APPENDIX H—AREAS OF CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN CRITERIA

As part of the process for developing the Greater Sage-Grouse Resource Management Plan (RMP)/Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) Amendments (hereafter, land use plans [LUP]), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) planning team members reviewed all BLM administered public lands in the planning area to determine if any areas should be considered for designation as areas of critical environmental concern (ACEC) or if any existing ACEC designations should be modified or terminated. Only BLM-administered public lands can be considered for ACEC designation.

Areas of critical environmental concern are BLM lands where special management attention is needed to protect important and relevant values. Special management attention refers to management prescriptions developed during preparation of an RMP or amendment expressly to protect the important and relevant values of an area from the potential effects of actions permitted by the RMP, including proposed actions deemed to be in conformance with the terms, conditions, and decisions of the RMP (BLM Manual 1613).

To be a potential ACEC, a nominated area must meet the criteria of relevance and importance as outlined in 43 CFR 1610.7-2 and BLM Manual 1613. If the relevance and importance criteria are met, an area must be identified as a potential ACEC and considered for designation and management in the resource planning process. Designation is based on whether or not a potential ACEC requires special management attention in the selected plan alternative.

To be eligible for designation as an ACEC, an area must meet the relevance and importance criteria described in 43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1610.7-2 and BLM Manual 1613.

Relevance and importance are defined as follows:

> **Relevance.** There shall be present a significant historic, cultural, or scenic value; a fish or wildlife resource or other natural system or process; or natural hazard.
>
> **Importance.** The above described value, resource, system, process, or hazard shall have substantial significance and values. This generally requires qualities of more than local significance and special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern. A natural hazard can be important if it is a significant threat to life or property.

An area meets the "relevance" criterion if it contains one or more of the following:

1. A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value (including but not limited to rare or sensitive archeological resources and religious or cultural resources important to Native Americans).

2. A fish and wildlife resource (including but not limited to habitat for endangered, sensitive, or threatened species; or habitat essential for maintaining species diversity).

3. A natural process or system (including but not limited to endangered, nonsensitive, or threatened plan species; rare, endemic, or relic plants or plant communities which are terrestrial, aquatic, or riparian; or rare geological features).

4. Natural hazards (including but not limited to areas of avalanche, dangerous flooding, landslides, unstable soils, seismic activity, or dangerous cliffs). A hazard caused by human action may meet the relevance criteria if it is determined through the resource management planning process that it has become part of a natural process.

An area meets the "importance" criterion if it further meets one or more of the following:

1. Has more than locally significant qualities, which give it special worth, consequence, meaning, distinctiveness, or cause for concern, especially compared with any similar resource.

2. Has qualities or circumstances that make it fragile, sensitive, rare, irreplaceable, exemplary, unique, endangered, threatened, or vulnerable to adverse change.

3. Has been recognized as warranting protection to satisfy national priority concerns or to carry out the mandates of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA).

4. Has qualities that warrant highlighting to satisfy public or management concerns about safety and public welfare.

5. Poses a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

This report presents the completed evaluation forms for the nominated ACECs in the planning area. An ACEC that meets both relevance and importance criteria can be included in at least one management alternative analyzed in the LUP Amendments and EIS.

Table H-1. Greater Sage-Grouse Core Habitat Area (Alternative B) Relevance and Importance Evaluation

Area Considered:	Albany, Campbell, Carbon, Converse, Crook, Fremont, Goshen, Laramie, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Park, Platte, Sublette, Sweetwater, Teton, Uinta, and Weston Counties	
General Location:	Albany, Campbell, Carbon, Converse, Crook, Fremont, Goshen, Laramie, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Park, Platte, Sublette, Sweetwater, Teton, Uinta, and Weston Counties in Wyoming	
General Description:	Priority habitat areas for Greater Sage-Grouse in Wyoming.	
Acreage:	The total number of acres of core sage-grouse habitats on BLM/Forest Service administered lands is 9,876,565 acres. Of that total, 5,063,436 acres are BLM/Forest Service surface administration and would constitute the Public Proposed Sage-grouse Core Habitat ACEC.	
Values Considered:	Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.	
Relevance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value	Yes	Although not the intent of the ACEC, due to its size and proposed restrictions on oil and gas and wind energy development especially, other sensitive resources would also benefit.
A fish and wildlife resource	Yes	Other than sage-grouse, the proposed ACEC area contains a mix of elk, mule deer, antelope, moose, winter, transition, parturition ranges and migration corridors, and elk feedgrounds; with some of the winter ranges in these key habitat areas being the terminuses of some of the longest intact migration routes in the lower 48 states. Sage-grouse brood rearing, nesting, winter concentration areas, and lek sites; pygmy rabbit habitats; sage-steppe songbirds nesting and brood-rearing occur throughout these primarily sage-steppe habitats. The sage-steppe habitats in the proposed core area is the most intact stands of habitat remaining for sagebrush obligate species many of which are considered BLM sensitive such as

		the pygmy rabbit, brewer's sparrow, loggerhead shrike, and sage sparrow.
A natural process or system	Yes	There are several areas of special status plant species within these sage-steppe habitat areas, such as Trelease's milk-vetch, Cedar Rim thistle and meadow pussytoes.
Natural hazards	No	There are no specifically identified natural hazards in the proposed sage-grouse key habitat areas.
Importance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
More than locally significant qualities	Yes	The proposed ACEC covers over six BLM Field Office Areas and three Forest Service Districts, and includes a large portion of the Wyoming Basin ecoregion and its associated sagebrush-steppe vegetative community and critical Greater Sage-Grouse core habitat. It also includes smaller portions of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem and the Great Plains/High Plains ecoregion. The Wyoming Basin and its sage-steppe vegetative communities have been subject to intense fragmentation as oil and gas, coal, uranium, transmission lines, and other development has crisscrossed these vegetative communities with roads, pipelines, wellpads, compressor stations, transmission lines, and other forms of development. This cumulative buildup over time has reduced habitat effectiveness to the point that the Greater Sage-Grouse has been identified as eligible for listing (but currently precluded) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).
Special qualities	Yes	Sage-steppe habitat conversion to agricultural operations and industrialization have limited the amount of suitable sage-grouse breeding, nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats across Wyoming. In addition, continuous cycles of drought and competition for resources with domestic and wild ungulates have resulted in limitations and conflict for resources on the remaining habitats.
Warrants national priority/FLPMA protection	Yes	These issues have been recognized by the above referenced ESA listing by USFWS, as well as by the BLM, which is undergoing an EIS amendment to incorporate greater management protections for sage-grouse and their key habitat areas throughout the Casper, Kemmerer, Newcastle, Pinedale, Rawlins, and Rock Springs planning areas and the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Medicine Bow National Forest, and the Thunder Basin National Grassland.
Safety/public welfare concerns	No	Qualities regarding safety and public welfare are not present within the areas nominated as potential ACECs for sage-grouse habitat.
Poses a significant threat	No	Areas nominated as potential ACECs for Greater Sage-Grouse habitat do not pose a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

Table H-2. Greater Sage-Grouse Habitat Area (Alternative C) Relevance and Importance Evaluation

Area Considered:	Albany, Carbon, Converse, Fremont, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Sublette, Sweetwater, Uinta, and Weston Counties
General Location:	Albany, Carbon, Converse, Fremont, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Sublette, Sweetwater, Uinta, and Weston Counties
General Description:	Audubon Important Bird Areas in Wyoming.

Acreage:	3,645,897 acres within the project area was nominated by the WildEarth Guardians.	
Values Considered:	Greater Sage-Grouse habitat, migratory birds.	
Relevance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value	Yes	Although not the intent of the ACEC, due to its size and proposed restrictions on oil and gas and wind energy development especially, other sensitive resources would also benefit.
A fish and wildlife resource	Yes	Other than sage-grouse, the proposed ACEC area contains bird migration corridors. Sage-grouse brood rearing, nesting, winter concentration areas, and lek sites; sage-steppe songbirds nesting and brood-rearing occur throughout these primarily sage-steppe habitats. The sage-steppe habitats in the proposed core area contains the most intact stands of habitat remaining for sagebrush obligate species, many of which are considered BLM sensitive such as brewer's sparrow, loggerhead shrike, sage sparrow, and waterfowl important areas.
A natural process or system	Yes	There are several areas of special status plant species within these sage-steppe habitat areas, such as the Trelease's milk-vetch, Cedar Rim thistle, and meadow pussytoes.
Natural hazards	No	There are no specifically identified natural hazards in the proposed sage-grouse key habitat areas.
Importance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
More than locally significant qualities	Yes	The proposed ACEC covers over six BLM Field Office Areas and three Forest Service Districts, and includes a large portion of the Wyoming Basin ecoregion and its associated sagebrush-steppe vegetative community and critical Greater Sage-Grouse core habitat. It also includes smaller portions of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem and the Great Plains/High Plains ecoregion. The Wyoming Basin and its sage-steppe vegetative communities have been subject to intense fragmentation as oil and gas, coal, uranium, transmission lines and other development has crisscrossed these vegetative communities with roads, pipelines, wellpads, compressor stations, transmission lines and other forms of development. This cumulative buildup over time has reduced habitat effectiveness to the point that the Greater Sage-Grouse has been identified as eligible for listing (but currently precluded) under the ESA.
Special qualities	Yes	Sage-steppe habitat conversion to agricultural operations and industrialization have limited the amount of suitable sage-grouse breeding, nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats across Wyoming. In addition, continuous cycles of drought and competition for resources with domestic and wild ungulates have resulted in limitations and conflict for resources on the remaining habitats.
Warrants national priority/FLPMA protection	Yes	These issues have been recognized by the above referenced ESA listing by USFWS, as well as by the BLM, which is undergoing an EIS amendment to incorporate greater management protections for sage-grouse and their key habitat areas throughout the Casper, Kemmerer, Newcastle, Pinedale, Rawlins, and Rock Springs planning areas and the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Medicine Bow National Forest, and the Thunder Basin National Grassland.
Safety/public welfare concerns	No	Qualities regarding safety and public welfare are not present within the areas nominated as potential ACECs for sage-grouse habitat.

Poses a significant threat	No	Areas nominated as potential ACECs for Greater Sage-Grouse habitat do not pose a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

Map H-1. Proposed Audubon Important Bird Areas, Area of Critical Environmental Concern

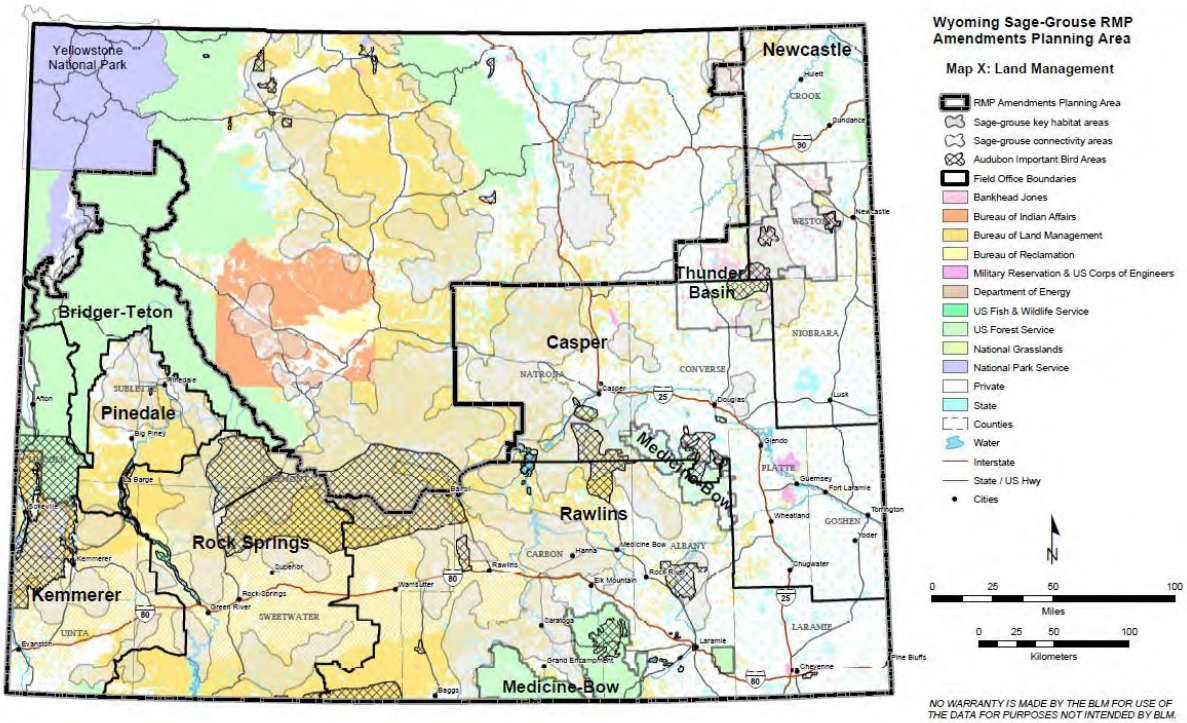

Table H-3. Pinedale Greater Sage-Grouse Relevance and Importance Evaluation

Area Considered:	Beaver Ridge, Fontenelle Creek, East Anticline	
General Location:	Sublette and Lincoln Counties, Wyoming	
General Description:	Priority habitat areas for Greater Sage-Grouse.	
Acreage:	54,800	
Values Considered:	Greater Sage-Grouse priority habitat, big game migration, cultural resources, big game crucial winter range.	
Relevance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value	Yes	Native Americans historically knew the Green River as "Seed-ska-dee," their name for the sage hens, or "prairie chickens." Prehistorically, the strutting grounds within the Pinedale Field Office held thousands of birds making them easy prey and a food staple for early people of the Green River Valley.
A fish and wildlife resource	Yes	Core Area #1 (Beaver Ridge) at the north end of the field office is not only core sage-grouse habitat; it is also a major big game migration route

		from the Hoback and Noble Basin areas to the Pinedale Anticline and Ryegrass areas. A great majority of the area is already classified "No Surface Occupancy." Protecting this area from leasing will slow development and allow passage of big game through the area while traveling to and from winter and summer range. There are also numerous cultural attributes existing in the area. Two sites of note include Fort Bonneville, constructed in 1832; and Beaver Rim which was reported to be the location of several bison kill and procurement locales. Six Trapper's Rendezvous where held in the area. This brought hundreds of people together for the purpose of restocking supplies selling their furs and the camaraderie of the group experience. Prehistoric sites in the area range from several bison kill and procurement locales to short term camps. In addition, there are numerous eligible sites along big game migration corridors. This area also contains Visual Resource Management (VRM) open space and is classified VRM II and III. Core Area #2 (Fontenelle Creek) is composed of a large block of sage-grouse core area located at the south end of the field office and extending into the Kemmerer Field Office. In addition to this area being sage-grouse core area, it contains a large block of Big Game Winter Range. This area also contains VRM II, open space, and no development attributes. Core Area #3 (East Anticline) is primarily located along the Mesa breaks and contains another very important big game and sage-grouse wintering area. A late prehistoric expression occurs in and along the Mesa breaks, making the area significant and in need of further study. Much of the area is currently under lease suspension. Since studies have indicated a steep downward trend in mule deer populations on the Anticline, continued protection of this area through lease suspensions would likely benefit mule deer and other populations of wintering wildlife. In addition to the area's importance to wildlife, it also contains numerous prehistoric and historic sites. 48SU2019 is considered a NRHP eligible cultural site of spiritual significance to Native Americans and is located in this vicinity. The area is partially classified as VRM Class II with some III.
A natural process or system	Yes	The nomination also meets the criterion for a natural system or process because of the condition of the sagebrush habitat in the nomination area.
Natural hazards	No	No natural hazards are known.
Importance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
More than locally significant qualities	No	Although the area contains habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse conservation, the area is not significantly unique or more important than other habitat areas in this region. Greater Sage-Grouse are distributed throughout the western United States. The portion of the distribution in Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alberta, and Saskatchewan are designated as Management Zone I (Stiver et al. 2006). Management Zones are delineations of Greater Sage-Grouse populations and sub-populations within floristic zones with similar management issues. Within Management Zone I in Montana, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks designated core areas (MFWP 2009) and Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) has also designated core areas in Wyoming (WGFD 2009b). In addition, Montana Audubon has also designated five important bird areas for sage-steppe associated birds, including Greater Sage-Grouse, in Montana, most of which are contained within the MFWP core areas. While all of these areas are considered important to Greater Sage-Grouse conservation, the areas are dispersed throughout the region and

		are not significantly unique to a specific region or planning unit. In addition, Greater Sage-Grouse habitat in these core areas is owned by a number of different entities and habitat on BLM lands is not distinct from habitat managed by other ownership.
Special qualities	No	The area is not particularly fragile or sensitive to change as compared to other sites in Wyoming.
Warrants national priority/FLPMA protection	Yes	Satisfies national priority concerns.
Safety/public welfare concerns	No	No safety or public welfare concerns are known.
Poses a significant threat	No	No significant threats.

Map H-2. Proposed Pinedale Area of Critical Environmental Concern

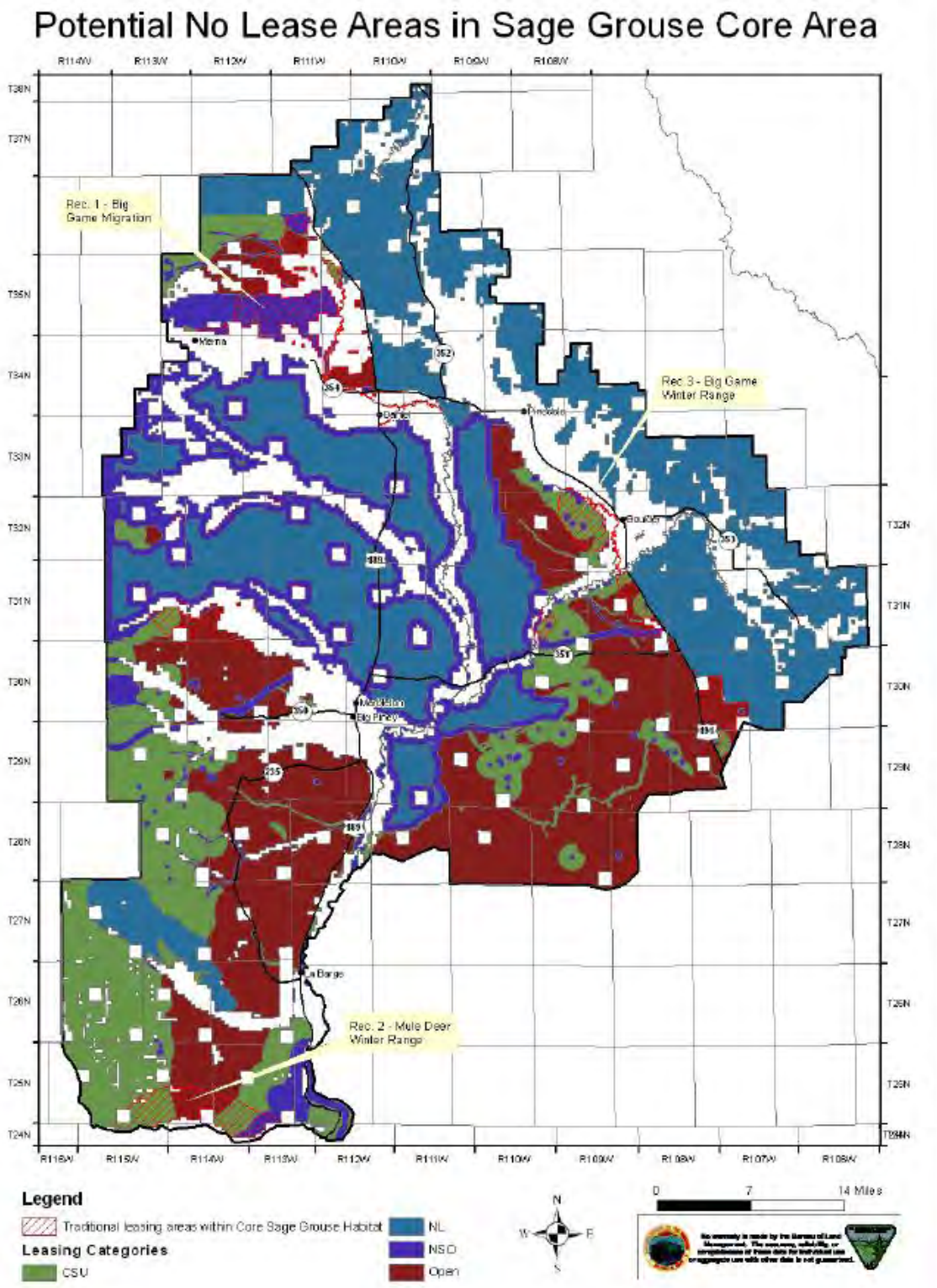

Table H-4. Newcastle Greater Sage-Grouse Relevance and Importance Evaluation

Area Considered:	Crook County	
General Location:	Area is south of Moorcroft and west of Upton. It includes all lands except lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service or the State of Wyoming in all or parts of Townships 48-45 and Ranges 66-68.	
General Description:	Priority habitat areas for Greater Sage-Grouse.	
Acreage:	The proposed no leasing area covers approximately 79,179 acres. Of the 79,179 acres 42,409 acres are federal mineral estate, 6,831 state minerals, and 29,939 acres of private mineral estate.	
Values Considered:	Greater Sage-Grouse priority/core habitat.	
Relevance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value	No	Although historic, cultural and scenic values occur widespread on public lands, the nominations did not highlight any such values as part of the nomination for sage-grouse habitat. A general reference to the presence of various resource values without specifying why the values are significant in the context of an ACEC does not provide rationale for meeting this criterion.
A fish and wildlife resource	Yes	The area contains breeding, nesting, brood-rearing, and winter habitats for sage-grouse. There are currently three occupied leks within the proposed boundary of the No Leasing Area. The area proposed for No Leasing designation encompasses all of the seasonal and life cycle habitats required by sage-grouse during the year. Sage-grouse population declines throughout the west have caused serious concern for the species. Sage-grouse have been petitioned for listing under the ESA and is a designated Wyoming BLM sensitive species. While sagebrush communities exist throughout the West, the pressures on the sage-grouse habitat have threatened to elevate the species to a candidate for listing under the ESA. The area contained within the proposed No Leasing area is some of the best intact habitat within the Newcastle Field Office.
A natural process or system	No	Although natural systems and processes occur on public lands, the sagebrush vegetation community and the various habitat requirements of Greater Sage-Grouse across its range are not comprised of plant species or communities as described in this criterion and were not highlighted as comprising a natural system.
Natural hazards	No	The public lands nominated as potential ACECs do not constitute a natural hazard as described in this criterion.
Importance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
More than locally significant qualities	Yes	The proposed No Leasing area has not been surveyed for sage-grouse leks and is believed to contain many leks that have not been identified. Radio collared grouse in the Newcastle Field Office have not been identified as migratory populations. The grouse in the proposed Raven Creek Special Management Area are most likely non-migratory populations. Grouse are planned to be collared in the spring of 2011 to determine migratory status and map seasonal habitat use.

Special qualities	Yes	The areas nominated as potential ACECs have the following qualities described under this criterion: fragile, sensitive, irreplaceable, and vulnerable to adverse change. The resource on a range-wide basis is not rare, exemplary, unique, or endangered or threatened (i.e. listed species).
Warrants national priority/FLPMA protection	No	Although conservation of Greater Sage-Grouse is of current national concern to the agency due to the warranted but precluded status in regard to listing by the USFWS, and initiation of the Greater Sage-Grouse planning strategy, the agency has been emphasizing Greater Sage-Grouse conservation since the late 1990s. In 2005, the BLM issued WO-IM-2005-024 directing that sage-grouse conservation measures be included into all RMPs within the range of the species by 2015. At this time there exist no secretarial or executive orders or public laws identifying Greater Sage-Grouse as a national priority for protection beyond management of the species habitat which falls within the purview of implementation of the ESA and FLPMA.
Safety/public welfare concerns	No	Qualities regarding safety and public welfare are not present within the areas nominated as potential ACECs for sage-grouse habitat.
Poses a significant threat	No	Areas nominated as potential ACECs for Greater Sage-Grouse habitat do not pose a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

Map H-3. Proposed Newcastle Area of Critical Environmental Concern

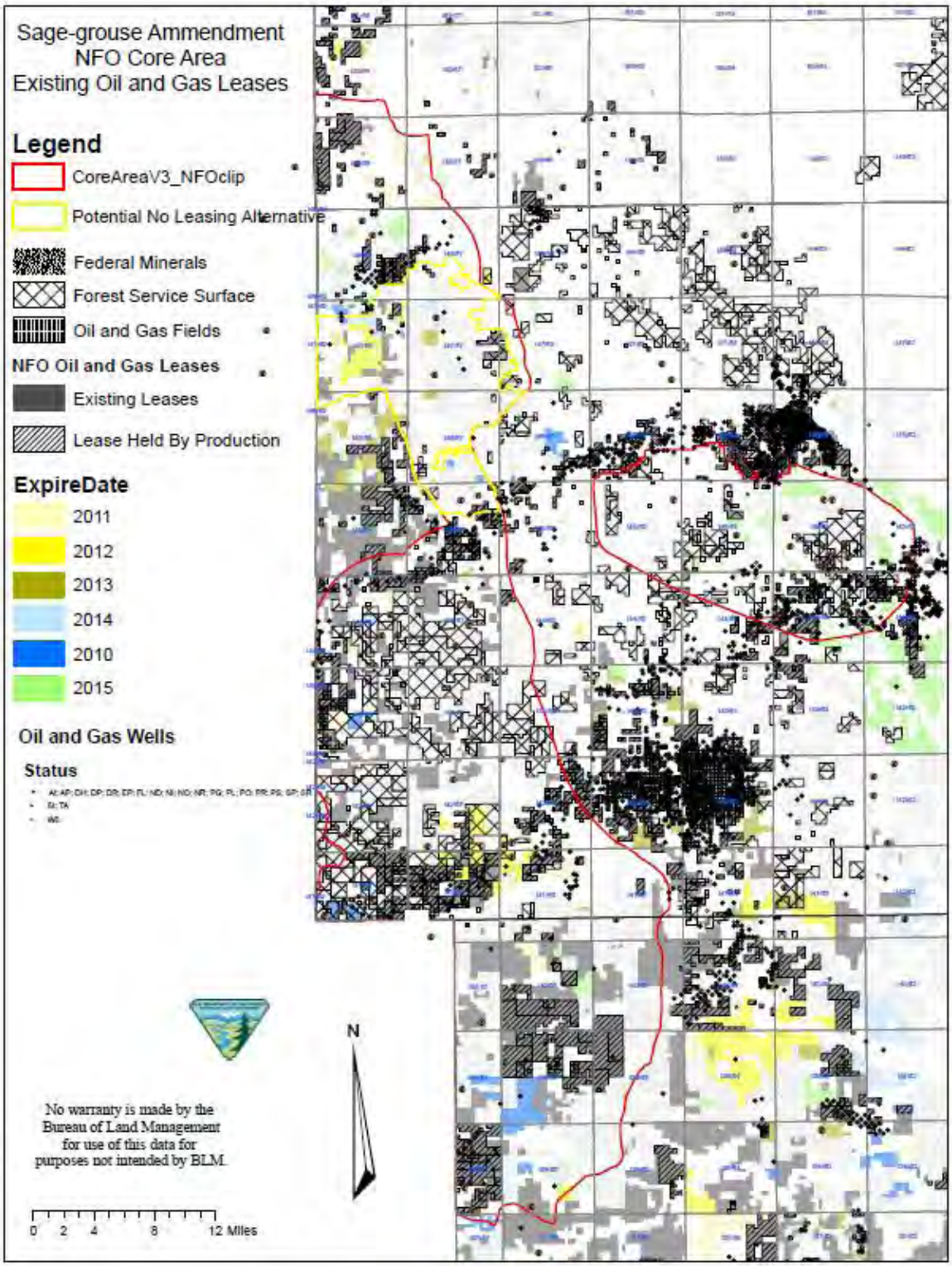

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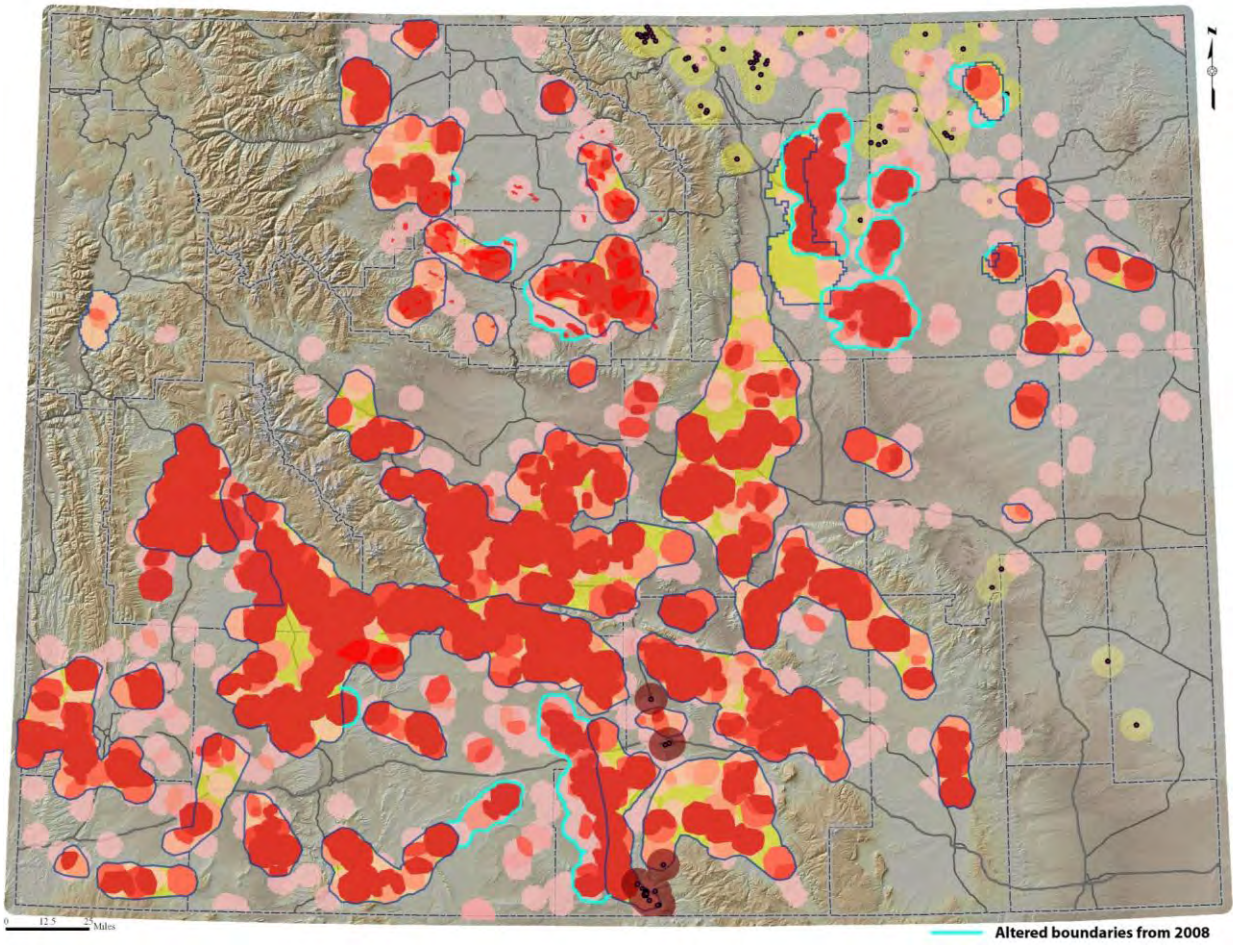
Table H-5. Greater Sage-Grouse General Habitat Relevance and Importance Evaluation

Area Considered:	Albany, Campbell, Carbon, Converse, Crook, Fremont, Goshen, Laramie, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Park, Platte, Sublette, Sweetwater, Teton, Uinta, and Weston Counties	
General Location:	Albany, Campbell, Carbon, Converse, Crook, Fremont, Goshen, Laramie, Lincoln, Natrona, Niobrara, Park, Platte, Sublette, Sweetwater, Teton, Uinta, and Weston Counties	
General Description:	General habitat areas for Greater Sage-Grouse in Wyoming.	
Acreage:	The total acreage of Greater Sage-Grouse general habitats on BLM/Forest Service administered lands is 23,848,198 acres. Of that total, 11.6 million acres are BLM/Forest Service surface administration and would constitute the Public Proposed Sage-grouse General Habitat ACEC.	
Values Considered:	Greater Sage-Grouse habitat.	
Relevance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
A significant historic, cultural, or scenic value	Yes	Although not the intent of the ACEC, due to its size and proposed restrictions on oil and gas and wind energy development especially, other sensitive resources would also benefit.
A fish and wildlife resource	Yes	Other than sage-grouse, the proposed ACEC area contains a mix of elk, mule deer, antelope, moose, winter, transition, parturition ranges and migration corridors, and elk feedgrounds; with some of the winter ranges in these key habitat areas being the terminuses of some of the longest intact migration routes in the lower 48 states. Sage-grouse brood rearing, nesting, winter concentration areas, and lek sites; pygmy rabbit habitats; sage-steppe songbirds nesting and brood-rearing occur throughout these primarily sage-steppe habitats.
A natural process or system	Yes	There are several areas of special status plant species within these sage-steppe key habitat areas, such as, the Trelease's milk-vetch, cedar-rim thistle and meadow pussytoes to name a few.
Natural hazards	No	There are no specifically identified natural hazards in the proposed sage-grouse general habitat areas. The area does contain rattlesnakes, stinging insects, roads in poor condition, etc. but at this scale and dealing with almost eleven million acres of BLM land, these hazards have not been specifically identified.
Importance Value	**Meets Value (Yes/No)**	**Rationale for Determination**
More than locally significant qualities	No	The proposed ACEC covers over six BLM Field Office Areas and three Forest Service Districts, and includes a large portion of the Wyoming Basin eco-region and its associated sagebrush-steppe vegetative community and Greater Sage-Grouse general habitat. It also includes smaller portions of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem and the Great Plains/High Plains eco-region. The Wyoming Basin and its sage-steppe vegetative communities have been subject to intense fragmentation as oil and gas, coal, uranium, transmission lines, and other development has crossed these vegetative communities with roads, pipelines, wellpads, compressor stations, transmission lines, and other forms of development. It has been this cumulative buildup over time that has reduced habitat effectiveness to the point that the Greater Sage-Grouse has been identified as eligible for listing (but currently precluded) under the ESA. It is impossible to interpret the areas of protection based on the maps

		that were provided in the nomination.
Special qualities	No	Sage-steppe habitat conversion to agricultural operations and industrialization have limited the amount of suitable sage-grouse breeding, nesting, brood-rearing, and wintering habitats across Wyoming. In addition, continuous cycles of drought and competition for resources with domestic and wild ungulates have resulted in limitations and conflict for resources on the remaining habitats. The combination of general habitat negates the benefits of the added protection needed in core habitat and may inadvertently increase fragmentation of core habitat as the complexities of overlapping resource values and projects of national interest intersect.
Warrants national priority/FLPMA protection	No	These issues have been recognized by the above referenced TSA listing by USFWS, as well as by the BLM, which is undergoing an EIS amendment to incorporate greater management protections for sage-grouse and their core habitat areas throughout the Casper, Kemmerer, Newcastle, Pinedale, Rawlins, and Rock Springs planning areas and the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the Medicine Bow National Forest, and the Thunder Basin National Grassland. The general habitat within the project area in most cases has intensive mineral development and is held by production. The added value of managing the ACEC would not be fully realized due to the valid existing rights encumbering these habitats, which is largely why these areas were not included in the general habitat as a core area strategy by the State of Wyoming.
Safety/public welfare concerns	No	Qualities regarding safety and public welfare are not present within the areas nominated as potential ACECs for sage-grouse habitat.
Poses a significant threat	No	Areas nominated as potential ACECs for Greater Sage-Grouse habitat do not pose a significant threat to human life and safety or to property.

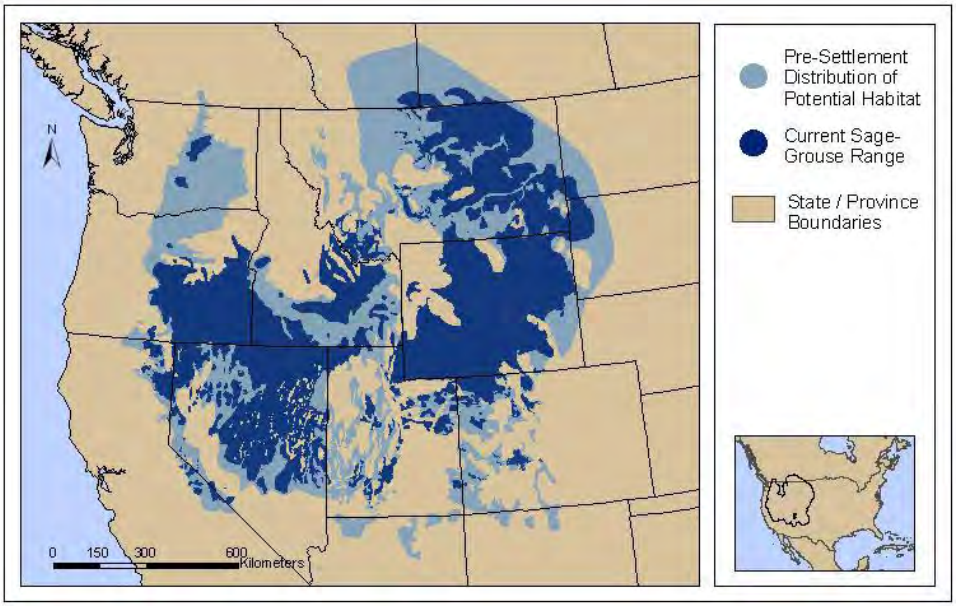
Map H-4. Proposed Greater Sage-Grouse General Habitat Area of Critical Environmental Concern



Background Information for All Nominations

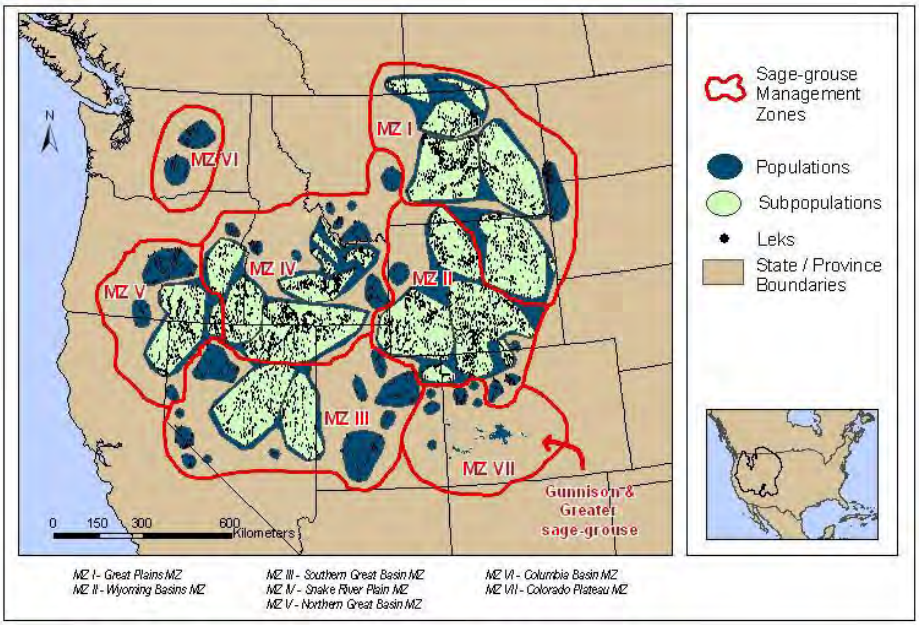
Greater Sage-Grouse are distributed throughout the western United States (Figure H-1). The portion of the distribution in Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Alberta, and Saskatchewan is designated as Management Zone I (Figure H-2) (Stiver et al. 2006). Management Zones are delineations of Greater Sage-Grouse populations and sub-populations within floristic zones with similar management issues.

Figure H-1. Greater Sage-Grouse Distribution



Source: Stiver et al. 2006

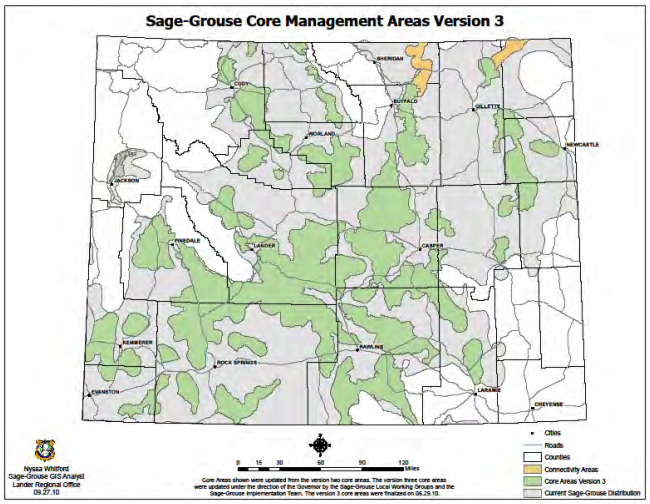
Figure H-2. Greater Sage-Grouse Management Zones



Source: Stiver et al. 2006

Within Management Zone I in Montana, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) has designated core areas[1] (MFWP 2009) and WGFD has also designated core areas in Wyoming (Figure H-3) (WGFD 2009b).

Figure H-3. Greater Sage-Grouse Core Areas (Wyoming)



[1] *Sage-grouse core areas are habitats associated with 1) Montana's highest densities of sage-grouse (25% quartile), based on male counts and/or 2) sage-grouse lek complexes and associated habitat important to sage-grouse distribution (MFWP 2009).*