

Biological Opinion on Eastern Oregon Sage Grouse and Cattle Impacts

Under the **Endangered Species Act (ESA)**, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issues biological opinions when federal actions may affect listed species. For the **greater sage-grouse** in eastern Oregon, the ESA listing process was pivotal in shaping conservation policy.

ESA Listing Status

In 2010, USFWS found the greater sage-grouse warranted but precluded listing under the ESA, pending a 5-year review. After unprecedented multi-state collaboration — including the **Oregon Sage-Grouse Conservation Partnership (SageCon)** — USFWS concluded in 2015 that the species was **not warranted for listing** due to effective conservation measures and habitat protection [ODFW+1](#). This decision was supported by the **Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan** (Executive Order 15-18) and state administrative rules.

Cattle and Habitat Management

Cattle grazing is a long-standing land use in eastern Oregon sagebrush ecosystems. The **ODFW Sage-Grouse Mitigation Program** and the **Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy** recognize that livestock operations can be a source of habitat disturbance if not managed carefully. The mitigation hierarchy — **avoidance, minimization, mitigation** — guides how projects (including grazing) are sited and designed to reduce impacts [ODFW](#).

Key points for cattle:

- **Avoidance:** Locate grazing or development away from sage-grouse core habitat (Priority Areas for Conservation) and low-density areas identified in ODFW’s 2023 update [ODFW](#).
- **Minimization:** Use rotational grazing, reduce overgrazing, and maintain vegetation cover to support habitat quality.
- **Mitigation:** Implement compensatory habitat improvements if unavoidable impacts occur.

Biological Opinion Context

While the ESA listing was not granted, USFWS and ODFW still issue **biological opinions** for federal actions (e.g., BLM land management, federal permits) that could affect sage-grouse. These opinions assess whether actions comply with the ESA’s “take” prohibitions and whether mitigation measures are sufficient. For cattle-related activities, opinions often:

- Acknowledge that grazing is compatible with sage-grouse conservation if managed under state and federal guidelines.
- Require habitat monitoring and reporting to ensure compliance with mitigation standards.

- Recommend coordination with the Mitigation Program for any new or expanded grazing in sage-grouse habitat.

Current Threats

Although the species is not listed, new threats — such as **lithium mining** in southeast Oregon — could disrupt habitat and undermine conservation gains [OPB](#). Biological opinions in such cases would assess whether mining activities meet ESA compliance standards and whether mitigation can offset impacts.

In summary: The greater sage-grouse in eastern Oregon is not federally listed under the ESA, but biological opinions still guide federal actions involving cattle grazing or other land uses. These opinions emphasize science-based habitat management, avoidance of core areas, and mitigation to protect the species' long-term viability.