

June 5, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
154 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole  
Chair  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
2308 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Susan Collins  
Vice Chair  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
2413 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Chair  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
531 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson  
Chair  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
2084 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
522 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Ranking Member  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,  
Environment, and Related Agencies  
United States House of Representatives  
2354 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairs and Ranking Members,

Once again, we write on behalf of our millions of members and supporters nationwide to urge the exclusion of the so-called “sage-grouse rider” from FY 2025 appropriations legislation. The sage-grouse rider has, for the last ten years, prohibited the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) from considering whether to protect the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The consequences of the rider – most notably, the continued lack of an effective framework for greater sage-grouse conservation and

recovery as evidenced by the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) latest draft plan revisions – have been devastating for the bird and its habitat. This rider must finally be removed once and for all. We also urge the rejection of any new riders that would undermine the ESA or other protections for wildlife.

Greater sage-grouse are in serious trouble. A landscape-scale species, the bird depends on large, interconnected areas of healthy sagebrush with native grass and forb understories. But the West’s once-vast sagebrush steppe ecosystems, collectively known as the “Sagebrush Sea,” have been fragmented and degraded. According to a 2022 report by the U.S. Geological Survey,<sup>1</sup> less than half of the Sagebrush Sea remains, with just 13.6% still ecologically intact and functioning. Just as alarming, the remaining ecosystem is disappearing at a rate of 1.3 million acres annually.

This ecosystem loss has had devastating consequences for greater sage-grouse. Populations have declined by 80 percent since 1965, and they continue on a downward trend.<sup>2</sup> Other species have also experienced the consequences – the Sagebrush Sea is home to over 350 species of conservation concern, including mule deer, cutthroat trout, pygmy rabbits, burrowing owls, and hundreds of other species of migratory and resident birds.

The ESA is our most effective tool for preventing extinction. More than 95 percent of species listed under the ESA have been saved from disappearing forever and hundreds are on the path to recovery and eventual de-listing. Moreover, the ESA benefits unlisted species as well, by incentivizing conservation efforts that obviate the need for ESA protections.

Greater sage-grouse were previously poised to benefit from such incentive-driven conservation efforts. In 2010, the Service found that the species warranted ESA listing. The finding sparked the National Greater Sage-Grouse Planning Strategy, a cooperative effort by states, federal agencies, industry, and other stakeholders to reduce the likelihood of listing by adding effective, science-based conservation measures for the species to land use plans. The drive behind these plans dwindled, however, after Congress passed the first sage-grouse rider in 2014, removing both the possibility of ESA listing and the incentive to implement effective measures by land managers. The resulting land use plan amendments, finalized in 2015, failed

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<sup>1</sup> Doherty, K., et al., 2022. A sagebrush conservation design to proactively restore America’s sagebrush biome: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2022–1081, 38 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20221081>.

<sup>2</sup> Coates, P.S. et al., 2021. Range-wide Greater Sage-Grouse Hierarchical Monitoring Framework: Implications for Defining Population Boundaries, Trend Estimation, and a Targeted Annual Warning System,” U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report (2020), <https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2020/1154/ofr20201154.pdf>.

to protect all key sage-grouse habitats and failed to provide consistent, effective habitat protections across the sage-grouse's range. The BLM is currently revisiting its plan amendments, however, the draft released on March 14, 2024 once again is not as strong as it should be to assure long-term greater sage-grouse survival.

Congress has included the sage-grouse rider in appropriations legislation every year since 2014, repeatedly preventing wildlife experts at the Service from making a scientific determination on the status of the sage grouse based on population levels and trends. Given concerns regarding the current BLM draft amendment to its land use plans, it is imperative that the rider stays out of FY 2025 appropriations legislation. Time is running out for the sage-grouse and the Sagebrush Sea. This rider results in more damage every year it remains in the bill. It must finally be removed.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alta Peak Chapter, California Native Plant Society  
American Bird Conservancy  
Animal Legal Defense Fund  
Animal Welfare Institute  
Basin and Range Watch  
Birds Canada  
Blue Ridge Wildlife Center  
Born Free USA  
Bozeman Birders  
Californians for Western Wilderness  
CalWild  
Cape Henry Audubon Society  
Cascadia Wildlands  
Center for Biological Diversity  
Central Lakes College NR Program  
Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage  
Chicago Bird Alliance  
Christian Council of Delmarva  
Clean Water Action  
Colorado Wild Rabbit Foundation  
Columbus Zoo and Aquarium  
Conservation Northwest  
Cook Inlet Regional Association  
Dakubetede Environmental Education Programs

Defenders of Wildlife  
Delaware Audubon  
Delaware Audubon Society  
Earthjustice  
East Cascades Audubon Society  
Eden Wildlife Rehabilitation & Release  
Endangered Habitats League  
Endangered Species Coalition  
Environment America  
Environmental Protection Information Center- EPIC  
Evergreen Audubon  
FOUR PAWS USA  
Friends of Merrymeeting Bay  
Friends of Nevada Wilderness  
Friends of the Earth  
Friends of the Inyo  
Friends of the Sonoran Desert  
Friends of the White Salmon River  
Friends of Wisconsin Wolves and Wildlife  
G2 Marketing Group  
Gallatin Wildlife Association  
Great Lakes Wildlife Alliance  
Great Old Broads for Wilderness  
Greater Akron Audubon Society  
Howling For Wolves  
Information Network for Responsible Mining  
International Marine Mammal Project of Earth Island Institute  
International Wildlife Coexistence Network  
Iowa Audubon  
Kettle Range Conservation Group  
Kids for Saving Earth  
Lane County Audubon Society  
League of Conservation Voters  
Los Angeles Audubon Society  
Maryland Ornithological Society  
Monmouth County Audubon Society  
Monroe Science Educational Services  
Montgomery Bird Club  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
North American Climate, Conservation and Environment (NACCE)  
North Central Washington Audubon Society  
Northern Catskills Audubon Society  
Northwest Animal Rights Network (NARN)  
Northwest Arkansas Audubon Society

NYC Plover Project  
Oakland Bird Alliance  
Oceanic Preservation Society  
Oregon Natural Desert Association  
Project Eleven Hundred  
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER)  
Rachel Carson Council  
Resource Renewal Institute  
Rockbridge Bird Club  
Rocky Mountain Wild  
S.O.S.- Networking for Mendocino Coast Animals  
Sage Steppe Wild  
San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society  
Save Animals Facing Extinction  
Sierra Club  
Sierra Foothills Audubon Society  
Sierra Forest Legacy  
Soda Mountain Wilderness Council  
South San Juan Chapter of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness  
Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance  
The Urban Wildlands Group  
Tree Fredericksburg  
Tucson Audubon Society  
Umpqua Valley Audubon Society  
Umpqua Watersheds  
Washington Wild  
Western Nebraska Resources Council  
Western Watersheds Project  
WildEarth Guardians  
Wilderness Watch  
Wildlands Network  
World Animal Protection  
World Wildlife Fund  
Wyoming Wildlife Advocates  
Yaak Valley Forest Council