

Trump administration plans to weaken protections for sage grouse

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Oliver Milman, The Guardian Thu 6 Dec 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/06/trump-administration-plans-to-weaken-protections-for-sage-grouse>

- The **Trump administration** has unveiled plans to weaken environmental protections for sprawling areas of the western US considered important habitat for the sage grouse, a chicken-like bird known for its flamboyant courtship displays.

The **proposals**, put forward by the federal **Bureau of Land Management** (BLM), essentially dismantle much of a landmark 2015 compromise struck between states, oil drilling companies and environmentalists to create a network of protected areas for the **sage grouse** across 11 western states.

Under the new plan, the sage grouse's protected area would shrink by around 9m acres to span just 1.8m acres. The plan also removes habitat conservation standards for grazing activities and makes it easier for federal officials to waive protective buffers around sage grouse mating areas, called leks.

An estimated 16 million sage grouse once roamed a vast area of sagebrush in the US west but years of development and the spread of agriculture has razed much of its habitat, causing a 90% population drop from historic levels. Sage grouse require large areas of intact sagebrush to feed and mate.

Today, sage grouse are found in 11 states, with the new Trump administration plan unwinding protection plans in seven of them – northeastern California, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming.

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“With today's action we have leaned forward to address the various states' issues, while appropriately ensuring that we will **continue** to be focused on meaningfully addressing the threats to the greater sage grouse and making efforts to improve its habitat,” said David Bernhardt, deputy secretary of the interior.

Environmental groups fear the move will throw open huge areas of sage grouse habitat to drilling, imperiling the future of the species and further fueling **climate change**.

“The BLM management plans and push for drilling in the most important areas for grouse reflect a deep denial about both the dire condition of grouse populations and climate change,” said Steve Holmer, vice president of policy for American Bird Conservancy.

“The agency plans recklessly to eliminate grouse habitat and pollute the atmosphere, and should be shelved,” he added.

The plan, expected to be finalized next year following a comment period, is likely to face a legal challenge from conservationists. “This is a huge step backward for greater sage grouse and for hundreds of other species that depend on unspoiled public land,” said Michael Saul, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.