



**Senator John Barrasso**  
**June 28, 2016**  
**Public Lands, Forestry and Mining Subcommittee**  
**Oversight Hearing**

**OPENING STATEMENT**

The Subcommittee will come to order.

The purpose of today's hearing is to conduct oversight on the status of implementation of federal sage grouse conservation and management plans under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service.

This hearing is not designed to focus solely on the quality, timing, or scope of the Administration's top-down approach to conservation plan, but today's oversight hearing of the plan implementation does require recognition that the overlay of federal plans last September effectively pushed aside years of successful state and private conservation efforts.

As part of their joint announcement last September, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the BLM, and the Forest Service used the creation of federal management plans as justification for the decision not to list the Greater Sage Grouse as "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act.

This was despite the fact that the federal sage grouse plans had not yet been tested on the ground, let alone finalized.

Today marks 280 days since that joint announcement.

Since that time, no instructional memoranda have been finalized, no final field guides have been made public, and agency staff on the ground are no closer to implementing the federal plans than they were last September.

In March, when instructional memoranda drafts were leaked following a meeting with western Governors' staffs, there was widespread concern that the documents would include inconsistent or unreasonable habitat targets that would not reflect on-the-ground range realities.

These criticisms have plagued the federal plans from the beginning, in large part because the federal plans in many cases failed to use successful state efforts as a roadmap for the federal plans.

Now, nine months after the Administration announced their sage grouse plans, implementation of the federal plans has not yet begun.

Undoubtedly, the Administration witnesses will say that agencies are making progress by beginning habitat inventories to prepare for implementation. In some states, like Wyoming, agency personnel have begun training to begin these habitat assessments this summer, but BLM and Forest Service personnel will be assessing sage grouse habitat conditions without instructional memoranda to inform them.

To me, it seems that these inventories are simply a way to demonstrate false-progress in implementation.

I expect that some witnesses today will say that the federal plans themselves contain flaws. This is something we've heard time and time again since the plans were finalized last fall. I also expect to hear that in some states, the Administration failed to meet their own planning requirements, like the use of best available science. And I expect to hear concerns about the "landscape-scale" approach the federal agencies took when developing their plans. I share all of these same concerns

In this Subcommittee last week, we heard all of these same things about the BLM's overhaul of their planning rule, called Planning 2.0.

It seems that whether we are talking about the BLM's planning process or sage grouse conservation across these eleven western states, there is significant opposition on the ground to federal action that advocates broad, sweeping policy direction mandated by Washington.

These one-size-fits-all policies cripple public access to public lands and disenfranchise those who have a vested interest in healthy resources. Future instructional memoranda will undoubtedly mention grazing, mineral extraction, oil and natural gas production, and other public land uses.

A CRS report from last Tuesday indicated that oil and natural gas production on federal lands is down twenty-seven percent from 2010. I'm concerned that BLM and the Forest Service plans will further reduce natural gas production on federal lands in Wyoming and other western states.

In Wyoming, and many of my colleagues' home states, their ranchers, energy and mineral producers, and construction workers depend on production based on federal lands. In turn, the Greater Sage Grouse depends on the people who depend on the land.

For months, folks across the West have been using the phrase "what's good for the bird is good for the herd". The message is simple, but clear: maintaining healthy habitat is good for wildlife, recreationalists, livestock, and other land users, as well as sage grouse.

The use of best science that reflects true habitat needs is critical to ensure the plans can be implemented at a scale which benefits the birds and the ecosystem.

At this point, I think it is clear that I have significant concerns about the lengthy delays in the instructional memoranda and the way agencies have addressed public outreach since last September.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their discussions during the last several months and the expected next steps.

Senator Wyden.