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**Feds: Gunnison grouse not 'threatened'**  
***Agency says birds' current populations don't warrant listing***

**By Gary Gerhardt**

The Gunnison sage grouse will be dropped as a candidate for inclusion as a "threatened species" under the Endangered Species Act.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Wednesday that an analysis of the number of males on mating grounds in the seven areas where the grouse are found indicate their numbers have been maintained during the past 50 years and, consequently, there is no need for protection under the federal act.

"We contracted with Edward Gorton of the University of Idaho who studied the current and historic numbers, as well as analyzed current and future threats based on the past 10 years, and he didn't find a decline in the numbers," said Pat Mehlhop, candidate conservation coordinator for the federal wildlife agency.

She said the species, which is separate from the greater sage grouse found in northern Colorado and Wyoming, did not warrant listing.

The largest concentration of the birds is found in the Gunnison River Valley, where they number an estimated 3,000 to 4,500, she said.

"Our literature indicates it was about the same number 50 years ago," Mehlhop said.

The other populations are found to the west and south of Gunnison from southwestern Colorado into Utah.

Rob Edward, director of carnivore restoration for Sinapu, a Boulder-based environmental group, was incensed by the decision, saying the "government is in denial."

"They went to the few places left for the birds today, counted them, and then said it was the same as it has been for 50 years," he said.

"What they didn't consider is the overall range for these birds has declined between 42 percent and 90 percent in the last 50 years. All they did was count the birds in the range that is left."