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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BLM Plans for Public Lands in North Dakota Provide for Greater Sage-Grouse Protection, Balanced Development

Today the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) released final environmental reviews for land use plans in North Dakota that will help to conserve greater sage-grouse habitat and support sustainable economic development. The land management plans, developed during the past three years in partnership with the state and with input from local partners, will benefit wildlife, outdoor recreation, ranching and other traditional land uses that rely on a healthy sagebrush landscape.

The updated North Dakota plan is an essential element of an unprecedented and proactive strategy to respond to the deteriorating health of the American West's sagebrush landscapes and declining population of the greater sage-grouse, a ground-dwelling bird under consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The collaborative federal-state effort includes three key elements to conserve the sagebrush landscape, which faces threats from fire, invasive species and encroaching development: a comprehensive strategy to fight rangeland fire, strong conservation plans for federal public lands, and conservation actions on state and private lands.

"The West is rapidly changing – with increasingly intense wildfires, invasive species and development altering the sagebrush landscape and threatening wildlife, ranching and our outdoor heritage," said Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. "As land managers of two-thirds of greater sage-grouse habitat, we have a responsibility to take action that ensures a bright future for wildlife and a thriving western economy. Together with conservation efforts from states and private landowners, we are laying an important foundation to save the disappearing sagebrush landscape of the American West."

"Federal and state governments and private landowners recognize that a healthy sagebrush landscape means a healthy western economy," said Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. "We are working with local partners to design innovative, long-term conservation plans. Together, we can put effective conservation measures in place that not only benefit the greater sage-grouse, but also preserve the western way of life, help improve grazing lands and bolster rural economies."

The final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will guide land management on approximately 33,000 acres of BLM-administered surface land in North Dakota. The final EIS is the result of a robust, multi-year public process, including public scoping sessions, public meetings and public comment periods on the draft EIS. The plans are now undergoing a 60-day Governor's Consistency Review period and concurrent 30-day protest period, after which Records of Decisions will be signed.

The plans address issues identified by the Service in a 2010 determination that found the greater sage-grouse was deserving of protection under the ESA due to the inadequacy of regulatory protections to

prevent further sagebrush habitat fragmentation, placing the bird in danger of extinction. Federal protection was deferred because of higher priorities; however, the Service is required to revisit the determination by September 30, 2015.

With the shared goal of taking actions to avoid the need to list the bird, in 2011, then-Secretary Ken Salazar and western governors, led by Wyoming Governor Matt Mead and Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper, formed the Sage-Grouse Task Force to develop a cooperative approach to conserving the species across the West.

The plans provide a layered management approach that offers the highest level of protection in the most valuable habitat, known as Priority Habitat Management Areas. Within priority habitat, the plans seek to limit or eliminate new surface disturbance, particularly in Sagebrush Focal Areas, identified by the Service as “stronghold” areas essential for the species’ survival. The plans seek to minimize disturbance in General Habitat Management Areas, which are lands that require some special management to sustain greater sage-grouse populations, but are not considered as important as priority habitat.

In North Dakota, the plan identifies 80 acres as general habitat and 32,900 acres as priority habitat. No lands within North Dakota have been identified as Sagebrush Focal Areas.

This plan amendment seeks to reduce surface disturbance of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat from oil and gas and geothermal development while recognizing valid, existing rights. It prioritizes future leasing and development outside of Priority and General Habitat Management Areas, and restricts surface disturbance associated with new federal leases in Priority Habitat Management Areas.

“We will continue to work with our state and local partners with the shared goal of establishing strong science-based management and conservation commitments across the range of the bird that allow the Fish and Wildlife Service to conclude the protections of the Endangered Species Act are not needed for the greater sage-grouse,” said BLM Montana/Dakotas State Director Jamie Connell.

Importantly, the plans honor all valid, existing rights, including those for oil and gas development, renewable energy, rights-of-way, locatable minerals, and other permitted projects. The plan measures only apply to BLM and USFS-managed lands and minerals.

Over the last four years, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its partners in the Sage-Grouse Initiative have worked with more than 1,100 private landowners to restore 4.4 million acres of habitat for sage-grouse while maintaining working landscapes.

More than 350 other species rely on a healthy sagebrush habitat, including elk, mule deer, pronghorn and golden eagles. Greater sage-grouse habitat currently covers 165 million acres across 11 states in the West, representing a loss of 56 percent of the species’ historic range. At one time, the greater sage-grouse population likely numbered in the millions, but is estimated to have dwindled to 200,000 to 500,000 birds range-wide.

BLM Resource Management Plans guide future land management actions and subsequent site-specific implementation decisions. These decisions establish the desired outcomes of resource management and the measures needed to achieve these goals and objectives.

The final EIS incorporates Resource Management Plan Revisions for the North Dakota Field Office. The BLM worked with cooperating agencies and the State of North Dakota to develop the range of alternatives analyzed and to develop the final EIS.

The North Dakota Plan Amendment/FEIS is available at the BLM’s Dickinson Field Office, 99 23rd Avenue West, Suite A, Dickinson, N.D., 58601 and on the project website:www.blm.gov/sagegrouse.

Any person who participated in the planning process for the proposed plan and has an interest which is or may be adversely affected by the plan, may protest approval of this proposed plan during the 30-day protest period. The protest period runs through June 29, 2015. Submit protest issues using the following methods:

Regular Mail:
BLM Director (210)
Attention: Protest Coordinator
P.O. Box 71383
Washington, D.C. 20024-1383

Overnight Delivery:
BLM Director (210)
Attention: Protest Coordinator
20 M Street SE, Room 2134LM
Washington, D.C. 20003

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The BLM manages more than 245 million acres of public land, the most of any Federal agency. This land, known as the National System of Public Lands, is primarily located in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. The BLM's mission is to manage and conserve the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations under our mandate of multiple-use and sustained yield. In Fiscal Year 2014, the BLM generated \$5.2 billion in receipts from public lands.