

Briefing Note – Removal of Greater Sage-Grouse Protections in Alberta

Date: October 15, 2026

The Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*) occupies silver sagebrush grassland in southeastern Alberta. The species is listed as Endangered under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) and under the *Alberta Wildlife Act* because their population is extremely small and has declined dramatically. In Alberta, the population is less than 100 individuals.

Greater Sage-Grouse are the largest North American grouse species and are dependent on sagebrush for food and shelter. They generally return to the same sites for mating, nesting and brood rearing each year. Their distinctive habitat requirements and sensitivity to anthropogenic disturbance make them vulnerable to habitat degradation and noise. Current distribution is less than 10% of their historical range due to habitat loss and fragmentation.

Existing Protections

A recovery strategy¹ for the species was completed in 2008 by the federal government. In 2014, an Emergency Order² (under Section 80 of SARA) came into effect to address imminent threats to the survival and recovery (i.e. to prevent extinction) of Greater Sage-Grouse in Canada. This Emergency Order is still in effect today but only covers a portion of the year-round Critical Habitat of the species (as identified in the updated 2014 recovery strategy³).

Additional habitat protections were enacted in 2021 under Alberta's *Public Lands Act* to complement the federal Emergency Order and further prevent the destruction of Greater Sage-Grouse habitats. These include land-use conditions that restrict harmful activity in areas known as the Core and Recovery Areas, which encompass the entirety of year-round and lek Critical Habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse in Alberta⁴ (Figure 1). These are described as serving “to prevent species extirpation by stipulating the restriction of habitat loss and degradation, noise limits, height limits on structures, and timing”.

Removal of Protections

In fall 2026 we learned that provincial habitat protections have been removed, leaving large parts of Greater Sage-Grouse habitat without protection. Of the ~3,800 km² with habitat protections, ~2,800 km² (74%) is likely impacted, leaving only the area subject to the federal Emergency Order with

¹ Lungle, K. and S. Pruss. 2008. Recovery Strategy for the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*) in Canada. In Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series. Parks Canada Agency. Ottawa. vii + 43 pp.

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/orders/greater-sage-grouse-emergency-protection.html>

³ Environment Canada. 2014. Amended Recovery Strategy for the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. vi + 53 pp.

⁴ Government of Alberta. 2020. Science support document: Greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*). <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/science-support-document-greater-sage-grouse>



protection in place. These changes appear to have been made without any public consultation or announcement.

These protections for Greater Sage-Grouse were implemented using land use conditions described in Alberta's "Master Schedule of Standards and Conditions"⁵ (conditions 1630-1644 in the February 2024 version, see Table 1). The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) applies these conditions when issuing dispositions for energy-related activities. In July 2026 the AER issued its latest update to the Public Lands Standards and Conditions⁶, where conditions 1630 and 1632-AS to 1640 are described as "Deleted" and "Removed supporting layer". While this document states "*It is not an official Master Schedule of Standards and Conditions (MSSC) document*", it reflects the contents of the MSSC. We have requested a copy of the latest MSSC, and the AER confirmed that there is an updated version but informed us it was not yet available online. It's therefore not yet possible to confirm the contents of the latest version.

In addition, recent AER approvals⁷ in the Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Area for the "construction of a small plant site" by a helium extraction company (Thor Resources), have proceeded without Greater Sage-Grouse conditions included. While other wildlife-related conditions have been applied to the approval, the Greater Sage-Grouse conditions are notably absent. The timing of this approval (July 17, 2026) is consistent with the timing of AER's update.

Impacts

There is significant interest in helium development in the range of Greater Sage-Grouse in Alberta. This development would increase the level of many of the major categories of threat identified in the 2014 Recovery Strategy, including habitat loss or degradation, and noise disturbance. Helium developments would require new well sites, new processing facilities, new vertical structures, and new roads – infrastructure that was previously limited by the provincial habitat protections. The recent approvals suggest that the removal of protections has already led to new development permits.

The extremely small population size of Greater Sage-Grouse means that this reduced protection for their habitat puts them at immediate risk of extirpation. The population has hung by a thread for two decades, not due to intrinsic resilience, but rather due to a series of concerted conservation interventions.

Over the past two decades these conservation interventions have included five translocations from Montana populations, a captive breeding and release program, well-site reclamation at hundreds of well sites, predator control, and the establishment of many conservation easements on private land.

⁵ <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/master-schedule-of-standards-and-conditions>

⁶ <https://static.aer.ca/prd/documents/onestop/public-land-standards-and-conditions-change-summary.pdf>

⁷ <https://www1.aer.ca/PubDocs/#/application-query/33700579>



Reclamation work has been extensive and is expected to increase the species survival and reproductive success with time. In 2025, Joel Nicholson, a Senior Wildlife Biologist with Environment and Protected Areas (EPA) said *“We’re seeing more reclamation on the landscape than I’ve ever dreamt of in my career. The hope is to keep our population on the landscape long enough for it to respond to this reclamation work”*⁸. The removal of habitat protections now puts all these efforts at risk of failure – without habitat protection, the risk of losing the species in Canada is greatly increased.

Table 1. Conditions relating to Greater Sage-Grouse, as described in the 2024 version of the Master Schedule of Standards and Conditions, that have been removed.

Condition	Condition Description	Area of Application
1630	The Disposition Holder must not conduct any activities within 3200 metres of a known or identified Greater Sage-Grouse Lek*.	Greater Sage-Grouse Leks and Buffer
1632-AS	The Disposition Holder must not kill or move sagebrush plants, native grasses or native forbs.	Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area
1633	Between Dec 1-Sept 14, the Disposition Holder must ensure that noise resulting from the activity does not exceed 45 decibels when the noise level is measured 10 metres from the source of the noise.	Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area
1634	Between March 16 - August 15, the Disposition Holder must ensure that noise resulting from the activity does not exceed 45 decibels when the noise level is measured 10 metres from the source of the noise.	Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Area
1635	The Disposition Holder must ensure that any above ground structures resulting from the activity does not exceed 1.2 m in height.	Greater Sage-Grouse Core and Recovery Areas
1636	The Disposition Holder must not construct new roads or trails or improve existing roads or trails.	Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area
1637-AS	The Disposition Holder must not construct new roads or trails or improve existing roads or trails.	Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Area
1638	Between Dec 1-Sept 14, the Disposition Holder must not conduct any activities, including operational work or maintenance*.	Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area
1639	Between March 16 - August 15, the Disposition Holder must not conduct any activities, including operational work or maintenance*.	Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Area
1640	The Disposition Holder must not conduct any activities* (applies to Purpose: Surface Materials only).	Greater Sage-Grouse Core and Recovery Areas

⁸ <https://www.alberta.ca/article-a-new-dawn-for-albertas-endangered-greater-sage-grouse>

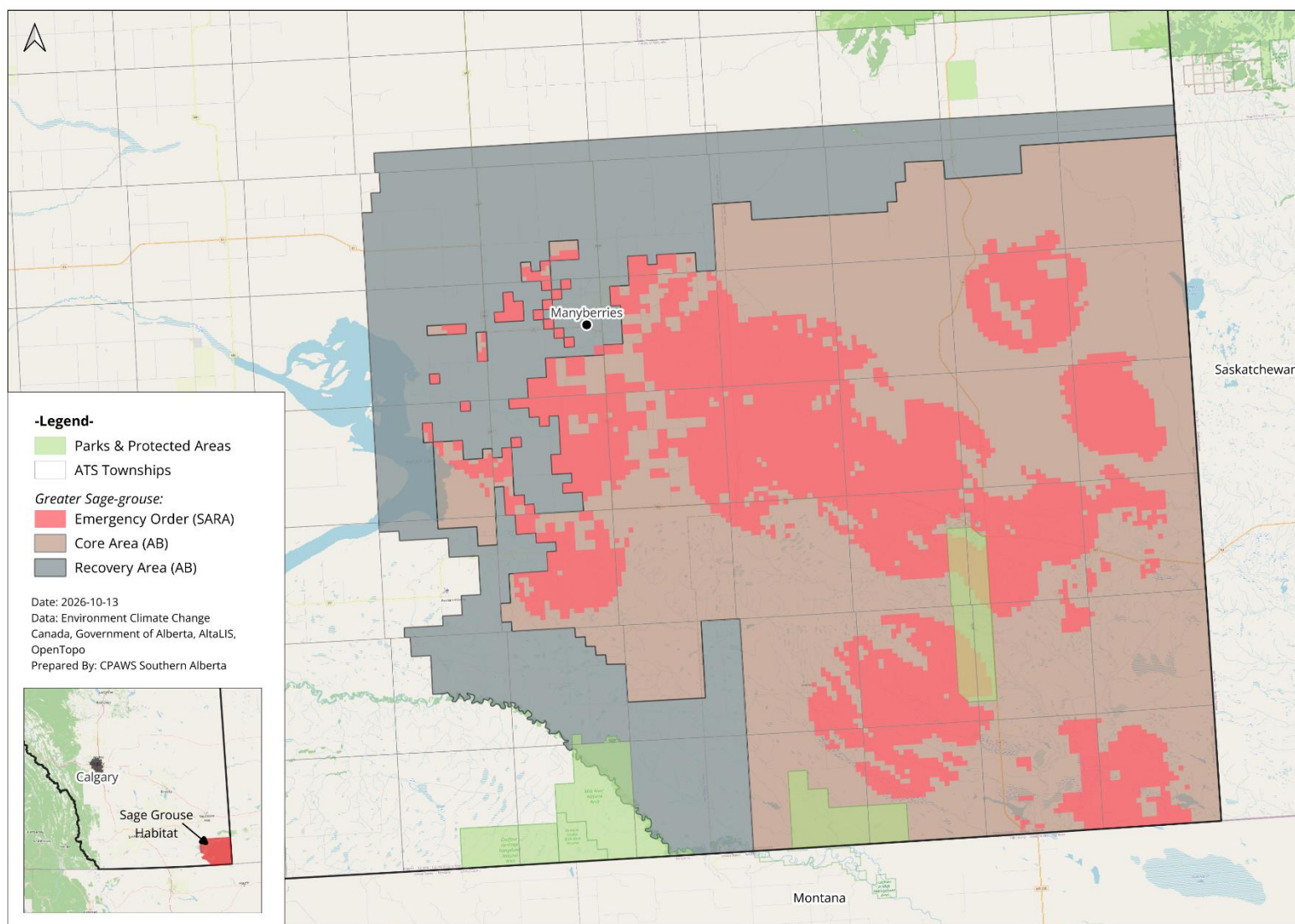


Figure 1. Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area (brown), Recovery Area (grey), and area under a *Species at Risk Act* Section 80 Emergency Order (red). Provincial habitat protections have been removed in the Core and Recovery Areas.