

DRAFT NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228**

Draft – Not for Release

Contacts: Al Pfister 970-243-2778
Diane Katzenberger 303-236-4578

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Protection for the Gunnison Sage-Grouse

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed today to list the Gunnison sage-grouse as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Historically, the Gunnison sage-grouse was found in the southwestern portion of Colorado, southeastern Utah, northeastern Arizona, and northwestern New Mexico. Currently it is found in seven localized populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah representing 8 percent of its historical range.

An endangered designation means the species is in danger of extinction within all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened designation means a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

To ensure that the final determination regarding this proposal is as accurate and effective as possible, the Service is requesting comments or suggestions on this proposed listing from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, private landowners, industry and all other interested parties.

The Service is particularly seeking comments concerning threats to the Gunnison sage-grouse; the location of any additional populations; information concerning the range, distribution, and population size of Gunnison sage-grouse; and current or planned activities, particularly on private lands, that may affect the species.

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.

There has been a steady long-term decline in Gunnison sage-grouse since the 1970s which is attributed to a variety of sources. In addition to loss of habitat, encroachment by pinyon-juniper into sagebrush country; fire suppression, which results in decadent stands of sagebrush; drought; disturbance by off-road vehicles; continuous noise that impairs acoustical quality at leks (courting areas); herbicides and pesticides; pollution; and competition for habitat from other species have caused declines in the Gunnison sage-grouse population.

Local landowners, environmental groups, livestock organizations, counties, Utah Division of Wildlife Resource, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been working together under seven locally developed plans to provide for the conservation of the Gunnison sage-grouse in Utah and Colorado.

“We are grateful to our partners for leading the way in the development of local conservation plans and a rangewide conservation plan for the benefit of the Gunnison sage-grouse,” said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service’s Director of the Mountain-Prairie Region. “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 native species,” Morgenweck added.

On January 18, 2000 the Service determined that the Gunnison sage-grouse warranted listing as a threatened or endangered species, but listing was precluded by the need to work on other listing actions of higher priority. In March of 2004 several environmental organizations filed a complaint suing for emergency listing of the species. That case is still pending.

The Gunnison sage-grouse is designated as a sensitive species in both Colorado and Utah.

The Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) are about one-third smaller than the greater sage-grouse, and males have more distinct, white tail feathers and filoplume. Female Gunnison and greater sage-grouse have nearly the same plumage, but the female Gunnison is again about one-third smaller than the greater sage-grouse. Male Gunnison sage-grouse conduct an elaborate display when trying to attract females to breeding grounds, or leks in the spring. They will strut, flap their wings against their white pouches and utter a distinct series of sounds by vocalizing and popping two air sacs within their pouches. Nesting begins in mid-April and continues into July.

Public hearings regarding this proposal have been scheduled for September 21, 2005 at the Norwood Community Center in Norwood, Colorado and for September 22, 2005 at the Gunnison County Fairgrounds Community Center in Gunnison, Colorado. Both meetings will begin at 5:00 pm

Written comments will be accepted until _____ and should be sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Colorado Ecological Services Office, 764 Horizon Drive, Building B, Grand Junction, Colorado 81506-3946. Comments may also be sent by electronic mail to fw6_gusg@fws.gov.

A copy of the proposed listing and other information about the Gunnison sage-grouse is available on the Internet at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/gunnisonsagegrouse>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant

fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

- FWS -