

DATE: July 14, 2005

BRIEFING FOR REGIONAL DIRECTOR

PREPARED BY: Al Pfister, Grand Junction, Colorado, Ecological Services

FROM: Mary Henry, ARD-Ecological Services, R6

SUBJECT: July 14 meeting with Gunnison County Commissioners

PURPOSE OF BRIEFING DOCUMENT: Information on Gunnison sage-grouse issues that may arise with Gunnison County Commissioners

BACKGROUND:

- 2000: Gunnison sage-grouse designated a candidate
- Livestock grazing and housing development and infrastructure are the primary threats
- 2003: Listing Priority Number lowered from 5 to 2
- Gunnison sage-grouse is one of R6's highest priorities for listing; we received funding to list in FY05.
- May 2005: Rangewide Conservation Plan signed by Service, CDOW, NRCS, BLM, FS, NPS and Utah DWR. The rangewide plan was made available for public comment prior to finalization.
- May 2005: Application for Colorado Statewide Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances submitted by CDOW
- June 2005: DC District Court judge dismissed the Gunnison sage-grouse case with the understanding that we would settle with plaintiffs by July 29.
- July 6-September 6, 2005: 60-day public comment on CCAA
- September 2005: FWS to issue the statewide permit
- September 2005: Proposed rule scheduled for publication
- September 2006: Final listing decision, possibly accompanied by final critical habitat designation

WHAT IS BEING DONE IN GUNNISON BASIN:

- The Gunnison Basin population is the largest of the 7 populations. The population has declined significantly since monitoring began 50 years ago. However, the spring 2005 count of males on leks was almost double the 2004 count.
- 1995: Gunnison Sage-grouse Working Group for the Gunnison Basin population formed
- 1997: They completed and obtained stakeholder signatures on the Gunnison Basin Conservation Plan.
- The 1997 Plan outlines many activities for the County and others to undertake. Few have been implemented to date by the County.
- 1998: Stakeholders signed a 15-year MOA committing to implement the plan.
- The Service has updated the Gunnison Basin workgroup periodically over the last several years of changes in the listing status of Gunnison sage-grouse.
- The issue of the local plan or Rangewide Plan taking precedence has been raised frequently with the Basin, primarily related to grazing. The CDOW's and Service's response is Appendix H of the RCP will be used as the basis for evaluating habitat conditions.
- May 2005: Meeting between Service and Gunnison County Commission. Issues included: 1) impact of listing on livestock grazing; 2) constraints on BLM through section 7 consultations; and 3) concern that listing will overtake the local planning process and implementation of the Gunnison Basin Conservation Plan.
- We recommended the Commissioners begin working on a county-wide plan to address the issue of urban and exurban development and their impacts on sage-grouse conservation. Such planning will enhance our chances of precluding listing. If listing is not precluded, planning for development will position the County to move quickly on developing a Habitat Conservation Plan. We informed them of the availability of section 6 grants for HCP planning.
- The Commission adopted a position that they would act on the recommendation. They are hiring a County sage-grouse coordinator to do the work.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

- We welcome new information at any time.
- The Service will consider all ongoing conservation activities under our PECE policy prior to making the final listing decision.
- Gunnison County has an opportunity to implement their existing conservation plan and participate in the State's CCAA.
- Grants for grouse conservation are available through CDOW (Colorado Species Conservation Partnership, State Wildlife Grants), NRCS (CRP, EQIP, WHIP) and the Service (Landowner Incentive Program, Private Stewardship, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Intermountain West Joint Venture).
- If the grouse is listed, grants are available for developing and implementing Habitat Conservation Plans.
- BLM, FS and the Service have signed a Colorado Strategy for implementing the National Section 7 Streamlining MoA.

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