

Firefighting plan aims to protect Western habitat

March 10 2015, by Keith Ridler

U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell has released the initial plan for a new wildfire-fighting strategy to protect a wide swath of intermountain West sagebrush country that supports cattle ranching and is home to a struggling bird species.

The 27-page report released Tuesday calls for prioritizing and protecting areas most at risk by using veteran crews, rural fire departments and fire protection associations made up of ranchers who can respond quickly. The previous strategy didn't call for specific efforts to protect the habitat.

The plan heading into the 2015 wildfire season also calls for accelerating efforts to restore burned rangelands by developing a strategy for storing and distributing locally adapted seeds to try to keep invasive species such as cheatgrass from returning.

"Cheatgrass and other [invasive species](#) have contributed to making rangeland fire one of the greatest threats to the Great Basin—not only to sagebrush habitat, but to wildlife, ranching and other economic activities that depend on a healthy landscape," Jewell said in a statement. "As we head into the 2015 fire season, the actions recommended in this report will help ensure that our preparedness, response and recovery strategies better align with the threats facing the West."

The Boise-based National Interagency Fire Center, which assigns resources throughout the nation during wildfire season, is already

adopting new strategies. One of them is a plan to preposition fire crews in the Great Basin ahead of fire season.

"That's the key thing that we will be doing differently," said Randy Eardley, a Fire Center spokesman. Previously, he said, fire crews only responded—sometimes from great distances—once wildfires had started and spread. "If we have more crews available in the area, then yes, it could be very effective," he said.

The plan requires making a priority the protection of sage-steppe ecosystems where sage grouse live. Wildfire managers are still working out the specifics of how some aspects of the plan will be put in place, Eardley said.

In the last decade, rangeland fires have been especially destructive in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California. Jewell in October toured southern Idaho and saw firsthand the giant swaths scorched by wildfires. In January she issued an order seeking a "science-based" approach to find a way to stop wildfire and other threats while also protecting habitat for greater sage grouse.

The wide-ranging bird is under consideration for federal protections, and just the potential listing by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has already put on hold development of wind farms and oil and gas drilling plans in some areas. Experts say an endangered-species listing could damage Western states' economies.

The football-sized bird once numbered in the millions, but current estimates put the population between 200,000 and 500,000.

The plan released Tuesday stems in part from a conference last fall in Boise that brought together scientists and land managers to find collaborative ways to protect Great Basin rangelands from the plague of

increasingly intense wildfires.

John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert who took part in that conference, on Tuesday analyzed the resulting plan.

"This is a reordering because of the possible sage grouse listing," he said. "Nobody wants a listing because so much key habitat burns that (a listing) just gets out of everyone's control."

Besides sage grouse habitat, the gigantic wildfires have destroyed rangeland that ranchers rely on to graze cattle.

"I appreciate the direction of Secretary Jewell's management plan," said Idaho Republican Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter in a statement on Tuesday. "In fact, many of the points echo the strategies that have been fundamental to my [sage-grouse](#) protection plan for some time now."

Otter said he and other Western governors have been working for years battling cheatgrass "and other threats to important habitat in Idaho and throughout the region."

The January order by Jewell created a Rangeland Fire Task Force assigned to come up with an initial plan by March. That report made public on Tuesday is called "The Initial Report: A Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration in 2015."

The next step in the process is for the task force to recommend longer-term actions for rangeland [fire](#) management, prevention, suppression and restoration. That report, according to Jewell's January order, is due by May 1. Full implementation is scheduled for 2016.

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