



National Wildlife Federation

Rocky Mountain Regional Center

303 East 17th Avenue, Suite 15 • Denver, CO 80203 • 303-786-8001

Ryan Zinke
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington DC 20240

Dear Secretary Zinke:

On behalf of the National Wildlife Federation's 6 million members and supporters, thank you for your leadership on helping big game in the West survive increasingly fractured landscapes with Secretarial Order 3362, "Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big-Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors."

We appreciate your call to use the best available science to conserve and improve habitat quality, Western big game winter range and migration corridors for pronghorn, elk and mule deer. The Department of Interior already has a useful tool in its toolbox to assist with ensuring crucial big game migration corridors and winter range are protected and enhanced – the existing sage grouse conservation plans. The iconic Western sagebrush steppe is home to hundreds of species and provides access to unparalleled hunting opportunities for sportsmen and women across the nation. Much of these sagebrush lands that are important for healthy sage-grouse populations are also important for big game herds. Having grown up and hunted in the sage steppe of Wyoming and Colorado, I have seen first-hand the importance of these lands and know well how much they mean to Western sportsmen.

Using data from state wildlife agencies and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the National Wildlife Federation commissioned maps showing that **70 percent of sage-grouse habitat in six Western states is classified as important or crucial for big game – roughly 86 million acres.**

Big game and greater sage-grouse share huge swaths of the landscape in [Wyoming](#), [Montana](#), [Colorado](#), [Idaho](#), [Utah](#) and [Nevada](#). This shared habitat provides a unique opportunity to carefully consider the sage-grouse conservation plans and how they can also benefit iconic Western big game species.



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The sage-grouse conservation plans contain policy recommendations and tools rooted in the best available science to ensure priority sage-grouse habitat is carefully considered when planning for future oil and gas development and other activities on public lands.

These include:

- Prioritizing drilling and mining outside of important habitat.
- No Surface Occupancy stipulations for energy exploration and development. The industry's technology and practices have made it increasingly easier to access oil and gas without disturbing sensitive surface areas.
- Disturbance caps.

As your agency develops plans to achieve the goal of improving and enhancing migration corridors and big game winter range as directed by Secretarial Order 3362, we urge you to carefully consider existing scientific information, data and strategies that resulted from developing the sage-grouse plans. Failure to do so will likely undermine any effort to improve big game corridors and winter range for the simple fact that sage-grouse and big game share significant habitat throughout the West. We are willing to help assess how sage-grouse conservation can complement efforts to conserve big game habitat, help expand hunting opportunities and ensure sustainable big game populations across the region.

Wildlife biologists as well as sportsmen and women realize that the elk or mule deer we see in the summer in high-elevation forests are usually the same ones moving through sagebrush lands in the winter. Those same lands are essential to the survival of sage-grouse.

We at the National Wildlife Federation share your goals in this effort and stand ready to share our research and findings to help ensure success for Secretarial Order 3362.

Thank you for taking on the issue of big game migration corridors and winter range. We look forward to working with you and your agencies on this important matter.

Sincerely,

Aaron Kindle
Sr. Manager, Western Sporting Campaigns