

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 20, 2017

The Honorable Tony Tooke
Chief, U.S. Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Chief Tooke:

We write to request details regarding the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) role in the Administration's review of efforts to manage and protect the greater sage-grouse, which was led by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and prompted by Secretary Zinke's Secretarial Order 3353, issued on June 7, 2017. Furthermore, we seek additional details regarding a November 21, 2017 Federal Register (FR) notice outlining USFS' intention to seek comment on potential changes to the 2015 forest plan amendments (2015 plans) designed to safeguard the greater sage-grouse and its habitat. Finally, we write to ask for an extension on the USFS' comment period outlined in the November 21, 2017 FR notice.

The greater sage-grouse population that was once estimated to be as large as 16 million has today unfortunately been reduced to between 200,000 and 500,000 birds. To address this precipitous decline, an unprecedented coalition of ranchers, farmers, sportsmen, conservationists, community members, and federal and state government agencies came together to forge a consensus vision to help protect the bird. Over the course of a decade, this broad group crafted and refined land-use plans to protect the species, while also protecting rural economies. The solutions brought forward by these diverse interests are thoughtful, hard-won, and deserve appropriate deference in any review or potential revision of the 2015 plans. Because of the profound economic and cultural implications of upending this range-wide solution – including a potential Endangered Species Act listing of the sage grouse that could result from USFS and BLM changes to the 2015 plans – we ask that you respond to the following questions and requests for information by January 12, 2018:

1. What role did USFS play in the sage-grouse review and the creation of the final report as required under Secretarial Order 3353, "Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation and Cooperation with Western States," issued on June 7, 2017?
2. Describe in detail how USFS coordinated with DOI on the final report, dated August 4, 2017, and contributed to the report's recommendations.
3. For which of the "recommendations for revisions to procedures, policies, and management plans for sage grouse conservation" outlined in the report was USFS responsible?
4. Did USFS officials travel to any of the affected 11 western states to hear from state and local stakeholders as part of the review prompted by Secretarial Order 3353? If so, please provide the name(s) of the USFS official(s) present, all other attendees recorded as

present, and the date, time, and location of any such meetings that USFS convened or participated in.

5. How many USFS acres are being reviewed under the November 21, 2017 FR notice? Please provide us with a map of all the acres under review.
6. The November 21, 2017 USFS FR notice states that “to address issues identified by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the states, and various interested parties, the Forest Service is considering the possibility of amending some, all, or none of the Forest Service land management plans that were amended in 2015...” Please list the states and various interested parties referred to here and the specific “issues identified.”
7. Should USFS recommend changes to the 2015 plans, does the agency plan to propose any forest plan amendments separately from or jointly with any changes proposed by BLM following the recent comment period on BLM’s sage grouse plan amendments?
8. We hope that USFS will engage the Bipartisan Sage Grouse Federal-State Recovery Task Force before proposing any changes to the 2015 plans. Describe in detail USFS’ discussions thus far with that Task Force. If discussions have not yet occurred, please outline your plans for dialog with the task force in the future.
9. On November 11, 2017, the Associated Press reported that Governors Matt Mead of Wyoming, John Hickenlooper of Colorado, and Steve Bullock of Montana were concerned that changing the current plans could undercut work to prevent a greater sage grouse listing as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. Which governors have you spoken with thus far regarding USFS’ potential actions to revise the 2015 plans?
10. BLM’s National Technical Team, the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Conservation Objectives Team, the U.S. Geological Survey’s Summary Report, and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies all agreed on the key elements of the finalized 2015 plans. With such strong support for the structure of the 2015 plans from the relevant federal science community, please explain why major changes to the 2015 plans are being contemplated.

The November 21, 2017 FR notice regarding potential land-use plan amendments involves 15 national grasslands and forests spread across 11 western states. Given the potentially vast acreage involved, complexity of these plans, and wide variety of interested stakeholders, we request that you extend the deadline for comments by at least 45 additional days. Thank you for your consideration and your willingness to work with us and address our questions.

Sincerely,





Mary F. Burt

Ron Wyden

Robert Gray Minto

Tom Udall

Jeffrey A. Murdock

Chris Van Hollen

Patty Murray

Mark Warner

Jon Tester

Dianne Feinstein

Jack Reed

CC: Brian Steed, Acting Director, Bureau of Land Management