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**Landowners signing on to protect sage grouse habitat
*Conservation agreement moving along***

By Erica Hogan

Bruce McCloskey and Jay Menum of the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) stopped in to the Gunnison County Commissioners work session on October 11 to discuss the future of the Gunnison sage grouse.

“I assume you might want to chat about the Gunnison sage grouse,” McCloskey said to commissioners Paula Swenson and Jim Starr. “We have to do whatever we can to make sure this bird does not get on the Endangered Species List.”

Discovered by researchers only a decade ago, the Gunnison sage grouse has been the focus of many ongoing discussions throughout the county in recent months. The grouse, a rare bird species whose primary home is the Ohio Creek Valley between Gunnison and Crested Butte, is inching closer to landing on the federal Endangered Species List.

The final decision on listing the bird as an endangered species is made by the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But as a representative of the DOW, McCloskey was steadfast in his organization’s support of not placing the Gunnison sage grouse on the list at the work session. McCloskey and other opponents of listing the bird feel that local, rather than federal, management would better protect the bird.

McCloskey was present to update the commissioners on the progress of the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), a document that offers landowners the opportunity to negotiate protection measures with the local DOW and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before the Gunnison sage grouse is listed.

“It boils down to what private ranchers and landowners are able to do, and the CCAA is the way to go,” McCloskey said, though he cautioned that the agreement has no guarantees, but is moving in the right direction. “We’re absolutely committed to this. It’s the best tool we have. I just want the county to know that we will follow through with this.”

Landowners in the bird’s habitat in Gunnison County received notification of their option to participate in the CCAA protection measure earlier this summer. Now, the county and some landowners have begun to look at the agreement as a tool to demonstrate strong local protection, and to persuade federal wildlife officials not to list the species as endangered.

“We’re very close to our goal,” Menum said. “Right now, we have between 60 and 70 landowners in Gunnison County that have expressed interest in joining the CCAA, and we have written confirmation for 42,000 acres. We’re almost to our goal of 55,000 acres. We’re quite pleased at that.”

State Representative Kathleen Curry even dropped in for a portion of the October 11 discussion, to voice her concerns about coming up with legal funds for the CCAA.

“We have to be aware that every decision made will be litigated,” Curry said. “We need to be prepared to come up with a budget to fight their argument.”

Money for funding the CCAA is expected to come from funds generated by the state’s lottery and by a new wildlife stamp.

“This is the right way to do conservation,” McCloskey said. “The even greater thing is that a lot of critters will benefit.”

Starr emphasized the need for consistent and effective monitoring of the species regardless of whether the CCAA or Endangered Species Act will be the guiding protection measure used in Gunnison County.

“To be honest with you, that needs a little work,” McCloskey said. “I’m expecting that the local BLM is going to be eager to work with us.”

Recent statistics from the DOW indicate a near doubling in counts of the bird’s population. Estimated counts of the bird by wildlife biologists rose from 2,300 in 2004 to 4,000 in 2005, after a month-long counting period that ended in May, when calculations of the counts, based on males, began.

Listing under the Endangered Species Act gives local law enforcement the authority to control actions that are not in keeping with protecting the bird’s life or habitat. Some activities that have been identified as contributors to the sage grouse’s decline include oil and gas extraction, development, grazing and recreation.

Those opposing the idea of listing the bird feel the legislation is heavy-handed and could be better managed at a local level. Gunnison County commissioners have maintained their resolute stand to fight for local control of the species’ protection, and ultimately to evade what appears to be a near-imminent listing. If listed, the Gunnison sage grouse would likely appear on the federal Endangered Species List in September 2006.

County commissioners are now tasked with finding a sage grouse conservation coordinator to work as a liaison between state, federal and local agencies in managing aspects of preserving the species. The board met last week to interview candidates for the position.