



Nevada's Owyhee Desert Sagebrush makes list of 15 wild areas at high risk of development for oil, gas and other resources

New report shines spotlight on important wild lands that must be protected

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Las Vegas, NV - (September 19, 2017) — A [new report](#) released today by The Wilderness Society raises the alarm about the Owyhee Desert sagebrush region of Nevada, an imperiled ecosystem that is home to the greater sage-grouse, and other wild lands. Across the U.S., the sagebrush ecosystem is threatened by extractive industries eager to exploit the resources on or underneath them, including oil, gas and coal.

[‘Too Wild To Drill’](#) identifies 15 unique places found on public lands that are at high risk of drilling, mining and other development—and the damage and destruction that inevitably follow. Among these is the Owyhee Desert sagebrush ecosystem in northern Nevada, identified as especially valuable habitat (a “Sagebrush Focal Area”) by federal and state wildlife agencies. Across the West, more than 350 wildlife species, from pygmy rabbits to pronghorn to the greater sage-grouse, known for its dramatic mating ritual dance, rely on the sagebrush ecosystem for survival. But now, the Trump administration is moving to review and weaken the greater sage-grouse conservation plans as part of an aggressive agenda to open public lands to drilling and mining at the expense of all other uses, including preserving critical wildlife habitat.

“We must act now to fight any weakening of protections for the Sagebrush Focal Area in Nevada’s Owyhee Desert, which includes wild public lands surrounding the Owyhee Canyon Wilderness Study Area. This landscape must remain wild for the sake of the greater sage-grouse,” said Nada Culver, senior director for agency policy at The Wilderness Society. “The greater sage-grouse conservation plans represent the best chance of rescuing the sage-grouse and keeping it off the endangered species list. This new review disregards nearly a decade of research and collaborative work by states and agencies, while ignoring the western communities who weighed in with millions of comments in support of keeping the conservation plans in place to work as intended.”

The conservation plans were crafted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service in close collaboration with Republican and Democratic governors, local and state agencies, regional conservationists, ranchers, hunters, and many others interests. They are a first-of-a-kind landscape-level conservation effort that took nearly 10 years of bi-partisan negotiation. Through the greater sage-grouse conservation plans, the federal agencies focused on protecting the most important habitat that merits the highest level protection, such as Nevada’s Owyhee Desert Sagebrush region, while managing additional habitat with lesser protections. Undoing these plans will open up the area to potential energy leasing as seen in many areas of sage-grouse habitat across the West.

“It’s astounding to watch plans that were developed through the most collaborative conservation efforts ever created and with the full involvement of the states ‘reviewed’ to assure state involvement. In actuality, it is the Trump administration’s Department of Interior ‘reviewers’ who are refusing to collaborate,” said Brian A. Rutledge, The National Audubon Society Vice President and Director of the Sagebrush Ecosystem Initiative. “Reducing the protections for the habitat identified by and for grouse, will reduce the viability of more than three hundred other species. That will reduce certainty for ranchers and mineral developers.”

According to the 'Too Wild to Drill' report, the BLM "should ensure any changes to the plans maintain their overall structure to protect the most valuable habitat from the biggest threats. Plans to protect sage-grouse and other wildlife habitat have overwhelming general support and provide certainty for counties, states and federal land managers."

The report recommends that the BLM "move forward with supplementing the Nevada sage-grouse conservation plan to ensure a defensible plan is put in place before the species is found to warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. The revised plan should retain strong protective measures to avoid impacts from energy development, including Sagebrush Focal Areas."

The release of 'Too Wild Too Drill' falls during [numerous reviews](#) of public lands policies, ordered by President Donald Trump and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, which are taking place behind closed doors with little or no public oversight or accountability. In fact, earlier this week news broke of the Trump administration's secret efforts to roll back protections for several wild places featured in 'Too Wild To Drill,' including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments, presumably to make them available for energy development.

This month also marks the end of the 180-day review period established by President Trump's "Energy Independence and Economic Growth" [Executive Order](#). The directive requires federal agencies to review any regulations that could "potentially burden" fossil fuel development.

The Wilderness Society issues a new version of 'Too Wild To Drill' every few years to call attention to vulnerable places on public lands. In this edition, other places highlighted include the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, one of the most remote and wild places left in the world, as well as:

- Greater Grand Canyon Watershed, Arizona
- Mojave Trails National Monument, California
- North Fork of the Gunnison, Colorado
- Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Minnesota
- Badger-Two Medicine, Montana
- Paradise Valley, Montana
- Chihuahuan Desert Rivers, New Mexico
- Wayne National Forest, Ohio
- Bears Ears National Monument, Utah
- Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Utah
- Appalachian Trail, Virginia
- Green River Valley, Washington
- Northern Red Desert, Wyoming

"The Trump administration's reevaluation of habitat protection could fundamentally undermine the structure and goals of the greater sage-grouse conservation plans," said The Wilderness Society's Nada Culver. "This action is a sideways attempt to abandon habitat protection for unfettered oil and gas development. Gutting the structure of these plans puts the entire landscape at risk. It is one more example of how the Trump administration is determined to promote fossil fuel interests at the expense of public lands, wildlife, clean air and clean water that have the overwhelming support of all Americans."

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