This blog post was drafted by Jamie T. Martinez.

On March 15, the Trump administration finalized its plan to loosen protections on federal lands for the habitat of the greater sage-grouse, a near-threatened species that lives in sagebrush country across the western United States. The final plan amends the resource plans adopted in 2015 to guide conservation of greater sage-grouse habitat on BLM-managed public lands in California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Wyoming.

In 2015, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (FS) released a collection of land-management plans for federal lands in ten western states that aimed to conserve greater sage-grouse habitats and support continued economic development. The plans limited new developments on approximately 10.7 million acres of federal lands, such as restricting new oil and natural gas drilling in areas with substantial sage-grouse habitats. Moreover, the plan required the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to conduct a status review to determine whether the greater sage-grouse warranted protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In September 2015, the FWS found that the conservation efforts significantly reduced threats to the sage-grouse, and therefore the species did not need protection under the ESA.

The current plan to amend the 2015 conservation plans has been controversial. Opponents of the new plan say that it is an explicit move to promote oil and gas drilling on public lands. Moreover, whereas the previous plan protected 10.7 million acres across ten states, the new plan lifts protections on most of that land– - leaving about 1.8 million acres dedicated to protecting the sage-grouse. Opponents of the new plan argue that the reduction in protection will destroy nesting habitats and move the sage-grouse closer to being listed as an endangered species.

Proponents of the new plan argue that other conservation measures would stay in place, such as buffer zones that ban the destruction of sage-grouse habitats near nests. Further, mining and drilling companies would still need to apply for a waiver to harm habitats. Proponents also urge that the new plan will improve economic activity, which was allegedly stifled under the 2015 plan.

The revision process has been covered in earlier posts (see Public Lands Watch: Sage grouse and Public Lands Watch: Sage Grouse Plan Revisions).