United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
Colorado State Office
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Received
County Adminstration
7/11/2014
cc: BOCC
M. Birnie
M. Crosby
M. Pellettier
J. Cochran
R. Forrest
D. Baumgarter
N. Standaraum

In Reply Refer To:
6500 (CO-910)

JUL 0 9 2014

Ms. Paula Swenson
Chairperson
Gunnison County Board of Commissioners
200 E. Virginia
Gunnison CO 81230

Dear Ms. Swenson:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) invites you to participate as a cooperating agency in formulating a Plan Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that sets forth an effective strategy for conserving Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat on BLM-administered public lands throughout the range of the species. The range-wide planning area consists of over 625,000 acres of BLM surface estate in Chaffee, Delta, Dolores, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Mesa, Montrose, Ouray, Saguache, and San Miguel counties in Colorado, Grand and San Juan counties in Utah.

The BLM Colorado is leading the effort to evaluate existing and potential measures for protecting the Gunnison Sage-grouse and its potential proposed critical habitat on behalf of BLM Colorado and BLM Utah. The BLM expects to have consistent objectives and conservation measures in place by July 2016.

Background

The Gunnison Sage-grouse *(Centrocercus minimus)* is a ground-dwelling bird requiring large expanses of sagebrush, along with a diversity of grasses and forbs, and healthy wetland and riparian ecosystems. In January 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) published a proposed listing and critical habitat decision for the Gunnison Sage-grouse indicating that listing the species as "Endangered" was warranted. In its preliminary finding, the FWS cited the inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms for conserving the Gunnison Sage-grouse and its habitat as a significant threat to the species' survival and further recommended that the BLM incorporate additional conservation measures into applicable BLM resource management plans.

National Environmental Policy Act Compliance

The BLM has determined that the proposed plan amendment constitutes a major federal action requiring the preparation of an EIS in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The BLM will seek public and agency input to identify issues to address in the EIS and will coordinate with local, state and other federal government agencies in preparing the EIS. The

plan amendment will address proposed and alternative policies and analyze how implementation of the policies might affect the quality of the environment.

Cooperating Agency Participation

The BLM anticipates that a variety of partners, including cooperating agencies, stakeholders and each of the affected BLM Resource Advisory Councils in Colorado and Utah will be involved throughout the planning effort. We would like to invite you to partner with us in a cooperating agency relationship for preparation of the Draft Plan Amendment/ EIS. Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA (40 C.F.R. 1500-1508) emphasize the use of such arrangements as a means of ensuring timely coordination between the BLM and tribal, state, local and other federal agencies during NEPA analysis and document preparation. The BLM places great importance on effective collaboration with its partners through the cooperating agency relationship. Further information on cooperating agencies is available online at: http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/nepa/cooperating_agencies.html

As defined by CEQ and BLM regulations, your agency is eligible for cooperating agency status on the Gunnison Sage-grouse Range-wide Plan Amendment/EIS on the basis of its jurisdiction by law. Your agency's participation and perspective will be invaluable in helping the BLM to formulate an effective Gunnison Sage-grouse habitat conservation strategy. BLM decisions regarding public lands can have a tremendous effect on neighboring communities and the involvement of your agency as a cooperating agency can help to ensure that such decisions are sound and incorporate appropriate and effective landscape level considerations and measures.

The BLM anticipates a timeframe of approximately 24 months from project initiation to the issuance of a Final Plan Amendment/Record of Decision. The planning effort will involve multiple steps, including the preparation of a Draft Plan Amendment/EIS, Draft and Final Biological Assessments, a Draft Biological Opinion, a Proposed Plan Amendment/Final EIS and the Final Plan Amendment/Record of Decision. As such, review timeframes for both the BLM and cooperating agencies will be brief. Although established timeframes must be adhered to closely in order to keep the project on schedule, cooperating agencies may negotiate their level of involvement consistent with available staffing and resources.

If you are interested in participating as a cooperating agency; please contact Leigh D. Espy, Project Manager at (303) 239-3801 or lespy@blm.gov. Current information regarding the plan amendment will be maintained online at the BLM Colorado Gunnison Sage-grouse planning webpage: http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/BLM_Programs/wildlife/sage-grouse.html

Thank you for considering our invitation. We look forward to working with you and your agency throughout this important planning effort.

Sincerely,

Lonny L Bagley

for Ruth Welch
State Director