



For Immediate Release:
4 January 2010

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LANDMARK FEDERAL SAGE-GROUSE POLICIES IN WYOMING SET STAGE FOR WILDLIFE-FRIENDLY ENERGY DEVELOPMENT NATIONWIDE

Return of Sound Science to Federal Policymaking Says Brian Rutledge

Washington, DC, January 4, 2010 - Newly announced changes to Bureau of Land Management leasing policies offer fresh hope for the survival of the imperiled Greater Sage-Grouse, enhanced protection for other wildlife that share the western sagebrush ecosystem, and an innovative model for wildlife-friendly energy development across the West.

The BLM released the [memorandum](#) online January 4 to implement new protections limiting energy development in the 20 percent of Wyoming land designated as Sage-Grouse core areas, which contain some of the last, best remaining breeding habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse. The new rules embrace an approach first developed by a broad stakeholder task force convened by Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal and supported by Audubon's scientific mapping and biological expertise. The impact of the landmark approach is expected to spread rapidly across the region and may well influence energy planning across the country.

"This is a landmark decision for wildlife, for the return of sound science to federal policymaking, and for America's energy future," said [Brian Rutledge](#), Audubon Wyoming executive director and a key proponent of the core habitat approach. "By embracing sound science, the BLM is showing that we can have energy development and protect vital habitat at the same time."

The BLM's new policy comes on the heels of protests by Audubon and other groups of the federal government's push to lease nearly 700,000 acres of important habitat on federal land in Wyoming for oil and gas development. The new rules will dramatically reduce habitat damage and wildlife disruption associated with the protested leases, existing leased areas that have not yet been drilled, and future leases. In each case, oil or gas drilling will now be limited to one pad per section (one square mile) across seven million acres of Wyoming's designated core Sage-Grouse habitat. Current rules, which will remain in effect for the 80 percent of Wyoming land outside the core areas, permit as many as 60 well pads per square mile.

Wind energy development will be effectively precluded inside the core areas due to the scale of habitat disruption required. However, Audubon expects the new rules to redirect wind development activity toward the more appropriate 80 percent of Wyoming land that is outside core areas. This will minimize negative impacts on wildlife and habitats and reduce potential hurdles for much-needed renewable energy.

Previous energy development was a major factor in reducing Greater Sage-Grouse populations to between 10 and 20 percent of their historic levels.

"Half of the Sage-Grouse population in North America is in Wyoming," said Governor Freudenthal, "but that's only good news if you're in a position to protect it." Freudenthal says the Wyoming and BLM policies provide real protection by focusing on actual habitats instead of just population-counting, adding that the approach may well help to avoid the necessity of an Endangered Species Act listing to save iconic Grouse. Such a listing could dramatically curtail both energy development and other economic activity across the state. In the absence of a listing, the core-area approach would still provide habitat protection while permitting continued economic growth.

Impact to Spread Quickly

Montana and Colorado are already exploring stakeholder-crafted core-area approaches. Along with saving Sage-Grouse, their efforts are driven by hopes of protecting huge economic and recreational benefits in the face of an anticipated spike in energy development. The BLM itself may further the process through possible expansion of the new rules across the range of the Sage-Grouse, covering 11 western states and 60 million acres of federal land.

"Finally, sound science will start guiding energy development" said National Audubon Society President John Flicker. "Secretary Salazar and Governor Freudenthal deserve tremendous credit for their leadership, as do all the stakeholders who played a role."

The governor credits Audubon for providing science and credibility that helped other stakeholders, including industry, to accept the approach.

"It's exciting to be part of a process that can potentially turn a blind stampede for new energy development into a more thoughtful model that can work across the country," said Rutledge. "It was born in the West, but imagine the benefits for birds, wildlife and thoughtful energy development in California, or Pennsylvania or in Texas. The cores-areas approach recognizes the importance of wildlife and fragile landscapes, yet still encourages energy independence and economic growth for our communities."

Audubon urges the BLM to rapidly expand the policy across sagebrush habitat and beyond. The organization also invites industry leaders and local policymakers to support and build on the foundation of a process that allows all stakeholders to direct energy development toward the areas that make sense for people and for the environment. "It offers a chance to fill some of America's future energy needs correctly right from the start," added Rutledge. Rutledge further adds with optimistic caution, "The way this new policy is applied to the 80 percent of the Core Area already leased, will determine its impact and efficacy."

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More at links to *Sagebrush Initiative* pages www.audubon.org/campaign/energy/sagebrush/

Video sound bites, including Gov. Freudenthal, at www.audubon.org/campaign/energy/sagebrush/qa.html

B-roll available, contact Delta Willis dwillis@audubon.org

John Flicker comments on the initiative in his [View column](#) in Audubon magazine.

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