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Bureau of Land Management Fracking Plan Endangers Sage-Grouse in Utah

FILLMORE, Utah -- Conservation groups expressed alarm today that a U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to auction off 14,943 acres of public land in central Utah for fracking and drilling will harm the imperiled Sheeprocks population of greater sage-grouse. The BLM previously announced that it would include lands occupied by the Sheeprocks sage-grouse population and designated as "Priority Habitat" in its sage-grouse plans in its September 2017 oil and gas lease auction to be held by the Fillmore, Utah BLM office.

"We've lost so many sage-grouse in the Sheeprocks area that the government has had new ones brought in from other places and released," said Kelly Fuller, energy campaign coordinator with Western Watersheds Project. "It's a waste of money trucking in new sage-grouse and then putting their habitat on the auction block."

In February, [the BLM issued a press release](#) vowing to increase protection for sage-grouse and their habitat in the Sheeprock Mountain area of Juab, Tooele and Utah Counties. The Sheeprocks population dropped by nearly 40 percent over the last four years, triggering mandatory changes to how the BLM manages this iconic western bird.

"Sage-grouse are like canaries in a coal mine. Their population numbers are indicators of environmental health, and when they're not doing well, it's a wake-up call that it's time to do something," said Allison Jones, Executive Director of Utah Wild Project.

In 2011, the BLM assembled a blue-ribbon panel of sage-grouse experts, called the National Technical Team, to make recommendations on land management strategies that would allow sage grouse to survive. These experts recommended closing priority sage-grouse habitats entirely to oil and gas leasing.

"BLM's decision defies reason," said Michael Saul, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity's Public Lands Program. "The agency's own plans require emphasizing oil and gas leasing outside the most important habitat for sage-grouse. But despite admitting that the Sheeprocks population is in critical condition and requires more protection, BLM officials want to encourage additional drilling in the sagebrush? It makes no sense."

Even now, [the sage grouse are gathering](#) at dawn at their traditional mating grounds, called 'leks,' where they dance and breed year after year.

"For the Greater Sage-Grouse to recover, energy development needs to be located outside priority habitat," said Steve Holmer, Vice President of Policy at American Bird Conservancy.

"This proposal ignores what the hard trigger in the Utah plan is telling us, that sagebrush country needs more conservation, not more drilling," Holmer continued.

"President Trump is throwing our western wildlife under the bus to make oil and gas executives rich," said Jeremy Nichols, climate and energy program director for WildEarth Guardians. "These latest plans to auction away public lands that are critical habitat for the iconic sage-grouse just underscore the extreme lengths this Administration will go to do the bidding of the fracking industry."

Public comments on the Environmental Assessment for the BLM's September 2017 Utah lease sale [will be accepted until May 1](#).

The mission of Western Watersheds Project is to protect and restore western watersheds and wildlife through education, public policy initiatives and legal advocacy.

American Bird Conservancy's mission is to conserve native birds and their habitats throughout the Americas.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.2 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

WildEarth Guardians protects and restores the wildlife, wild places, wild rivers, and health of the American West.

The Wild Utah Project strives to advance our mission of providing science-based strategies for wildlife and land conservation.

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