has selected the preferred alternative because it best facilitates collaboration between the Service, IDFG, and prospective landowners while providing the following conservation benefits to the sage-grouse:

- Existing and potential sage-grouse habitat will be maintained and/or enhanced on enrolled properties.
- Habitat restoration activities will take place on enrolled properties to improve habitat conditions for the sage-grouse in the WCPA.
- The conservation measures identified in section IV of the CCAA will be implemented on all enrolled properties to reduce or eliminate any identified threats to the sage-grouse on the property.
- The programmatic approach of the CCAA streamlines the process to enroll non-federal lands and implement conservation actions for the benefit of the sage-grouse in the WCPA. This will result in more resources available to encourage landowner participation and sage-grouse conservation.
- Monitoring and collection of baseline biological information concerning the sage-grouse and its habitat within the WCPA will be improved through cooperative management efforts on enrolled properties.
- Successful implementation of these voluntary conservation measures will increase public awareness and support for sage-grouse conservation efforts.

Implementation of the preferred alternative, while exempting some incidental take of the sage-grouse if it is listed under the Act, will provide long-term benefits to the species, and is not expected to have any significant adverse effects to any of the resources identified in the EA including wildlife, land ownership and use, vegetation, and recreation.

Under the no-action alternative, recovery efforts for the sage-grouse would continue, however, no Permit would be issued in association with the programmatic CCAA. As a result, cooperation between the Service, IDFG, and interested property owners would be limited and sporadic. Under the no-action alternative, threats to the sage-grouse in the WCPA would continue, and population declines would be expected to continue. The no-action alternative is not expected to have any significant adverse effects to wildlife, land ownership and use, vegetation, or recreation.

Under the landowner-by-landowner alternative, some of the conservation benefits of the preferred alternative would occur for the sage-grouse, although at a much smaller scale. The landowner-by-landowner alternative would require that individual CCAA's be developed for each non-federal property owner interested in implementing conservation actions for the sage-grouse, requiring substantial commitments of time and resources from the Service. Due to resource constraints, the landowner-by-landowner alternative would result in a smaller number of enrollees, and less overall coordination with property owners, IDFG, and other agencies for conservation of the sage-grouse. The landowner-by-landowner alternative is not expected to have any significant adverse effects to wildlife, land ownership and use, vegetation, or recreation.

Public Involvement and Review

The public was extensively involved in developing the programmatic CCAA and the EA. The CCAA was originally drafted by representatives of the West Central Idaho Sage-Grouse Local Working Group (LWG), composed of interested citizens, IDFG, and the Service. The Service also attended numerous LWG meetings and reviewed drafts of the CCAA with representatives of the LWG. The LWG is an open group, and local, state, and federal governmental agencies, interested citizens and property owners, agricultural and environmental groups, and any other interested parties are welcome to participate. Drafts of the programmatic CCAA and EA were made available for public review during a 30-day public comment period beginning on July 23, 2009; the press release and Federal Register notice were transmitted to over 600 contacts, including members of the Idaho Federal and State congressional delegations, Federal and State government agencies, County governments, tribes, the media, environmental organizations, private property owners, and other interested individuals and groups. The Service received six comment letters during the public review period, responses to which are addressed in the Service's Findings and Recommendations document.

Conclusions

Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that the preferred alternative is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement for this action. Furthermore, I have found that implementing the preferred alternative will have no significant impact on any of the environmental resources identified in the EA.

This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file and are available for public inspection, by appointment, at the following Service offices:

Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office
1387 S Vinnell Way, Rm 368
Boise, Idaho 83709
Contact: Kendra Womack

Pacific Regional Office
911 NE 11th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232
Contact: Rick Amidon

Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision.

Documents Incorporated by Reference

Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for the Greater Sage-Grouse in the West Central Planning Area, Idaho.

Final Environmental Assessment for the West Central Planning Area Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Greater Sage-Grouse in Idaho.

Conference Opinion Regarding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Proposed Issuance of a Section 10(a)(1)(A) Enhancement of Survival Permit Associated with a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Greater Sage-Grouse in Idaho (Reference Number: 14420-2010-FC-0123).

Findings and Recommendations Regarding Issuance of and Enhancement of Survival Permit in Accordance with a Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances for Greater Sage-Grouse.



Deputy Regional Director

Date