



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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APR 23, 2019

IN REPLY REFER TO:
6800 (OR-931) P

EMS TRANSMISSION 04/29/2019
Information Bulletin No. OR-2019-035

To: Oregon District Managers for Burns, Lakeview, Prineville, and Vale

From: Deputy State Director, Division of Resources, Lands, Minerals and Fire

Subject: Status of 2018 Oregon Greater Sage-Grouse Adaptive Management Triggers

Purpose

This information bulletin (IB) transmits the results of the Oregon Greater Sage-grouse (sage-grouse) adaptive management thresholds (triggers) evaluation for calendar year 2018. This IB summarizes where triggers have been exceeded, which triggers have been exceeded, the required responses where a hard trigger has been exceeded, and a brief summary of the causal factor analysis process and outcomes.

Background

The Adaptive Management Strategy outlined in Appendix J of the 2015 Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Oregon Greater Sage-Grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (ARMPA) identifies hard and soft triggers for habitat and populations within Oregon priority areas for conservation (PAC). Oregon's 20 PACs mirror the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) core area habitat and correspond directly to the BLM's priority habitat management area. Soft triggers represent an intermediate threshold indicating that management changes may be needed at the implementation level to reduce the likelihood of tripping a hard trigger. Hard triggers represent a threshold indicating that immediate and more restrictive plan-level action is needed to address sage-grouse conservation objectives.

The Adaptive Management Strategy outlines the process that the BLM Oregon/Washington (OR/WA) uses in cooperation with the ODFW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to determine if the soft and hard triggers have been exceeded. The BLM and ODFW finalized the 2018 analyses and results in mid-December 2018. On February 15, 2019, the BLM OR/WA State Office notified Vale, Burns, Lakeview, and Prineville Districts that eight PACs had tripped a soft or hard trigger in 2018 (Attachment 1). With this IB, the nine required hard trigger

responses listed on page J-8 of the 2015 ARMPA are now in effect on BLM lands within PACs that have tripped a hard trigger. The required responses cannot be reversed without a plan amendment or when annual review of the relevant conditions listed on page J-11 of the Adaptive Management Strategy determines the trigger has been reversed.

2018 Habitat Trigger

Habitat triggers are calculated from the proportion of acres within a PAC capable of supporting sage-grouse that are in existing (current) habitat. Capable habitat includes areas that either currently support vegetation cover appropriate for sage-grouse use (i.e., 5 percent or more cover of sagebrush species and less than 5 percent tree cover) or are predicted to support these vegetation conditions with treatments and/or natural plant succession. The BLM used two datasets from the Integrated Landscape Assessment Project developed by the Institute for Natural Resources to identify capable habitat and current habitat. Oregon PACs are 89.4 percent to 99.8 percent capable habitat. Current habitat that has burned with high or moderate soil burn severity, based on burned area reflectance classification (BARC) maps, is considered habitat loss. The footprint of vegetation treatments (e.g., juniper removal, sagebrush planting) in potential sage-grouse habitat are added to the current habitat acres when BLM field offices have verified the treated area currently supports 5 percent or more cover of sagebrush species and less than 5 percent tree cover.

Wildfire activity in central and eastern Oregon, measured in terms of number of ignitions and acres burned in 2018, was well below the average. Rangeland fire protection associations played a significant role in initial attack and suppression efforts. Fires in four PACs (Bully Creek, Dry Valley/Jack Mountain, Louse Canyon, and Soldier Creek) burned 3,458 acres of sage-grouse habitat. The Big Grassy fire in Louse Canyon PAC caused the greatest amount of habitat loss (2,229 acres), but it did not trip the habitat trigger.

Current habitat in two PACs was below the soft trigger threshold (i.e. less than 65 percent current habitat) in 2018 (see table below). Both PACs were below the habitat threshold prior to the 2015 ARMPA. The historic Vale seeding project and frequent wildfires removed sagebrush from large sections of the Cow Lakes PAC. Habitat restoration completed since 2013 has included almost 10,000 acres of sagebrush planting and over 12,000 acres of chemical treatment of invasive annual grasses. In the Trout Creeks PAC, the Holloway and Long Draw fires burned 69 percent of the sagebrush habitat in 2012. Post-fire treatments have included seeding and chemical treatments on 64,656 acres.

PAC Name	Total PAC Acres	Capable Habitat Acres	Acres of Habitat Lost 2013-2018	Current Habitat Acres	Vegetation Treatment Acres ¹	Percent Current Habitat	2018 Habitat Trigger
Cow Lakes	249,733	240,158	320	148,662	12,321	61.9	Soft
Trout Creeks	393,473	378,221	0	222,239	64,656	58.8	Soft

¹All treatment types completed since 2012; includes multiple treatments of sites

Oregon PACs with less than 70 percent current habitat are identified in the table below. While these PACs have not tripped a habitat trigger, because 65 percent or more of capable habitat is current habitat, they are at risk of exceeding the habitat threshold due to wildfire. In the Bully Creek PAC, wildfire has removed 10,660 acres of sagebrush habitat since 2012, with most loss occurring in the 2015 Bendire Fire. The Skyline Fire in 2018 burned an additional 182 acres of sage-grouse habitat in the PAC. In the Steens PAC, wildfire in 2006 removed 36,035 acres of sagebrush. This PAC is very close to tripping the habitat soft trigger. Since 2012, the BLM has completed vegetation treatments on 135,628 acres within the four PACs identified below.

PAC Name	Total PAC Acres	Capable Habitat Acres	Acres of Habitat Lost 2013-2018	Current Habitat Acres	Vegetation Treatment Acres ¹	Percent Current Habitat	2018 Habitat Trigger
Bully Creek	279,855	264,572	10,660	182,905	65,440	69.1	None
Burns	35,769	32,364	0	22,125	1,986	68.4	None
Folly Farm/Saddle Butte	251,558	232,381	786	158,457	23,726	68.2	None
Steens	185,730	166,065	349	108,025	44,476	65.0	None

¹All treatment types completed since 2012; includes multiple treatments of sites

2018 Population Trigger

Population triggers are based on a combination of actual and estimated maximum counts of males at complexes of closely allied leks, within 1 mile of each other, between which a set of males may move. Methods for projecting sage-grouse population trends to include lek complexes that are not counted every year contain multiple assumptions regarding lek formation and extinction rates. However, the BLM and the ODFW have strong confidence in the accuracy of the population estimates derived from these data due to the high proportion of leks surveyed in a given year (70 percent of known leks were surveyed in 2018) and consistency in monitoring methods applied over the previous 21 years. Moreover, strong agreement exists between the BLM and ODFW population estimates derived from the same base data, but using different analytical methods.

Population triggers were exceeded in seven PACs in 2018 (see table below). These same PACs tripped the population trigger in 2016 and 2017. The only change in 2018 from 2017 was the Brothers/North Wagontire PAC moved from soft population trigger status to hard population trigger status.

PAC Name	Soft Threshold (males)	Hard Threshold (males)	2018 Estimate (males)	Annual Percent Change	5-Year Average (males)	5-Year Percent Change	2018 Trigger
Baker	246	170	96	-14.9%	110	-11.1%	hard
Brothers/N. Wagontire	149	129	109	24.4%	120	-8.1%	hard
Cow Lakes	291	217	230	-11.8%	246	4.8%	soft
Crowley	341	267	315	-1.0%	299	3.3%	soft
Dry Valley-Jack Mountain	219	161	68	-29.8%	105	-7.6%	hard
Picture Rock	26	19	5	-28.6%	11	-25.0%	hard
Warners	530	403	404	-7.4%	440	5.3%	soft

Population trends in the PACs that tripped population triggers are described below. Oregon PACs are located within “mid-scale areas” developed by the BLM and its partners for use in the sage-grouse habitat assessment framework and for allocating annual funding to habitat conservation and restoration projects.

- The Baker PAC is located within the Baker mid-scale area. This population has declined approximately 75 percent since 2005, and has not exhibited a recovery similar to those observed in populations throughout the remainder of the state. The hard trigger threshold was first exceeded in 2016. The ODFW observed 92 males at leks there in 2018. This population may be particularly vulnerable to extirpation because it is geographically isolated from the other sage-grouse populations in Oregon and Idaho.
- The Brothers/N. Wagonire PAC is located within the Central Oregon mid-scale area. The population tripped the soft trigger in 2016 and 2017. While more males were observed at leks in 2018 than in the previous two years (due in part to observations at previously unknown leks), the 5-year average continued to decline, resulting in tripping the hard population trigger.
- The Dry Valley/Jack Mountain PAC is located within the Warner-Meinzer mid-scale area. This population has declined between 7.6 percent (BLM calculation method) and 8.3 percent (ODFW calculation method) since 2013. The PAC tripped the soft population trigger in 2016 and hard trigger in 2017 and 2018. All known leks in the PAC (n=26) were surveyed in 2018. No new leks were found in 18 aerial surveys of the PAC.
- The Picture Rock PAC is located within the Warner-Meinzer mid-scale area. This population has declined 25 percent since 2013 and tripped the hard population trigger in 2017 and 2018. All known leks (n=7) were surveyed in 2018. Five males were observed at one lek.
- The Cow Lakes PAC is located within the Owyhee River mid-scale area on the Oregon-Idaho border. The 52 percent decline in the population that began in 2003 tripped the soft population trigger in 2016-2018. Because it also tripped the soft trigger for habitat, Cow Lakes PAC tripped a hard trigger in 2016-2018. In 2018, the 5-year running mean population estimate rose between 4.8 percent (BLM calculation method) and 12.6 percent (ODFW calculation method). However, the number of males counted at the same leks in 2017 and 2018 continued to fall. The sage-grouse population in Idaho, which is connected to the population in the Cow Lakes PAC, has declined significantly since the 2015 Soda Fire and tripped a hard population trigger in that state.
- The Crowley PAC is located within the Owyhee River mid-scale area. The positive growth that started in 2016 continued into 2018, with ODFW reporting a 13.2 percent increase in male attendance at leks and a 4.4 percent increase in the 5-year average annual population.
- The Warners PAC is located within the Warner-Meinzer mid-scale area. The population has been in decline since tripping the soft population trigger in 2016. In 2018, the population estimate is one male above the hard trigger threshold. While the average annual population change since 2013 is positive, substantial population growth will be necessary to avoid tripping the hard trigger.

Hard Trigger Responses

Responses to triggers that involve management changes or more restrictive plan level actions to address declines in habitat or population are outlined in the Adaptive Management Strategy (Appendix J). All required hard trigger responses (Attachment 2) will remain in place until the habitat or population levels rise above the trigger threshold. In 2018 there were no existing projects or pending authorizations where mandatory hard trigger responses were necessary.

Causal Factor Analysis and Annual Review

When a soft or hard trigger is tripped in a PAC, the BLM conducts an analysis of existing conditions and trends in the PAC to identify any major factors affecting population and habitat trends that resulted in exceeding the trigger(s). Causal factor analysis (CFA) reports are complete or under review for the eight Oregon PACs that tripped triggers in 2018. Attachment 3 provides a brief overview of the CFA procedures and results. Annually, field offices review their CFA reports to determine if the data and analysis remains current and valid or if the report should be revised. The annual review is documented on the BLM CFA Annual Review Form. If the causal factors and management recommendations in the existing CFA remain valid, there is no need for a revision. A PAC moving from a soft trigger status to a hard trigger status is not reason enough to require a CFA revision if there is no new information that would substantially change the determinations and management recommendations identified in the soft trigger CFA.

Administrative or Mission Related: Mission.

Districts with unions are reminded to notify their unions of this information bulletin and satisfy any bargaining obligations before implementation. Your servicing Human Resources Office or Labor Relations Specialist can provide you with assistance in this matter.

Signed by
Todd Curtis
Acting Deputy State Director, Division of Resources,
Lands, Minerals and Fire

Authenticated by
J. Mackey
Records Section

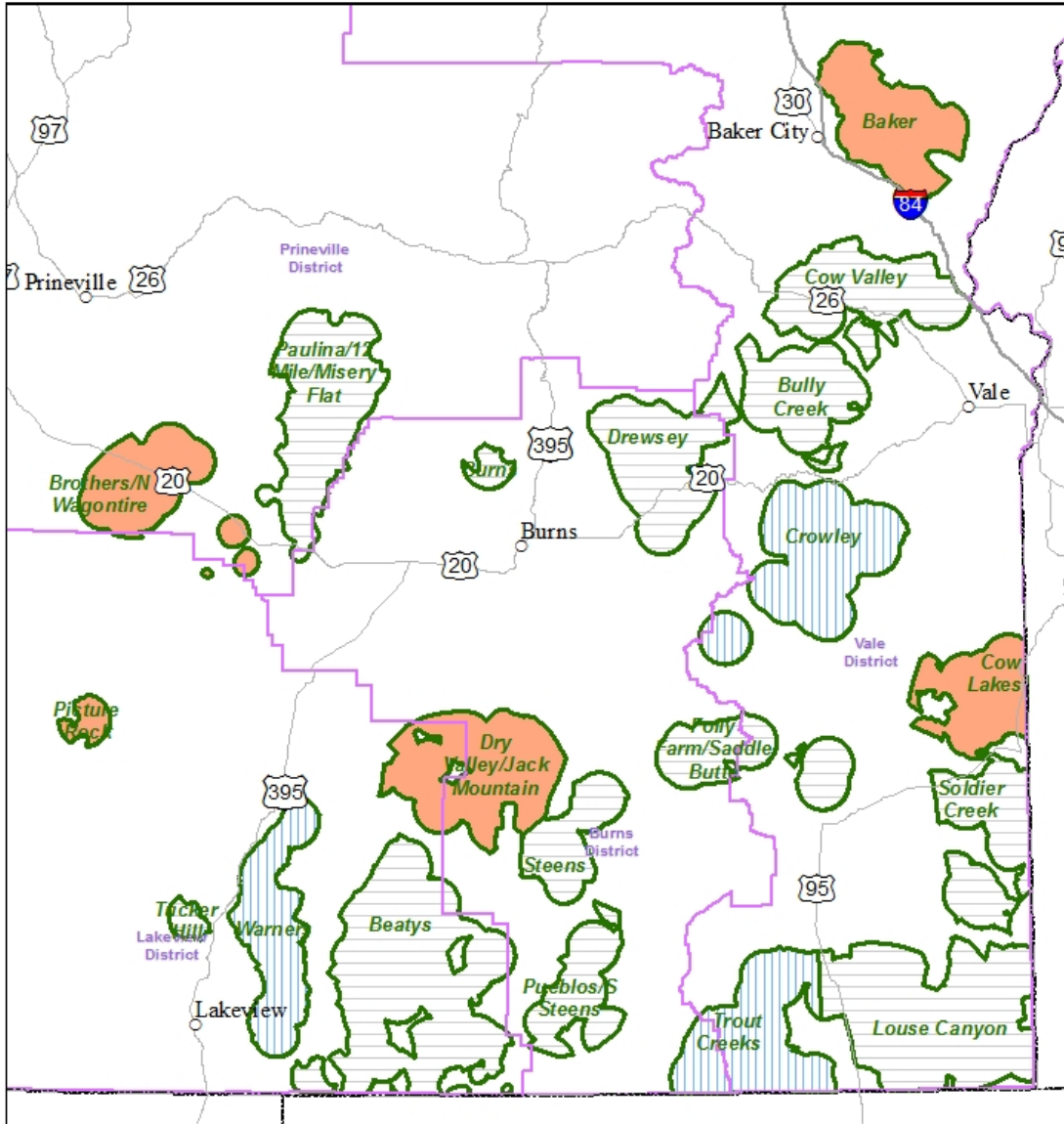
Attachment(s)

- 1 – Map of PACs that Tripped Triggers in 2018 (1 p.)
- 2 – Required Hard Trigger Responses (1 p.)
- 3 – Causal Factor Analysis Process and Results (1 p.)

Distribution

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Map of 2018 Triggers



2018 Adaptive Management Trigger Status by Oregon Greater Sage-grouse Priority Areas of Conservation (PAC)

PAC Trigger Status

- The PAC has tripped a Hard trigger, or both Soft triggers
- The PAC has tripped a soft trigger
- None
- Priority Areas of Conservation (PAC)

- State Boundary
- District Area Boundaries
- Interstate Highways
- Federal Highways



0 15 30 Miles

February 2019

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Required Hard Trigger Responses

On lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management Oregon/Washington within the boundaries of the Baker, Cow Lakes, Dry Valley/Jack Mountain, Picture Rock, and Brother/N. Wagonire Priority Areas of Conservation (PAC), the following direction takes effect immediately upon notification of district offices:

- Do not use prescribed fire to treat sagebrush in the less-than-12-inch precipitation zone. As a last resort, after all other treatment options have been explored and as site-specific variables allow, consider using prescribed fire for fuel breaks in stands where annual grass is a very minor component in the understory.
- Do not conduct mechanical sagebrush treatments in known Greater Sage-grouse winter habitat.
- Limit broadcast burning of juniper-invaded sagebrush to no more than 160 acres per treatment block in the priority habitat management area (PHMA).
- Issue no new geophysical exploration permits in the PHMA.
- Make PHMA exclusion areas for new right-of-way authorizations. The Boardman-to-Hemmingway right-of-way is an exception for the Baker PAC, but the environmental impact statement must analyze the impact of this disturbance on Sage-grouse populations within the PAC.
- Restrict off-highway vehicle use to areas greater than 2 miles from occupied and pending leks during the breeding season (March 1 through June 30). Exceptions are permitted in order to protect human life and safety, such as search and rescue operations and wildfire response, and to support essential farm operations in keeping with the terms and conditions of valid grazing permits, such as fence repair and to deal with ailing or dead livestock.
- When reseeding closed roads, primitive roads, and trails, use appropriate native seed mixes and require use of transplanted sagebrush. Use of non-native species is not permitted.
- Prohibit new road construction within four miles of active sage-grouse leks, subject to valid, existing rights and to protect human health and safety.
- Prohibit construction of recreational facilities, such as kiosks, signs, and toilets, within two miles of occupied and pending leks.

These decisions shall remain in place unless removed by a plan amendment or when the affected PACs rise above trigger thresholds with an upward trend.

Causal Factor Analysis Process and Results

The following table includes a summary of causal factor analyses completed or ongoing and the possible factors involved in exceeding thresholds. Common and wide-spread causes identified below include fire, invasive annual grasses, degraded native understory vegetation, and fence collision risk. Factors with a possibly significant role are human infrastructure (mostly roads and power lines), improper livestock grazing (based on last land health evaluation), and re-occurring drought. While the amount of infrastructure within a PAC may not have changed appreciably in the years leading up to the decline, predator populations may have expanded due to subsidies associated with power lines and roads. The degree to which West Nile virus has caused a population to decline or prevent an increase during favorable environmental conditions is unclear.

Possible Causes or Factors	Baker	Crowley	CowLakes	Trout Creeks	Dry Valley- Jack Mtn (draft)	Warners (draft)	Picture Rock	Brothers- N. Wagontire
Isolated/small size	X						X	
Agriculture Conversion	X							
Conifer encroachment						X	X	
Energy Development								
Infrastructure	Unclear	Unclear	Localized					Unclear
Wild horses		X						
Urbanization								
Sagebrush Elimination			X					
Fire	Localized	X	X	X	X			
Invasive plants	X	X	X	X	X			
Mining								Localized
Livestock grazing	Unclear		Unclear	Unclear				Unclear
Recreation	Localized							Unclear
Predator populations	X	X	Unclear			Localized		Unclear
Native understory condition	X	Unclear	X	X				
Drought	X	X			X	X	X	
West Nile Virus	Unclear	Unclear	Localized					Unclear
Habitat fragmentation	X	X	X					
Fence collisions	X	X	Localized			X	X	
Hunting								X
Crested wheatgrass seedings	X		X					Unclear
Sage-grouse translocations						X		
Research						X		