

15,000 Acre Federal Fracking Plan Endangers Sage Grouse in Utah



By Kelly Fuller

Every spring, wildlife lovers across the west rise before dawn and gather on great open expanses of sagebrush. They know that after the sun rises, they will

enjoy one of nature's vivid spectacles: the mating display of the male greater sage-grouse.

Male sage-grouse sport a fan of striped tail feathers and a fluffy white mantle with two gold-colored air sacs, like a double-yolked egg. The dancing birds lift and drop the top half of their bodies dramatically, as if they had hydraulic suspensions under their feathers. Sometimes you can hear the strutting sage-grouse before you see them. The inflating air sacs sound like old-fashioned percolator coffee pots, and the noise carries a long way across the quiet steppe. This spring-time dance party has been going on for thousands of years. But over the last five decades, the sage-grouse population has declined by more than 60% due to habitat loss and fragmentation. Grazing, farming, mining, urban sprawl, and energy development are just a few of the factors driving the

decline.

One group of sage-grouse is especially in trouble. In the Sheeprock Mountains area of central Utah, greater sage-grouse numbers are dropping fast: They have decreased by nearly 40% in the last four years.

In February 2017, it looked like the vulnerable Sheeprocks sage-grouse had finally caught a break. The U.S. Bureau

Instead of restricting oil and gas development, the BLM announced it would auction off fracking and drilling rights to 14,943 acres of Sheeprocks sage-grouse habitat, including special priority habitat that has been identified as critical to the birds' survival.

of Land Management (BLM) declared that a "hard trigger" had been tripped, meaning the population declines were sufficiently dire to increase stronger and more protective management guidelines. This meant that stronger actions to help sage-grouse became mandatory, including habitat restoration and minimizing impacts from development.

But less than two months later, the BLM flip-flopped. Instead of restricting oil and gas development, the BLM announced it would auction off fracking and drilling rights to 14,943 acres of Sheeprocks sage-grouse habitat, including special priority habitat that has been

identified as critical to the birds' survival.

Oil and gas development is bad news for sage-grouse not just because it fragments and destroys their habitat. Sage-grouse have been known to abandon their nesting grounds when tall structures that can provide perches for their predators are built. These include the drilling rigs and power lines that service oil and gas fields.

TuIf this auction takes place in September 2017 as planned, greater sage-grouse will not be the only wildlife that suffer. Eagles, mule deer, elk, and many other

species will also experience habitat loss in the area.

There is an obvious solution. Rather than auction off oil and gas development rights in the Sheeprocks, the BLM should do what it said it would do: improve the habitat so it can support more sage-grouse.

Western Watersheds Project has organized a coalition of conservation groups to fight this lease sale. Contact Kelly Fuller at kfuller@westernwatersheds.org for more information and to learn how to join this effort.

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The Oquirrh, Onaqui, and Cedar Mountain ranges in west-central Utah.

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