Montana Sage Grouse Conservation Program

2015-2020 ACHIEVEMENTS

The Greater Sage-grouse was once a candidate for federal listing as an endangered species across 11 western states. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determined that a listing in 2015 was not warranted because of federal and state conservation efforts.

Montana's Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program was developed by a diverse coalition of Montanans. Landowners, developers, and conservationists came together in 2013-2014 and agreed on Montana's strategy. Now in its fifth year, the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program is fully implemented and provides an effective, efficient process for balancing habitat conservation while maintaining Montana's economic vitality in sage grouse country.

Population trends and the progress of state conservation programs across the west will be assessed in 2021.

Greater Sage-grouse *Centrocercus urophasianus*

I appreciate the state's willingness to work with private landowners, given how vitally important healthy rangeland is for livestock and wildlife. There's a balance to incentivizing good management to keep the sage grouse off the endangered species list without too much regulation and oversight. The fundamentals are sound, grounded by respect for private property rights, clear rules, flexibility to accommodate unique situations, and common sense.

Diane Ahlgren, MSGOT, Rangelands Resources Committee, Rancher

We have developed a positive working relationship with the Program and MSGOT to enable maintenance and development of our co-op's powerline infrastructure. MECA has been involved since 2013. We have been treated fairly and the communication has been good. We appreciate that the Program and MSGOT have worked with us to address our concerns and share the objective of protecting the sage grouse to prevent the intrusion into our state of federal action that would occur should the sage grouse be listed as a threatened or endangered species.

Gary Wiens, CEO Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

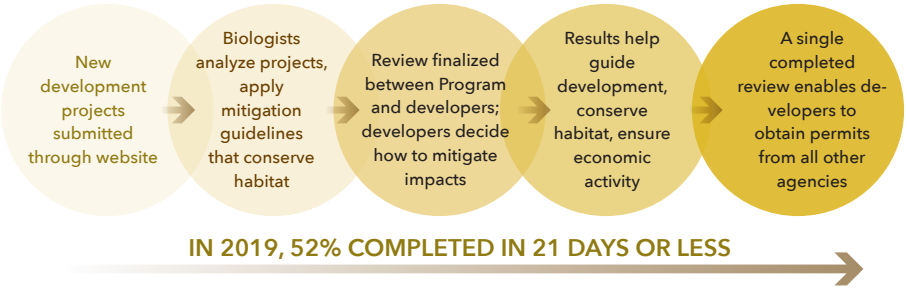
Doug Hardy, General Manager, Central Montana Electric Power Cooperative

The Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program is proof that when diverse interests come together with a common goal, we can achieve things. We are conserving this incredible native wildlife species, while also allowing business to go on in sagebrush-steppe habitats. We're confident that this program will continue to strike that balance so all Montanans benefit from it.

Nick Gevock, Montana Wildlife Federation

A personalized, efficient, coordinated review process

Montana's approach conserves sage grouse and their habitat while maintaining the state's economic life.



Mitigation balances conservation and development

Montana's Sage Grouse Conservation Program is objective, transparent, and scientifically defensible. Landowners, developers and businesses control many of the impacts through proactive planning. Flexibility is afforded when needed to address unique circumstances. Between January 1, 2016 and October 31, 2020, the Program completed 2,197 reviews out of 2,366 requested by developers. The Program was still working on 44 projects and needed additional information from developers to complete the remaining 125 reviews.

237 miles of water pipelines | 31 new communication towers | 88 new wells | 767 MW wind/ solar projects | 1070 miles of road projects | 1725 miles new fiber optic cable

Montana's strategy is focused on conserving habitat near leks and the tenet of no net loss of existing habitat. The Habitat Quantification Tool calculates debits and credits. Mitigation is the scale that balances habitat lost or impacted with habitat gained or conserved. Mitigation requirements are proportional to impacts on habitat, leks and the population.

Developers offset impacts of their activities by implementing their own mitigation projects, contributing to the Stewardship Fund, or a combination of both. The Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team distributes those funds through competitive grants. Successful grant applicants then implement the credit projects.

Habitat Quantification Tool
Impacted habitat generates debits, conservation projects generate credits

Mitigation Market
Developers buy credits to offset impacts in sage grouse habitats

Stewardship Fund
Developer contributions support grants to create credits on their behalf

The Mitigation Market is working

From 2016 to 2019, the **Stewardship Fund** has conserved **71,373 acres** of sage grouse habitat to date through **8 successful grants**. These conservation projects used **$5,679,911** from the Fund and leveraged an additional **$12,439,638** in matching funds from federal and private sources. In all, Stewardship Fund grants created **1,460,878 mitigation credits** to offset known and expected future development. An additional **497,292 credits** were created by developers and through independent restoration efforts.

Between January 1, 2016 and October 31, 2020, **2,366 development projects** have been reviewed.

1,958,172 credits | **407,307 debits**

Farmers and ranchers have always shared the land with sage grouse. We want to continue to work to protect their habitat while ensuring that it can be used for farming and grazing as well.

Rachel Cone, Montana Farm Bureau Federation

It is not often that a diverse statewide coalition emerges around bird conservation. It happened for sage grouse. Audubon helped bring the best available science to this complex conservation issue, and we've all worked hard to sustain both the coalition and sage grouse. Montana should continue this work and make sure that we succeed in this larger conservation effort.

Amy Seaman, Montana Audubon Director of Science and Policy

Treasure State Resources Association members represent many of the interests impacted by sage grouse management, whether it be private landowners who provide the lion's share of the habitat or those who develop natural resources and create well-paying jobs. Montana's Program represents a collective effort to avoid having the heavy hand of the Endangered Species Act dictate how we go about conserving the bird and its habitat. Combining input from diverse stakeholders with legislative direction and guidance from the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team, the Program continues to evolve in seeking real world solutions to management challenges with the same goal—keep Montana's sage grouse off the endangered species list.

Peggy Trenk, Executive Director, Treasure State Resources Association

Stay the Course

Montana is on track. The mitigation marketplace is working. Habitat objectives are being met, and the sage grouse population is secure. The Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team and the Program have adapted successfully through ongoing collaboration with diverse stakeholders.

Montana is well positioned for an assessment of conservation efforts across 11 western states, set for 2021. No immediate changes to Montana's Program are necessary. But renewed funding is needed to sustain Montana's efforts to retain state authority. By continuing to implement its own conservation Program, Montanans can best maintain control of their lands, wildlife, and economy.

The future of sage grouse in Montana will depend on our collective efforts to balance conservation and development.

TRANSPARENT ★ BIPARTISAN ★ STRATEGIC ★ SCIENTIFIC ★ COLLABORATIVE

Back in 2013, Montana was faced with a significant natural resource problem, but we rose to the occasion and found a workable solution. I was part of the group that worked with the oil and gas industry, federal, state, and local governments, and the nonprofit world to pound out an agreement. No one got everything they wanted, but we all got something. And when I say "pound out" I mean lots of meetings with lots of viewpoints and disagreements. But we moved forward and effectively it seems to be working. Montanan's avoided an ESA listing. That is a coup.

Jeffrey Tiberi, Montana Association of Conservation Districts, retired

From day one, the priority goal of the Montana Sage Grouse Program has been to retain state management authority for sage grouse by reducing threats to habitat and populations as we continue to foster economic opportunities in sage grouse country. Thanks to the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team, Program staff, Montana land-owners, and others, the Program is accomplishing that goal. As we move ahead with adaptive management, it is imperative we maintain the goal of state management authority squarely as a policy priority.

Glenn Marx, Montana Association of Land Trusts

Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program

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This public document was produced at state expense. For details on cost and distribution, contact John Grassy, DNRC Public Information Officer at (406) 444-0465 or jgrassy@mt.gov

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