



The future of sage-grouse depends on the continued stewardship of working lands.

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Voluntary agreements protect sage-grouse and landowners

ONCE ABUNDANT THROUGHOUT THE AMERICAN West, greater sage-grouse have long been in decline in Washington state and throughout their historic range. Since 80 percent of the state's current sage-grouse population occupies private property in the Columbia Basin, the future of the species depends on the continued stewardship of those working lands.

To support these efforts, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has been working with a variety of stakeholders on a strategy that would conserve sage-grouse while protecting landowners' livelihoods. Under a federal program called Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA), landowners who agree to preserve sage-grouse can secure their operations against potential legal impacts if the species is listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

How a CCAA works

A CCAA is a voluntary agreement whereby landowners agree to manage their lands to conserve a species that may become listed under the ESA. In return, landowners receive assurances against additional regulatory requirements should that species ever be listed for protection under federal law.

Terms of these agreements are tailored to address the needs of the specific property in order to keep working lands working.

Wildlife species also benefit from these agreements, because conservation measures outlined in a CCAA are implemented before a species is listed for protection. In 2013, actions taken by landowners under these agreements have been credited with helping to recover – and avert listings for – three species (the greater and lesser Adams Cave beetle, and the dunes sagebrush lizard).

This CCAA is intended to be compatible with the federal Sage Grouse Initiative and related conservation programs funded through the federal Farm Bill.

Developing a CCAA template

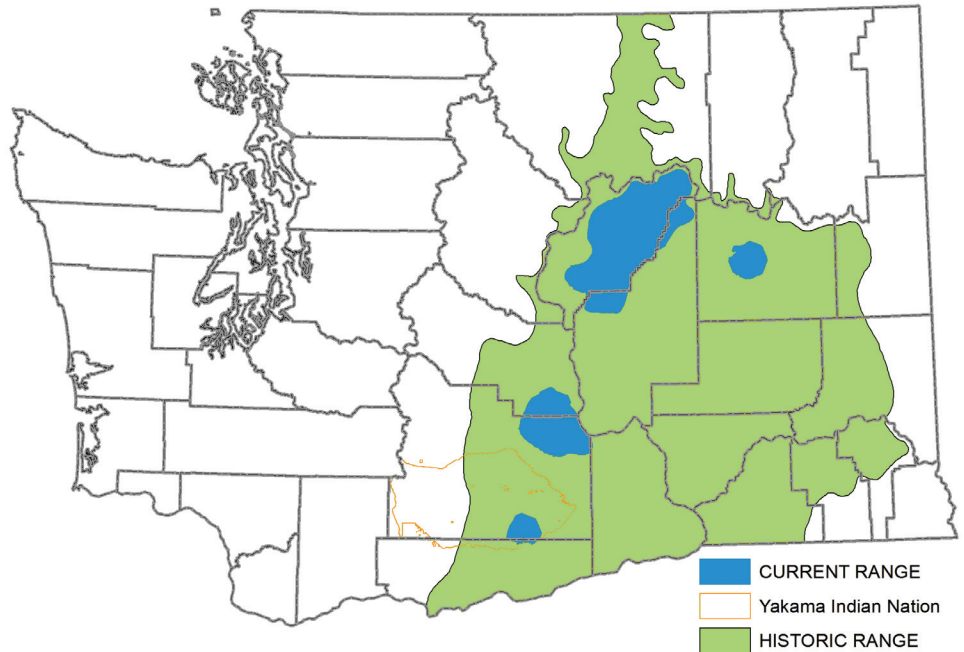
WDFW is working to make it easier for landowners to obtain a CCAA. To do so, the department has been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Washington Department of Natural Resources, organized agricultural groups and others to create a template for these agreements.

Once approved, the template can be tailored by any private, tribal, local, or state entity to meet the needs of their lands.

The draft template currently includes a set of conservation measures that focus on:

- Avoiding fragmentation or degradation of shrub-steppe habitat, including losses from wildfires.
- Preventing the introduction or spread of non-native plants.
- Minimizing harm to sage-grouse from fences, pets, and predators.
- Avoiding disturbance to breeding or nesting grounds during critical time periods.

The template will be released for public comment in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act in 2016.



Sage-grouse in decline

Washington is one of 11 western states with populations of greater sage-grouse, all of which have declined due to habitat loss in recent decades. Once common throughout the shrub-steppe areas of eastern Washington, the species now occupies about 8 percent of its historical range.

In 2014, WDFW estimated the state population of greater sage-grouse at less than a thousand birds.

The sage-grouse was state-listed as a threatened species in 1998. WDFW completed a recovery plan in 2004 and has since worked with landowners to enroll thousands of acres in federal conservation programs. The department has also restored sage-grouse habitat on WDFW-owned Wildlife Areas, led an effort to reintroduce sage-grouse in Lincoln County, and worked to minimize predation on recovering populations.

In October 2015, the USFWS determined that listing the sage-grouse under the ESA was no longer warranted due to agreements and conservation efforts throughout the western states. The decision and some agreements are currently being litigated. WDFW remains committed to helping landowners to conserve sage-grouse on working lands in Washington.

