

2019 was a big year for sage grouse news, but many in 2020 are keeping a watchful eye on the bird

[Camille Erickson](#) Jan 5, 2020



Sage grouse gather around small holes to eat dirt in February 2015 near Pinedale. Some are still concerned about the prospect of the bird's numbers diminishing.

Alan Rogers, Star-Tribune

Raucous debate over how the state should respond to declining sage grouse population numbers once again stirred political action in Wyoming last year.

For one, Gov. Mark Gordon signed an **executive order** to amend the rules governing development in and around 15 million acres of sage grouse core habitat. The order upheld existing conservation strategies from a previous order but also added new data collection requirements and outlined guidelines for reclamation of disturbed habitat.

Wyoming's Sage-Grouse Implementation Team (a group of **two dozen experts** from some 20 different agencies) met **several times** to drum up extensive recommendations for the governor.

The Wyoming Legislature also had a hand in managing critical sage grouse habitat. Lawmakers advanced **a bill to session** in November that could anoint the state with the statutory authority to uphold its compensatory mitigation program.

On a national level, the U.S. District Court for the District of Idaho issued an injunction on the Trump administration's rollback of 2015 sage grouse safeguards. All the while, conservation groups have continued to sound the alarm, many dismayed over the bird's tapering growth across the West.

But 2020 could be a quieter year for sage grouse matters.

"I don't think you're going to see any radical change in what we do," said Bob Budd, executive director of the **Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust**. "It's been working. Do we have our ups and downs? Of course we do, but I don't think you're going to see anything very earth-shattering in the coming year."

Compensatory mitigation pushed

The chubby, speckled bird has captured the attention of the West for decades and many eyes have turned to Wyoming to set a protection plan for the imperiled animal. The state is home to more sage grouse than anywhere else in the world. But that ranking comes with heavy responsibilities.

Sage grouse-friendly habitat has been compromised for years. The bird often avoids even the slightest human disturbances and has been relegated to smaller and smaller parcels of habitat across the country. Recent census numbers showed the number of sage grouse has continued to decline in Wyoming and multiple neighboring states.

In response, Wyoming lawmakers have sought to balance the need to keep regulations palatable for the state's dominant energy industries and avoid population declines that could trigger the listing of greater sage grouse as endangered.

The state now oversees a compensatory mitigation program as a way to offset some of the human-caused damage to greater sage grouse. But Wyoming regulators technically do so without the statutory authority. The Greater Sage-Grouse Compensatory Mitigation Act — drafted this year in the Legislature's **Joint Minerals, Economic and Business Committee** — would change that.

“The general tenor of the bill is to house the compensatory mitigation program within the (Office of State Lands and Investments). The Legislature wanted to overtly say: this is how we're going to do it; this is who is going to handle it,” Budd said. “I think they did a pretty good job of that.”

The state encourages developers to avoid or minimize the impact of activity on land leased in core sage grouse habitat. If that's not possible, developers may be required to offset negative impacts in core areas, like loss of habitat or disruption, by participating in the compensatory mitigation program. Under the newest sage grouse executive order, the state mandates compensatory mitigation to take place if a developer's activities occur in core areas and exceed certain stipulations, explained Dan Heilig, senior conservation advocate at Wyoming Outdoor Council.

Put simply, compensatory mitigation requires developers to offset disruption to sage grouse core areas by supporting the preservation of the bird's habitat in other ways.

“We've been encouraging the state to adopt Legislation for some time,” Heilig said. “We have wanted (the state) to have statutory authority.”

If the act passes, the Board of Land Commissioners will oversee the compensatory mitigation credit system and institute rules, according to the draft legislation.

Population concerns mount

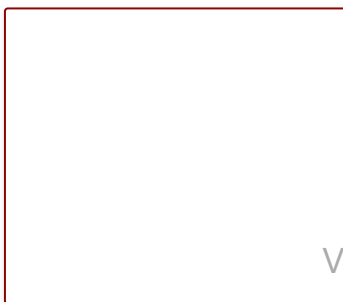
Meanwhile, sage grouse population numbers show signs of continuing a three-year slump, according to the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. The **preliminary data** came from an analysis of chick and hen wings collected by hunters in central and southwest Wyoming.

“Typically, we see ups and downs in sage grouse populations in a cycle. Biologists look at the trend or average over a longer period of time,” Leslie Schreiber, a Wyoming Game and Fish Department biologist, said in a statement. “So far, data shows there were 1.1 chicks per hen.”

For the population to stay the same, an average of 1.2 chicks per hen is important to maintain. For sage grouse population to grow, at least 1.5 chicks per hen are needed. To survive their first month in the world, the chicks need a protein-rich diet from insects to stay nourished.

Heilig, of the Wyoming Outdoor Council, will be staying on his toes in the new year, especially as the Bureau of Land Management continues to lease public land for oil and gas development in droves, some of it on critical sage grouse habitat.

“We’re really concerned about what we’re seeing with numbers, population trends,” he said. “We’re not ready to push the panic button just yet, but we are paying close attention to population trends.”



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