

## NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

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### **Conservation, Faith Organizations Petition to List Unique Population of Greater Sage-Grouse**

**By Mark Salvo**

Conservationists, the federal government and resource users are engaged in a pitched battle over the future of greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitats in the West. In 2003, twenty-one conservation, animal welfare and sporting organizations, including the Sierra Club, submitted a petition to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to list all populations of greater sage-grouse as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act (see [www.sagebrushsea.org/sp\\_greater\\_grouse.htm](http://www.sagebrushsea.org/sp_greater_grouse.htm)). Under pressure from industry and the Bush Administration, FWS rejected the petition last January.

Now comes another opportunity to protect a unique population of sage grouse that occurs in the rugged Mono Basin region on the California/Nevada border. Recent scientific evidence has demonstrated that Mono Basin sage grouse are genetically distinct from other greater sage-grouse. Geneticists have discovered that Mono Basin sage grouse have “a unique history of isolation distinct from all other populations” and that they are “at least as divergent from other populations of the greater sage-grouse as *Gunnison sage-grouse* are from the greater sage-grouse.” (The Gunnison sage-grouse was designated as a separate species in 2000). The scientists concluded that the Mono Basin area population does “certainly qualify as a distinct population segment from a genetic standpoint and may even warrant consideration as a new subspecies.”

Despite their distinct genetic traits, Mono Basin sage grouse appear and behave as other greater sage-grouse, and have the same habitat requirements as other sage grouse. Unfortunately, like other sage grouse populations, Mono Basin sage grouse have declined precipitously since the early 1900s. A species that was once described as abundant now only exists in small, isolated populations in the region.

Sage grouse habitat in the Mono Basin area has been fragmented, degraded and eliminated by livestock grazing; off-road vehicle use; residential development; juniper encroachment; invasive species; wildfire; mining; the Mammoth Lakes airport expansion and associated development; and the placement and construction of roads, fences and transmission lines. Unfortunately, existing management plans will fail to prevent further declines in Mono Basin sage grouse populations. According to FWS, only one of thirty existing conservation measures meets the agency’s criteria for effective conservation actions for sensitive species. More effective conservation is needed.

Their genetic distinctiveness, combined with declining population trends and lack of regulatory protection, qualify Mono Basin sage grouse for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a “distinct population segment.” In October 2005, the Stanford Law School Environmental Law Clinic submitted a petition to FWS on behalf of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Christians Caring for Creation, Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project to list Mono Basin sage grouse as threatened or endangered under the ESA. FWS has 90 days to respond to the petition.

Mono Basin sage grouse represent the southwestern most population of greater sage-grouse in the western United States. Scientists emphasize the importance of such peripheral and genetically distinct subpopulations to the survival of a species as a whole. It is in peripheral and genetically unique populations that the evolutionary potential of a species is greatest. Peripheral populations, such as the Mono Basin area sage grouse, are usually located at the ecological limits of a species’ range, thus exposing the species to unique environmental circumstances that may later become prevalent in central populations, such as the effects of global warming. Such testing of the peripheral populations can act to stabilize the entire species in the face of environmental change.

The remaining small, isolated populations of Mono Basin sage grouse are threatened to extinction. As poor land management continues to fragment an already tattered landscape, time is running out for the Mono Basin sage grouse. Especially given its importance to the larger sage grouse population, immediate action is needed to ensure that this genetically unique population of sage grouse is preserved.

Additional information about Mono Basin sage grouse is available at [www.sagebrushsea.org/sp\\_mono\\_grouse.htm](http://www.sagebrushsea.org/sp_mono_grouse.htm).

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