

Oil and Gas Drilling Threaten Sage-Grouse

Sage-grouse have already disappeared from nearly half of their historic range.¹ We must act now to save what is left. Unfortunately, oil and gas drilling has intensified in the eastern half of the sage-grouse's range, and although recent research has demonstrated that drilling harms sage-grouse, efforts to mitigate drilling impacts to sage-grouse have been inadequate so far.



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Drilling has Intensified in the Sage-Grouse's Range

- The number of oil and gas wells in sage-grouse habitat in the Rocky Mountain states has tripled in the last 20 years.²
- 44% of the most important remaining habitat for sage-grouse is at risk of energy development now.³
- Another 9.1 million acres of sagebrush and 2.7 million acres of grassland within the sage-grouse's range will be lost to oil and gas drilling in the coming years.⁴

Drilling Causes Sage-Grouse Declines

- Every scientific study conducted has detected negative impacts from oil and gas drilling on sage-grouse.⁵
- Oil and gas drilling can affect sage-grouse on their breeding grounds up to 4 miles away.⁶
- When oil and gas wells are too close together, the effects on sage-grouse are worse. At densities of greater than 1 well pad per square mile (= 640-acre well spacing), sage-grouse abandon their breeding grounds at double the rate of undrilled areas. This cuts local sage-grouse populations down by up to half.⁷
- Landscapes with oil and gas drilling have twice as many roads and power lines as other sagebrush habitat, which also contribute to sage-grouse declines.⁸
- The scientists who reviewed the sage-grouse's status in the recently-released sage-grouse monograph concluded "conventional densities of oil and gas wells likely far exceed the species' threshold of tolerance."⁹



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Recent Drilling Guidance Does Not Solve the Problem

Until recently, the Bureau of Land Management only prevented oil and gas drilling within ¼ mile of sage-grouse leks, even though no science supported this as being an effective protection. Many oil and gas fields have been drilled in the sage-grouse's range with wells as close together as 40-acre spacing (though recent research shows that placing wells closer than 640-acre spacing is not sustainable).

Late in 2009, the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the majority of sage-grouse habitat and is in charge of the oil and gas program on public lands, issued new guidelines for managing oil and gas drilling in sage-grouse habitat in Montana¹⁰ and Wyoming¹¹. While these are steps in the right direction, they will not be enough on their own to stop the downward trend for sage-grouse. There are simply too many loopholes and exceptions.

For example:

- Montana's guidance is a menu of options - there are no guaranteed minimum protections. The areas that would be protected are still in the process of being identified.
- Wyoming's guidance mostly applies to areas identified as sage-grouse

cores by the governor, but the core area mapping was political - areas with high oil and gas potential were excluded. Outside the core areas in habitat that has already been leased for drilling BLM still relies on the ¼ mile protections that are known to be inadequate.

- In both states, no core areas will be completely safe from drilling.

Sage-Grouse Need Landscape-Level Protections

The scientists who reviewed the sage-grouse's status in the recently-released sage-grouse monograph concluded, "The rapid pace and scale of energy development is a major issue because areas being developed include some of the largest remaining sagebrush landscapes with the highest densities of sage-grouse in North America"¹².

Sage-grouse need real landscape-level protections from the impacts of oil and gas drilling. So little habitat remains that responsible drilling should stay out of the areas that sage-grouse need to survive. Taking this step would also help protect the air, water, and landscapes that the rest of the West's inhabitants rely on too.



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2009 Sage-Grouse Monograph, Studies in Avian Biology

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