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# BLM Puts 'Off Limits' Sign on 233,000 Acres in Utah

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Following last month's milestone decision to keep the beleaguered greater sage grouse off the endangered species listing, federal agencies in Utah have temporarily closed more than 233,000 acres of public and national forest lands for up to two years while they determine if the lands' importance to the ground-based bird habitat is such that they should be made off limits for a longer period.

The temporary closure would not affect existing permitted activities on the lands with the shutdown only applying prospectively, the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) said. The federal agencies are taking comments on the proposal through Dec. 23.

BLM and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) announced the start of the arcane process under the 1872 Mining Law with a publication in the *Federal Register* Sept. 24, shutting out the lands to any new mining activity for the interim two-year period.

Two days earlier, the Obama administration decided to protect the greater sage grouse with public-private conservation programs at the state level and not through listing of the ground-dwelling bird under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Interior Secretary Sally Jewell called the public-private effort the largest land conservation effort ever undertaken (see *Daily GPI*, [Sept. 22](#)).

The effort is "consistent with the unprecedented effort to conserve the greater sage grouse and its habitat," a BLM Utah spokesperson said. An interactive map of the areas included in the closure is available on the BLM Utah [website](#).

During the temporary segregation period, the BLM and USFS will complete environmental analyses to determine if the lands should be formally withdrawn to protect the sage grouse habitat. "The process will invite participation by the public, tribes, environmental groups, industry, state and local government, as well as other stakeholders," the spokesperson said.

The federal agencies said neither the temporary closure or a permanent one would stop ongoing or future mineral exploration or extraction operations for operators with "valid pre-existing mining claims." Other pre-authorized activities similarly could take place.

Under the federal Land Policy and Management Act, the Interior Secretary can withdraw the lands for a maximum of 20 years, and that can be extended.

Jenna Whitlock, BLM's acting director in Utah, said the overall sage grouse conservation strategy is driven by a search for balance between habitat protection and resource development on public lands. "The BLM's land use plans were a key element in the Fish and Wildlife Service's determination that the greater sage grouse no longer needs the protections of the Endangered Species Act, and the future of the bird depends on the successful implementation of these plans," Whitlock said.

The BLM's decision to defer leasing in parts in Utah comes during an overall decline in drilling activity in the state. Utah accounted for roughly 2.1% of all oil and gas rigs working in the United States during the summer of 2012, but the state had just five operating rigs during the week ended Oct. 9, 2015, good for just 0.6% of the national total.