

OUTREACH PLAN

For the Proposal to List the Gunnison Sage-Grouse

ISSUE:

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list the Gunnison Sage-Grouse as endangered throughout its current range in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.

BASIC FACTS:

Range: Historically, Gunnison sage-grouse were found in the southwestern portion of Colorado, southeastern Utah, northeastern Arizona, and northwestern New Mexico. They are currently found in seven localized populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.

The range of the Gunnison sage-grouse has been reduced to approximately 8 percent of its historic distribution with only 1,850 square miles remaining occupied.

The separate populations are: the Cerro Summit/Cimarron/Sims Mesa population south and southeast of Montrose; the Crawford Area population south of Crawford and Hotchkiss; the Dove Creek population north and west of Dove Cree; the Gunnison Basin population around the town of Gunnison; the Pinon Mesa population south of Grand Junction; the Poncha Pass population north of Villa Grove; and the San Miguel Basin population near Norwood. The San Juan County, Utah population occurs east of Monticello. Most populations are small with the Gunnison Basin, Colorado population being the only relatively large Gunnison sage-grouse population.

Population status: The Gunnison Basin in Colorado contains the largest population with 971 males counted on leks in spring 2005 giving an estimated population size of 4,763, the highest number in over 20 years. The other six populations only had 5 to 68 males counted on leks in 2005, resulting in population estimates of 25 to 334. The 2005 rangewide estimate is 5,720. However the four largest populations show a significant negative trend over the past 10 to 50 years.

Although there was improvement in the population status in 2005, the long-term trends are still declining and threats to the species are continuing.

Habitat: Gunnison sage-grouse requires a variety of habitats such as large expanses of sagebrush with a diversity of grasses and forbs and healthy riparian ecosystems. It requires sagebrush for cover and fall and winter food.

Listing Priority: The Gunnison sage-grouse was put on the candidate list in January 2000 shortly before the Service received a petition for listing. It has a candidate listing priority of 2, the highest rank possible for the species.

Litigation: In March of 2004 several environmental organizations filed a complaint suing for

emergency listing of the species. That case is still pending.

Conservation Activities: There were six local conservation plans finalized between 1998 and 2000. The Cerro Summit-Cimarron-Sims Mesa population is the one population that does not have a local conservation plan. The Rangewide Conservation Plan for the Gunnison sage-grouse was completed in June 2005. State and Federal agencies have been involved in implementation of conservation measures primarily under the local conservation plans. There have been a number of habitat treatments and other land management actions implemented on Federal and non-Federal lands and several conservation easements and land purchases to benefit Gunnison sage-grouse. These conservation measures have primarily been funded through Federal and State funding mechanisms.

An umbrella Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances is being entered into with the Colorado Division of Wildlife.

Communication Goals:

Ensure all parties interested in or affected by this action are informed of the Service's proposal to list the Gunnison sage-grouse as endangered.

Provide information regarding the Colorado CCAA.

The Service has been in communication with federal and state partners and local communities since the mid-1990s when local conservation plans were first being developed. Field and regional staff recently met with the Gunnison County Commissioners to discuss their concerns regarding the potential listing as well the CCAA and other conservation efforts. Members of Congress have been appropriately updated concerning the status of the Gunnison sage-grouse. The region will continue these discussions during the proposal process.

Messages/Talking Points:

The Service believes sufficient information exists regarding the long-term decline in populations and persistence of threats that listing may be warranted.

Although there was improvement in the population status in 2005, the long-term trends are still declining and threats to the species are continuing.

The Service appreciates the states and local communities taking the lead in the development of local conservation plans and a rangewide conservation plan for the benefit of the Gunnison sage-grouse.

The conservation efforts that are underway for the Gunnison sage-grouse will allow for multiple uses of the land while still promoting recovery of this candidate species.

There has been a steady long-term decline in Gunnison sage-grouse since the 1970s which is attributed to a variety of sources.

Reduction of sagebrush habitat by direct habitat loss, conversion, or fragmentation is one of the significant factors identified as contributing to the Gunnison's decline.

The Gunnison sage-grouse uses a variety of habitats throughout the year but the primary component necessary is sagebrush and the most important species of sagebrush for this grouse is known as big sagebrush. It is used for hiding and thermal cover as well as a major source of food in the winter.

The size and range of Gunnison sage-grouse habitat have been reduced by direct habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation from building development; road and utility corridors; fences; energy development; conversion of native habitat to hay or other crop fields; alteration or destruction of wetland and riparian areas; drought; inappropriate livestock management; creation of large reservoirs; continuous noise that impairs acoustical quality at leks; herbicides and pesticides; and disturbance by off-road vehicles; encroachment by pinyon-juniper into sagebrush country; and fire suppression, which results in decadent stands of sagebrush.

Interested Parties:

local landowners,
livestock organizations
local county governments
Utah Division of Wildlife Resource
Colorado Division of Wildlife
Bureau of Land Management,
U.S. Forest Service,
Natural Resource Conservation Service,
National Park Service.

Congressional representatives
Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe
Environmental Organizations
Plaintiffs

Potential Controversy:

Private landowners, livestock and agricultural producers, and developers are concerned about land use restrictions should the Gunnison sage-grouse become a listed species.

Key date: [publication date]

Materials Needed: News release, Q&As, outreach plan, range map, interested party letter

Strategy: A press release and Q&As will be distributed to local media and congressional representatives. Outreach materials will be posted to the Region 6 web site. In addition, telephone calls and letters will notify interested parties. Two public meetings in Colorado have been scheduled.

