

# Feds to ease land restrictions across US West

March 15 2019, by Matthew Brown

---



In this April 20, 2013, file photo, male Greater Sage Grouse perform their mating ritual on a lake near Walden, Colo. The Trump administration is finalizing plans to ease restrictions on oil and natural gas drilling and other industry activities that are meant to protect an imperiled bird species that ranges across the American West. U.S. Bureau of Land Management Acting Director Brian Steed told The Associated Press the changes still protect greater sage grouse while addressing concerns that policies under former President Barack Obama were too restrictive. A formal announcement is expected Friday, March 15, 2019. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski, File)

The Trump administration is finalizing plans to ease restrictions on oil and gas drilling and other industries that were meant to protect an imperiled bird species that ranges across the American West, federal officials said Thursday.

U.S. Bureau of Land Management Acting Director Brian Steed told The Associated Press the changes would protect greater sage grouse while addressing concerns that existing policies governing millions of acres of federal land were too restrictive.

Critics say the changes will lead to more disturbances of grouse habitat, undermining efforts to shore up the bird's population.

A formal announcement is expected Friday.

The changes address a suite of sweeping land management plans for portions of 11 Western states that were adopted in 2015 under former President Barack Obama to keep the struggling bird from slipping toward extinction.

The ground-dwelling sage grouse is known for an elaborate mating ritual in which males puff out air sacs in their chest to attract female birds. They've seen steep declines due to energy development, disease and other factors.

The birds once numbered in the millions but the most recent estimates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service places the population at between 200,000 to 500,000.

The 2015 plans capped years of negotiations involving government, industry and advocacy groups. They were intended to prevent grouse from being listed as a threatened or endangered species. Such a designation could have brought severe limitations on grazing, [energy](#)

[development](#) and other activities across the bird's range, which covers some 270,000 square miles (700,000 square kilometers).

Under President Donald Trump, Interior Department officials have vowed to lift obstacles to drilling. Grouse protections have long been viewed by the energy industry as an obstacle to development.

Steed said the broad revisions to the Obama-era plans were meant to move beyond what he called a "one-size-fits-all" approach under the old rules. He said the changes give more flexibility to land managers and states concerned about balancing economic development with protections for the bird.

"Our intent was not to throw out the plans, but to make them better respond to the needs on the ground," Steed said. "We're doing that in a very careful way to ensure that the bird's protections are still in effect."

The new plans are expected to remove the most protective habitat designations for about 13,000 square miles (34,000 square kilometers) of public land. Those areas, considered essential to the species' survival, were a centerpiece of the Obama policy.

The Trump administration also would drop some requirements to prioritize leasing for oil and gas outside sage grouse habitat and allow for more waivers for drilling.

Opponents are expected to challenge the changes in court. Brian Rutledge with the Audubon Society said the changes will make it harder to stop the long-term decline of [sage grouse](#) by giving oil and gas companies access to crucial grouse habitat.

"It's a free for all, based on prioritizing fossil fuel extraction over any other use of the federal landscape," Rutledge said.

But state officials including Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, a Democrat, signaled their support of the changes.

"We look forward to working with the BLM and our local communities to move important conservation measures forward to protect [greater sage grouse](#) in Colorado," Polis said in a statement.

In Wyoming, one of the most important remaining strongholds for the species, Republican Gov. Mark Gordon said the changes would "provide predictability" for economic development while conserving grouse.

© 2019 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Feds to ease land restrictions across US West (2019, March 15) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-feds-ease-restrictions-west.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--