



OWEB Focused Investment Partnership Priority SAGEBRUSH/SAGE-STEPPE HABITAT

Summary Statement of Priority

The OWEB Board will consider proposals for investment in **sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat** for initiatives that address habitat conservation and restoration needs to achieve ecological outcomes over time at the landscape scale¹.

OWEB's Focused Investment Priority for sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat guides voluntary actions that address primary ecological threats and limiting factors related to the quality of this habitat type. These actions also will support and/or improve ecosystem functions and processes, including those required by Greater sage-grouse, which is an indicator species for this habitat type. **These actions will be guided by the habitat and population objectives set forth in the State's sage-grouse strategy and the combined ecological and social outcomes described in the State's "Oregon Sage Grouse Action Plan" which are listed on page 3 of this document.**

Focal areas for this Priority are Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) and the important connectivity corridors between these areas (see explanation and map). PACs do not represent individual populations, but rather key areas that have been identified as crucial to ensure adequate representation, redundancy, and resilience for conservation of its associated population or populations. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW's) sage-grouse strategy identifies core areas of habitat that align with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS's) PAC habitats. The core area approach uses biological information to identify important habitats with the objective of protecting the highest density breeding areas.

Landscape-scale sage-grouse conservation is critically important in Oregon as the habitat present here, along with that in southwest Idaho and northeast Nevada, has been identified by FWS as one of two sage-grouse 'strongholds' in the U.S. These sage-grouse strongholds are distinguished primarily as those areas that contain the highest densities of birds, are the most resistant and resilient to invasive species and altered fire regimes, and are the least vulnerable to impacts associated with the onset of climate change.

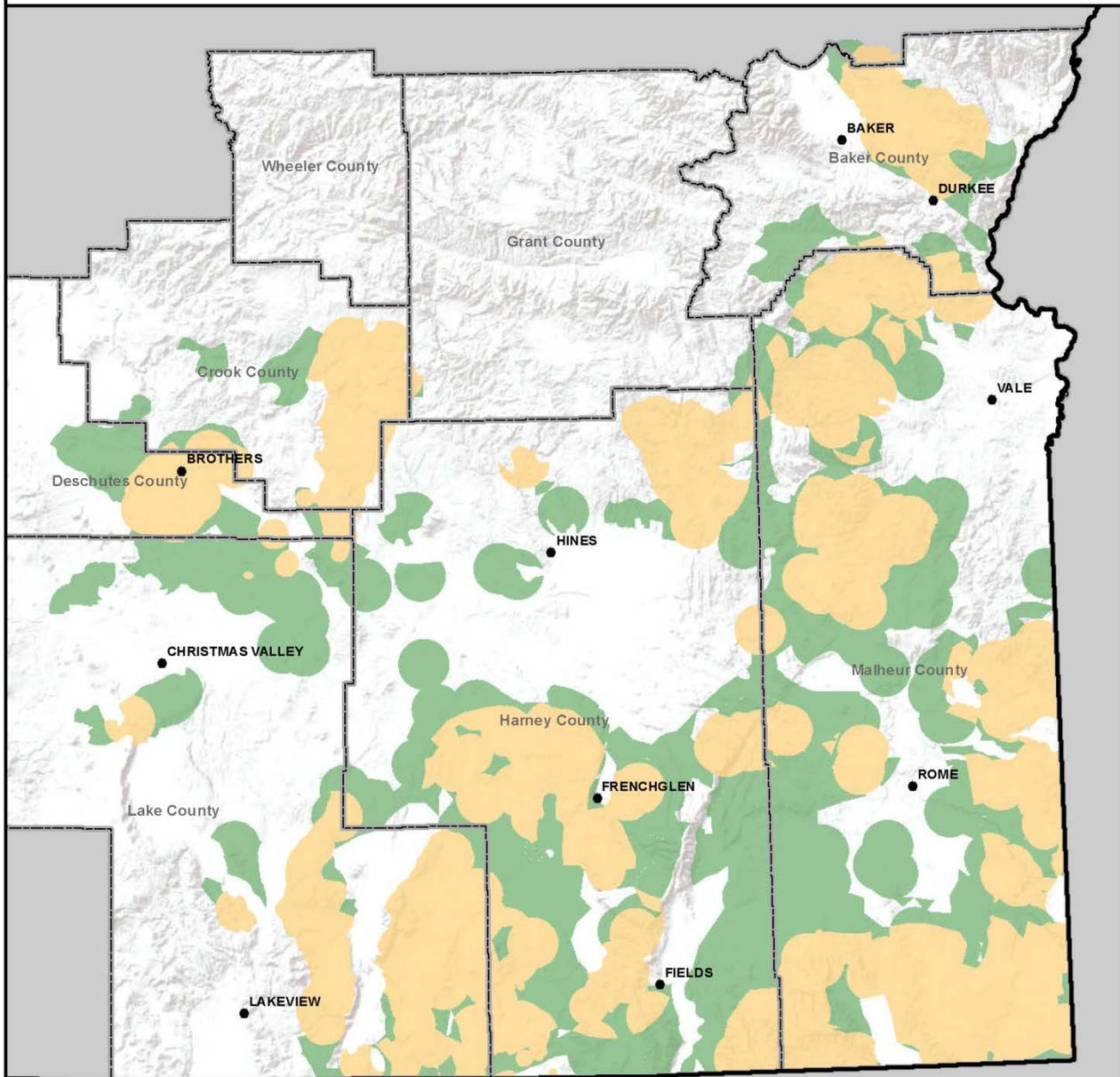
Background

Where it occurs – Sage-steppe habitat occurs throughout eastern Oregon and in parts of Central Oregon. Several ecoregions identified in the Oregon Conservation Strategy (i.e., Northern Basin and Range, Blue Mountains, Columbia Plateau and East Cascades) contain this habitat type.

These habitats are both extensive and diverse. In general, sagebrush habitats occur on dry flats and plains, rolling hills, rocky hill slopes, saddles and ridges where precipitation is low. Sagebrush-steppe is dominated by grasses and forbs (more than 25 percent of the area) with an open shrub layer. In sagebrush steppe, natural fire regimes historically maintained a patchy distribution of shrubs and predominance of grasses. Connectivity corridors of similar habitats between these areas are important to connect otherwise fragmented sage-steppe habitat.

¹ The landscape scale refers to the scale at which environmental, economic, and social factors intersect.

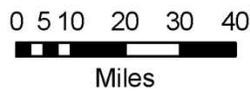
Focused Investment Priority for Sagebrush/Sage-Steppe Habitat



Core and low density areas are ODFW designations. ODFW Core areas align with the USFWS Priority Areas for Conservation (PACs) for sage-grouse in Oregon.



Sage Grouse Core and Low Density Areas



- S-G Core Areas / PACs
- S-G Low Density
- Counties
- cities

Indicator species and/or species of interest supported by this habitat – Oregon Conservation Strategy Species associated with sagebrush include Greater sage-grouse, ferruginous hawk, loggerhead shrike, sage sparrow, Brewer’s sparrow, sagebrush lizard, Washington ground squirrel, and pygmy rabbits. Other wildlife closely associated with sagebrush include: black-throated sparrow, sage thrasher, sagebrush vole, and pronghorn.

One particular species supported by sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat—the Greater sage-grouse—currently is being considered for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) and would be considered the primary indicator species for identification of priority investments for the Board through the Focused Investment Partnership program. Conservation actions to protect sagebrush/sage-steppe habitats should be designed in way that limits unintended consequences to aquatic habitats in these areas.

Why it is significant to the state – Sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat is an imperiled habitat that supports a range of species. These areas are associated with an economically and socially important ranching and agricultural industry in communities throughout a large portion of the state. The state of Oregon is developing an “Oregon Sage Grouse Action Plan” to outline the actions necessary to conserve sage-grouse in Oregon in an effort to proactively avoid ESA- listing of the species. The plan has broad support by state and federal agencies, the ranching industry and conservationists.

Key limiting factors and/or ecological threats, with a focus on ecosystem function and process –

- Altered fire regimes, which result in changes to native plant communities and increased risk of habitat loss due to intense wildfires;
- Invasive species such as juniper and non-native grasses, which increase the frequency, intensity and extent of wildfires;
- Conversion to other land uses, which results in habitat loss and connectivity; and
- Limitations of current restoration technologies and the need for successful restoration approaches, particularly in low-elevation areas that face severe challenges to native plant species regeneration following wildfire.

Reference plans –

- 1) Oregon Conservation Strategy
(http://www.dfw.state.or.us/conservationstrategy/read_the_strategy.asp)
- 2) ODFW’s Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Assessment and Strategy for Oregon
(<http://www.dfw.state.or.us/wildlife/sagegrouse/>)
- 3) Final report from the Sage-Grouse Conservation Objectives Team (COT) 2013
(<http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/sagegrouse/COT/COT-Report-with-Dear-Interested-Reader-Letter.pdf>)
- 4) Oregon Sage Grouse Action Plan (in development)