

Governor updates grouse executive order

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A draft of Wyoming's updated Greater Sage-Grouse executive order includes a core habitat map revised to exclude an area spanning Johnson and Sheridan counties previously recognized for importance in connectivity.

The removal of the Buffalo Connectivity Area and the inclusion of a new designation of habitat known as a stewardship area just over the Johnson-Campbell county border are among the biggest northeast Wyoming-related changes to the executive order expected to be signed by Gov. Mark Gordon this year.

The executive order is Wyoming's longtime sage-grouse conservation strategy that dates back to 2007 when Wyoming leaders sought to preclude an Endangered Species Act listing. Last updated in 2019, the executive order outlines Wyoming's sage-grouse Core Area Protection strategy and generally conservation of the bird and its habitat.

The state's sage-grouse conservation strategy is informed by the Sage-Grouse Implementation Team composed of state and federal agencies, legislators, local governments, nongovernmental organizations and industry representatives.

In a statement, Gordon said that Wyoming advocates for a sage-grouse conservation strategy "that recognizes the state's management authority over the species utilizing the best-available science."

"Wyoming remains a leader in the sage-grouse conservation, and the State of Wyoming's Executive Order Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area Protection has proven to be a successful strategy that has spanned three Governors in its foresight to have a state-lead conservation strategy," he said. "We appreciate the public's input as we continue to invest in sage-grouse conservation alongside responsible development in Wyoming."

Greater sage-grouse are a sagebrush obligate species, as are many of the state's species of greatest conservation need, the executive order says. Sage grouse require different seasonal habitats to complete their life cycle. At each life stage, however, sagebrush is necessary as either habitat or a food source.

Core areas are considered the state's best sage-grouse habitat based on their lack of disturbance, density of sagebrush canopy cover and the number of birds occupying the area. In the 2024 House Draw fire, approximately 100,000 acres of core sage-grouse habitat burned. The burn scar is still included in the county's existing core area habitat designation. Nongovernmental

organizations and local, state and federal agencies have devoted ample time and funding to restoring the damaged grouse habitat since the fire.

The Buffalo Connectivity Area stretched from north of Buffalo to the Montana state line. Since the map in the 2019 order was published, the connectivity area has been burned in a wildfire and collared bird data shows that the area is no longer effective in fostering genetic connectivity between birds. Ecologists say that connectivity is crucial for the long-term viability of sage-grouse populations in northeastern Wyoming. A small portion of the former connectivity area was added to the map as core habitat.

An area stretching from north of Gillette to the Montana border has

proven, based on sage-grouse DNA data collection, to be a better area for facilitating connectivity. The North Gillette Connectivity Area is a new addition to the core area maps included in the 2026 executive order.

Northeast Wyoming is on the edge of the divide between the Western sagebrush

steppe and midwestern grassland ecosystems. At the range edge, the quality of habitat starts to decline and populations can become isolated.

The 2026 version of the order also includes a new habitat designation called a stewardship area in northeast Wyoming. SGIT, in its consideration of core area map updates, included this new designation in the region due to the amount of habitat on private land and the abundance of existing development on the landscape, which would put it outside of the definition of core habitat.

The maps included in the executive order reflect what was included in the Bureau of Land Management's recently updated sage-grouse management plan.

Also part of the updated executive order is a new tool that the Wyoming Game and Fish Department will employ to examine sage-grouse populations each year and build adaptive management strategies. SCOUT – sage-grouse cluster ordering by unified trend assessment – is a tool that will help the agency identify population clusters that are doing better or worse than others, which will prioritize areas for management changes or habitat restoration efforts.

"SCOUT provides an important tool in our toolbox for identifying sage-grouse population concerns at a local level," Game and Fish Deputy Chief of Wildlife Justin Binfet said in a statement when the tool was announced in April. "It will help Wyoming continue to prioritize management actions where they're needed most."

Public comment welcome

The governor's office will accept public comment on the proposed revisions to the executive order through 5 p.m. on July 30. Visit <https://tinyurl.com/42wvj8hp> to view the document and provide input.