

Governor Steve Bullock
Office of the Governor
State Capitol
Helena, MT 59620

RE: Federal Efforts in Range-wide Conservation of Greater Sage-Grouse

Dear Governor Bullock,

We are a consortium of independent chapters of the National Audubon Society, all in the great state of Montana. We write to thank you for your leadership to conserve the Greater Sage-Grouse and to ask that you work with our state's congressional delegation to oppose legislative efforts to undermine sage-grouse conservation and ensure sufficient funding to make sure conservation efforts succeed, as this is in our state's best interest.

We applaud efforts to date by states and the wide range of partners across the West, which after years of work by a wide range of stakeholders, resulted in the development of landmark federal management plans on BLM and US Forest Service land that protects 67 million acres of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat while ensuring continued multiple-use. We encourage continued collaboration to ensure that these management plans as well as the state's plan and private stakeholder commitments are a success as so much is at stake for us here in Montana and across the West.

As Audubon chapters, we recognize the broader benefits of protections afforded to sage-grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem, the iconic western landscape upon which they are completely dependent.

Habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from increasing aggressive invasive species, energy development, agriculture and agricultural conversion, urbanization, wildfire frequency, and infrastructure development have made this ecosystem one of the most imperiled in North America. Very little of this ecosystem, which is the heart of our American West, has been undisturbed and unaltered in the past two centuries.

Efforts to improve management for sage-grouse are beneficial to over 350 additional vertebrate species that also depend on a healthy sagebrush ecosystem. This includes prominent species like mule deer and Golden Eagles, as well as similarly at-risk species like Sage Thrashers and pygmy rabbits (all found in Montana). The many species of sagebrush, the dominant vegetation for which the ecosystem is named, play a critical role in the hydrological cycle of the arid West and help maintain the sensitive ecological balance that keeps this ecosystem functioning. Thus, a well-managed sagebrush landscape can sustain not only robust wildlife populations, but also be more resilient for continued multiple-use activities.

We are encouraged by the recent proactive, science-based efforts to responsibly manage for these threats. Collaboration is key to addressing problems in the West, and federal plans are

based on input from all of the affected states and a broad suite of stakeholders. However, we are extremely concerned about the continued efforts by some in Congress to undermine the years of good-faith work that have gone into these plans. Most recently, Utah Representative Bishop and Idaho Senator Risch's harmful bills ("Greater Sage-Grouse Protection and Recovery Act of 2017") propose to block federal agencies from implementing the sage-grouse management plans and defers management over federal land to the states without any science-based standards or input from federal land managers. The plans were developed in a science-based and collaborative manner, and this same approach should be used to implement the plans or to make any improvements.

The hard work done over the last few years should not be dismissed. We strongly support funding to implement these plans that:

- Provides certainty and a clear path for multiple-use on public lands where appropriate, including ranching, recreation, and energy generation/transmission;
- Provides important and valued funding sources to stakeholders in our state (which has been leveraged to yield even more funding); and
- Addresses issues at the landscape scale, which benefits a wide range of wildlife.

Without these federal plans, as is proposed by the Bishop and Risch bills:

- Years of hard work and collaboration amongst stakeholders would be eroded; and
- We are "kicking the can" down the road on management of sage-grouse, thus putting the states in great peril to try and conserve a bird that has become even more compromised (with fewer options and loss of relationships among stakeholders).

As you know, concerted and cooperative efforts at the local, regional, and federal scale have led to unprecedented conservation plans for the Greater Sage-Grouse, which was the key to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2015 determination that the species did not warrant federal protection. Having you speak up on behalf of these federal land management efforts, specifically that they are adequately funded and continue to be implemented, is necessary for ensuring that sage-grouse remain a state-managed species across the western landscape and helps to assure that many other species prosper.

Together, we ask that you stand up for Montana and our western heritage by ensuring politics do not unravel the years of hard work that resulted in the sound management of an iconic species of the sagebrush ecosystem.

Respectfully,

Name

Title within Chapter (i.e. President)

Chapter Name

City, State

Cc: Montana's Congressional delegation