Note from the Chair, Erica Freese

“Long Draw fire devastates land, cattle and way of life for Eastern Oregon ranchers.”

“Female firefighter burned while battling Holloway Fire.”

“Colorado Wildfires 2012: Insurers estimate Colorado fire damage at $449.7M.”

These are just a few of the headlines making news since our last newsletter. If the photos accompanying this article don’t resemble anything you’ve seen this field season, then consider yourself lucky. Similar to many of you, field season here in Nevada has been hot, dry and smoky. As I write this article, on August 28, the National Interagency Fire Center has reported so far this year 43,932 fires have burned almost 7.3 million acres in the US and 6,829 fires have burned 4.4 million acres in Canada. The bad news is that things are still burning and fire season isn’t over. The little piece of good news is that all the smoke in the air makes for some spectacular sunsets.

Not only have people lost their lives, homes and livelihood from the 2012 fires, but the impact to wildlife, habitat, and rangeland condition has the potential to be devastating. If there was a single action that could almost guarantee the listing of sage-grouse as an endangered species, it might be the number of acres of habitat burned this summer. Hopefully the plethora of cooperative projects and land treatments done in the name of sage-grouse habitat improvement aren’t for nothing.

Nonetheless, just as unfortunate as the impacts to wildlife, is the impact to public land ranchers in the west. Not only have ranchers lost their livestock due to the fires, but burned federal lands will be rested for two years: a perfect combination to put some ranchers out of business. It might also be the perfect combination to prep for another bad fire year. Two years of rest on cheatgrass infested rangelands can make for a lot of fine fuels.
Note from Chair.... Continued from page 1

With all the smoke in the air and as members of the SRM Wildlife Habitat Committee, I'm sure many of you have been called upon for your expertise with regards to wildlife habitat and rangeland restoration. SRM members will play a critical role in how these burned areas are rehabilitated. With so much acreage there will be a seed shortage and a lack of time and money to get the needed projects on the ground. Let’s hope the perennial plants can make a stand and get some water this winter.

I look forward to seeing you all at the Oklahoma Meeting and am hoping for clear skies and rain in the near future.

While BLM Prepares Land Use Plan Amendments to Protect Greater Sage-Grouse in the Long-Term, its IM 2012-043 Provides Immediate Protections for the Bird

Submitted By Bob Firpo

When the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) concluded that greater sage-grouse (Centrocercus urophasianus) was warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act because of, among other things, habitat loss and inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) listened. BLM immediately gathered information and input from stakeholders, evaluated its options, and in August of 2011, issued a new National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy (Planning Strategy) to protect the bird. The Planning Strategy set forth BLM’s objective to amend the 68 Resource Management Plans (RMPs) that contain greater sage-grouse habitat so that each RMP includes new or revised regulatory mechanisms that will conserve and restore greater sage-grouse and its habitat. The Planning Strategy also called for BLM to create a National Technical Team of sage-grouse experts to ensure that the RMP Amendments would be informed by the best available information regarding greater sage-grouse.

After announcing the Planning Strategy, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Wyoming Governor Matt Mead convened a meeting with representatives from eight western states to discuss ongoing efforts to conserve greater sage-grouse habitat and the next steps needed to protect the bird. During and after that meeting BLM received additional input regarding strategies, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration with respect to greater sage-grouse management and conservation. Thereafter, and armed with all the information that it had obtained, BLM issued two important Instruction Memoranda further detailing its greater sage-grouse strategy.

The first instruction memorandum (IM 2012-044 “The Planning Direction IM”) details the Greater Sage-Grouse RMP Amendment Process and directs BLM to incorporate “explicit objectives and desired habitat
conditions, management actions, and area-wide use restrictions into LUPs (RMPs).” Among other things, IM 2012-044 directs BLM to consider as part of the land use amendment process “all applicable conservation measures” detailed by the Sage-Grouse National Technical Team in its “Report on National Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Measures.” Finally, IM 2012-044 notes that BLM expects to complete its analysis of conservation measures and issue Record of Decisions that amend RMPs by the end of fiscal year 2014 (September 30, 2014) to ensure that FWS has time to consider the RMP amendments as part of its anticipated 2015 listing decision for the greater sage-grouse.

The second instruction memorandum (IM 2012-043 “The Interim Management IM”), which is the primary subject of this article, details how the BLM will manage greater sage-grouse between now and the time that it takes BLM to finish the RMP amendment process described above.

A Guide to Understanding BLM IM 2012-043 (The Interim Management IM)

Recognizing that the greater sage-grouse RMP amendment process would take approximately three years to finish, BLM issued IM 2012-043 (The Interim Management IM) on December 11, 2011, to ensure that the agency provided appropriate interim protection for greater sage-grouse wherever possible. It was especially important for the BLM to issue such guidance given that the agency manages just over 50% of all greater sage-grouse habitat nation-wide.¹

IM 2012-043 provides immediate protection to greater sage-grouse by outlining policies and procedures that will apply to ongoing and proposed BLM actions within Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH) and Preliminary General Habitat (PGH) on BLM lands. Though BLM and its partners continue to refine PPH and PGH maps, the latest maps are available to the public from the relevant state wildlife agencies. In general, “PPH comprises areas that have been identified as having the highest conservation value to maintaining sustainable Greater Sage-Grouse populations,” and “includes breeding, late brood-rearing, and winter concentration areas.” “PGH comprises areas of occupied seasonal or year-round habitat outside of priority habitat.”

In the end, the goal of IM 2012-043 is to “promote[] sustainable Greater Sage-Grouse populations and conservation of its habitat while not closing any future options before the planning process can be completed.”

**Protections for Preliminary Priority Habitat (PPH)**


Though it is impossible to detail every policy and procedure outlined for PPH habitats, some highlights of IM 2012-043’s protections for PPH habitat include the following:

For *Integrated Vegetation Management*, the IM requires BLM to evaluate land treatments at the landscape scale to address habitat fragmentation, as well as to coordinate with adjacent land owners to promote the maintenance of large intact sagebrush communities;

¹Note that IM 2012-043 applies to BLM activities in California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Utah. While IM 2012-043 technically applies to Wyoming as well, the relevant interim measures for Wyoming BLM lands are now set out in IM WY 2012-019.
For Wildfire Emergency Stabilization and Burned Area Rehabilitation and Wildfire Suppression and Fuels Management, the IM requires BLM to prioritize re-vegetation projects to maintain and enhance unburned sagebrush habitat, stabilize soils, and limit the expansion of invasive species. In addition, the IM makes greater sage-grouse protection and habitat enhancement a “high priority” for the fire management program.

For Rights-of-Way, the IM requires BLM to minimize habitat loss and fragmentation, and to ensure reasonable alternatives for siting ROWs outside of PPH are considered. In addition, for pending and future proposed ROW applications, the IM requires BLM to consider on and off-site mitigation with the goal to cumulatively maintain or enhance greater sage-grouse habitat. If the BLM cannot determine that a proposed ROW and mitigation will cumulatively maintain or enhance greater sage-grouse habitat, the project must be reviewed by additional persons and teams to evaluate whether and what additional mitigation should be required or whether the project should go forward;

For Leasable Minerals (Energy and Non-energy), the IM requires BLM to minimize habitat loss and fragmentation, as well as to consider on and off-site mitigation with the goal to cumulatively maintain or enhance greater sage-grouse habitat. For existing leases where BLM has not issued a permit for development, the IM further requires BLM to “design future conditions or restrictions to minimize adverse effects to greater sage-grouse and its habitat . . . prior to permit approval;”

For Grazing Permit/Lease Issuance/ Grazing Management, the IM notes that enhanced management of livestock grazing “may be the most cost-effective opportunity” to improve greater sage-grouse habitat on public lands, and requires BLM to “plan and authorize” livestock grazing and range improvement projects to maintain and/or improve greater sage-grouse and its habitat. In addition, the IM requires BLM to consider a reasonable range of alternative grazing schemes that, among other things (1) incorporate data collected according to the Sage-Grouse Habitat Assessment Framework (Stiver, et al. (2010)), (2) incorporate management practices that provide for adequate residual plant cover (e.g. residual grass height), and (3) evaluate the potential risks to greater sage-grouse and its habitat from existing structural range improvements;

For Fences (Applicable to all programs), the IM requires BLM to evaluate the need for new fences, especially within 1 ¼ miles of active sage-grouse leks, and to consider deferring fence construction unless the fence will benefit greater sage-grouse habitat. In addition the IM directs the BLM to mark existing fences that have been identified as a collision risk;

For Realty Actions, the IM requires BLM to document reasons for a determination to dispose of lands containing PPH habitat, and to implement measures to minimize impacts to sage-grouse and its habitat from any such disposal.

Protections for Preliminary General Habitat (PGH)

As opposed to the more program specific policies and procedures designed to protect and conserve PPH habitat, IM 2012-043 provides only general considerations for PGH habitat. As stated in the IM, the intent of interim conservation policies and procedures for PGH habitat is “to reduce and mitigate adverse effects on greater sage-grouse and its habitat to the extent practical.”

Highlights of the protections for PGH habitat include the following: (1) When approving uses and authorizations BLM should consider and analyze management measures that would reduce direct, indirect, and cumulative adverse effects on greater sage-grouse, (2) BLM should consider deferring use authorizations in PGH habitat if the authorizations could result in greater sage-grouse population loss in PPH habitat, (3) BLM should consider off-site mitigation when approving actions in PGH habitat, and (4) BLM should evaluate and address anticipated fence collision risks within 1 ¼ miles of leks and greater sage-grouse seasonal habitats.
Hawk Poles, Fences and Water at the Hand Holt Ranch

Submitted by Kevin France

Barry Snow saw an opportunity to improve water availability in 3 of his pastures and help create habitat for endangered burrowing owls. This win – win opportunity led him to MULTISAR where a fruitful relationship has flourished for both the ranching operation and species at risk.

Barry’s land, the Hand Holt Ranch, is located in the Milk River basin, a haven for many rare plants and animals that depend on large tracts of native grasslands to breed, nest and raise their young. This very southern portion of Alberta is home to approximately 46 species of plants and animals that are at risk or may be at risk of disappearing from our unique province. For this reason MULTISAR focuses on this area for its Habitat Conservation Strategies and was more than willing to work with Barry to enhance burrowing owl habitat.

A pasture pipeline was installed to provide water for 3 pastures and a water trough can now be moved between them. This set up allows cattle to better distribute throughout the pasture and helps create habitat for burrowing owls and Richardson’s ground squirrels – an important animal that creates burrows later used by burrowing owls and provides critical food for ferruginous hawks.

Ferruginous hawks are another endangered species supported by the Hand Holt Ranch. When a pair decided to nest on Barry’s conveyor belt he decided to shut it down until the young were able to leave the nest. Alternate artificial nest poles were installed by AltaLink to encourage the hawks away from the belt and to act as a natural control for the ground squirrels.

Barry’s also been busy protecting the riparian area on his ranch by installing wildlife friendly fencing along the river and most recently using a bioengineering technique to stabilize an eroding river bank. The technique is called a wattle fence and involves using poplar tree trunks and branches to reinforce the bank. The tree continues to grow new shoots, eventually creating a stand of trees and stabilizing the bank with its roots.

Barry’s commitment to stewardship is exemplary. He has been able to improve his operation while providing important habitat for species at risk. And that is what MULTISAR is all about – helping landowners benefit from species at risk.
If you have information that you would like posted or an article that you would like to share with the Wildlife Habitat Committee please contact the editor. This newsletter is a forum for exchanging ideas and experience. The next issue will come out in May 2013. Please send information to the editor (Mark Freese) by e-mail to:

markfreese@ndow.org

You can also find this and every past newsletter at

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