

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
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To: State Directors (California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon/Washington, Utah, and Wyoming) and Center Directors

From: Assistant Director, Resources and Planning

Subject: Gunnison and Greater Sage-Grouse (including the Bi-State Distinct Population Segment) Habitat Assessment Policy

**Program Areas:** Wildlife Management, Threatened and Endangered Species Management, Rangeland Management, Riparian Management, Hazardous Fuels Management, Emergency Stabilization, Burned Area and Rehabilitation.

**Purpose:** This Instruction Memorandum (IM) provides program direction to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Field Offices (FOs) on implementing the BLM Technical Reference 6710-1 (Stiver et al. 2015, Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (HAF)). This IM includes clarification and additional guidance to follow when implementing the HAF to assess habitats for Gunnison and Greater Sage-Grouse, including the Bi-State Distinct Population Segment, ("sage-grouse"). This will help promote consistency when completing habitat assessments across the range of sage-grouse. This IM also includes guidance on roles and responsibilities, best practices for data management, and the content of a summary report (Attachment 1).

**Policy:** The following bullets provide guidance for implementing sage-grouse habitat assessments and a temporary accommodation for areas where habitat mapping is not complete:

- If seasonal habitat mapping is complete, the FO will assess site-scale suitability for the entire seasonal habitat area(s) in addition to assessing mid- and fine-scale suitability. Field offices should follow the approach found in the habitat assessment training materials hosted by the National Training Center.
- During the calendar year 2018, if the mapping of seasonal habitat has not been completed, the FO can complete a site-scale assessment within the area of interest, which will allow it to complete the LHS Evaluation and issue use authorizations (e.g., grazing

permit renewal). A discussion of the process and results of the site-scale sage-grouse habitat assessment should be included in the LHS Evaluation report.

- The BLM State and FOs should continue working with partners to complete the mapping of seasonal habitats, recognizing that some sage-grouse populations are non-migratory, which may reduce the workload required to identify the areas for the multi-scale assessments.
- When multi-scale sage-grouse habitat assessments are completed, BLM Offices are required to complete a Habitat Assessment Summary Report. State offices (SO) should track the areas where the assessments have been completed and report accomplishments to the Washington Office on an annual basis.
- The sage-grouse site-scale habitat suitability determinations are used to evaluate the applicable wildlife/Special Status Species (SSS) land health standard(s) (BLM 2001) for sage-grouse.
- Field Offices within the GRSB Planning area will use the values in the GRSB Plan Habitat Objectives table and the associated footnotes to inform site-scale suitability as described in the *Establishing Habitat Suitability Indicators and Values* section of the current BLM Habitat Objectives IM.
- Field Offices with management responsibilities for sage-grouse habitat but whose Resource Management Plan does not contain a Habitat Objectives Table should use objectives from an applicable sage-grouse conservation plan (e.g., Gunnison Sage-Grouse Rangeland Conservation Plan), the HAF Technical Reference, or values found in scientific literature that are appropriate for the area to inform site-scale suitability values. Refer to the BLM Habitat Objectives IM for a complete discussion of this topic.
- When completing site scale assessments, it is not appropriate to use a single indicator from the habitat suitability rating data form to determine habitat suitability. Rather, look across all the indicators on the form and use a preponderance of evidence approach to determine overall suitability (suitable, unsuitable, or marginal) of the plot. The measured habitat indicator values will vary across time, driven largely by uses and environmental conditions such as annual rainfall and disturbance, especially wildfire. Thus, it is critical to document environmental factors when completing the suitability forms.
- Quantitative data described in the habitat assessment training can be supplemented with additional local data to inform sage-grouse habitat assessments but the limitations of the data should be documented in the suitability data forms.
- On-line training material is available on the National Training Center (NTC) website and classroom training is available through the NTC and other subject matter experts to support implementation of this policy. Please contact the national sage-grouse coordinator or the NTC for further information to meet your training needs.

### **Prioritizing Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessments**

BLM authorized officers will set priorities for sage-grouse habitat assessments using prioritization criteria consistent with the applicable land use plan and the priorities for completing land health assessments to support authorizations as described in the Grazing Prioritization IM. An evaluation of existing data (such as core and supplemental indicator data collected as part of the Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring (AIM) Strategy and legacy trend data) and coordination with state and other partner agencies could also inform the selection of priority areas for assessments. Additional consideration could include areas where habitat

information is limited, where changes in management may improve sage-grouse habitat, or where a GRSG Plan adaptive management trigger has been tripped.

### **Using a Habitat Assessment Summary Report**

The field offices can use the multi-scale Habitat Assessment Summary Report to:

- Inform management where to implement actions to improve sage-grouse habitat at the mid-, fine-, and site- scales.
- Identify metrics for setting objectives to determine the effectiveness of vegetation treatments and habitat restoration efforts, including post-fire emergency stabilization and burned area rehabilitation, in sage-grouse habitat.
- Provide context in NEPA documents for proposed actions in sage-grouse habitats.
- Inform the habitat value (e.g. condition and extent) of debits and credits related to compensatory mitigation, which can be used in conjunction with state developed compensatory mitigation valuation approaches.

### **Establishing Habitat Suitability Indicators and Values**

The field offices will work with appropriate state agencies and compare the indicators between the GRSG Plan Habitat Objectives Table (and the relevant footnotes) and the HAF site scale data forms (S-2 through S-6) and take the following steps:

1. Indicators which are in the GRSG Plan table but not in the HAF forms are to be added to the applicable HAF forms.
2. Indicators that are in the HAF forms but are not in the GRSG Plan's table, offices will measure these indicators and add the following statement in the box where the suitability rating would be recorded: "*No known correlation exists between this indicator and the suitability rating for this seasonal habitat type in this land use plan area.*" Also include the citation for the supporting science. The indicator will not be used for the suitability rating of the plot. Reference the Habitat Objectives IM, Steps 1-2 for the steps necessary to incorporate this change.
3. Offices are required to note the change(s) to the data forms in the "Rationale for Overall Suitability" section of the forms.

Field Offices will compare the indicator values between the GRSG Plan's Habitat Objectives Table (and the relevant footnotes) and the HAF site scale data forms (S-2 through S-6) and take the following steps:

1. When the HAF indicator values for a suitable rating in S-2 through S-6 differ from the GRSG Plan's Habitat Objectives desired conditions, replace the values in the applicable forms.

If indicator values for a suitable rating in the HAF were replaced by indicator values from the GRSG Plan, offices are directed to develop indicator values for the marginal and unsuitable columns using the processes that were used to determine the desired conditions in the Habitat Objectives Table in the GRSG Plans.

Data forms found in the HAF technical reference have been modified to allow changes to the

indicator value columns as well as allow adding rows for indicators for those offices that have additional indicators and associated values from the applicable GRSG Plan Habitat Objectives Table or other sage-grouse conservation plan. The customized forms may be found at <https://spp.blm.gov>.

**Timeframe:** This IM is effective immediately.

**Budget Impact:** The BLM is required to evaluate habitat as part of its LHS assessment process and also needs this information when evaluating the impacts of uses in NEPA documents for authorizing uses. This IM provides consistent guidance in the methods to use in completing these habitat assessments for sage-grouse. Sage-grouse habitat assessment implementation will be phased in, following prioritization as described in this IM and based on available budgets.

**Background:** The HAF includes indicators that inform the suitability of habitat for sage-grouse at the mid-, fine-, and site-scales. The HAF also includes a suitability rating process for each scale. Please refer to the HAF for a discussion of the scales, description of seasonal habitat requirements, and examples of the suitability forms for completing the assessment. The BLM has developed training and analytical procedures to complete this rating process. One critical gap that is preventing the BLM from completing the multi-scale habitat assessments in some areas are adequate maps of seasonal habitat use areas. Mid-scale boundary delineation across the range of GRSG is almost complete. These efforts have relied on cross-border coordination within BLM and with partners. The completion of seasonal habitat mapping and delineation of fine-scale polygons are contingent upon continued close coordination of BLM offices and partner agencies within and between states. This process is ongoing.

The BLM will continue to explore and review new tools and data to help streamline habitat assessments and will develop corresponding guidance and training as required. Additionally, the BLM will continue to work with partners to improve the quality, consistency and/or efficiency of the analytical procedures.

On August 4, 2017, the BLM delivered a Response to Secretarial Order 3353 “Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation and Cooperation with Western States” (June 7, 2017) that identified issues related to the 2015 GRSG plans and subsequent policies. This policy update is a result of the SO 3353 as well as from lessons learned in 2017 as BLM FOs began completing the multi-scale assessments as directed in BLM IM 2016-144. This IM supersedes IM 2016-144.

**Manual/Handbook Sections Affected:**

Manual 4180 and Handbook 4180-1, Manual 6500, Manual 6600, Manual 6840.

**Coordination:**

This IM was coordinated with the Division of Forest, Rangeland, Riparian and Plant Conservation, the AIM Lead, the NOC Division of Resource Services, and BLM State Office wildlife and sage-grouse leadership within the range of sage-grouse.

**Contacts:** Questions or concerns should be addressed to Division Chief, Fish and Wildlife Conservation (W0-230), at 202-912-7366 or Vicki Herren, BLM National Sage-Grouse

Coordinator at 202-912-7235 or by email at vherren@blm.gov.

**References:** [BLM \(Bureau of Land Management\). 2001. Rangeland Health Standards, BLM Handbook H- 4180-1. Department of the Interior, BLM.](#)

[Stiver, S.J., E.T. Rinkes, D.E. Naugle, P.D. Makela, D.A. Nance, and J.W. Karl, eds. 2015. Sage- Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework: A Multiscale Assessment Tool. Technical Reference 6710-1. Bureau of Land Management and Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Denver, Colorado.](#)