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Feds say sage grouse 'not warranted' for listing *Point to new population study in making decision*

By Chris Dickey

Years of speculation and oftentimes contentious local debate came to a climax late Wednesday afternoon when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officially announced that it was not going to list the Gunnison Sage Grouse under the controversial Endangered Species Act.

"This is a 'not warranted' decision," said Gunnison County's Sage Grouse Coordinator Jim Cochran. "This removes the grouse from the candidate list."

Since 2000, the USFWS has declared that the declines in the population of Gunnison Sage Grouse - a separate species from other types of grouse - has made it warranted for listing, but that other priorities precluded such an action. Last fall, according to USFWS Candidate Conservation Coordinator Pat Mehlhop, that thinking changed.

The federal agency contracted with University of Idaho statistician Edward Garton to analyze population data for the Gunnison Sage Grouse. In the Gunnison Basin, that data goes back to the 1950s.

"His overall conclusion was that there was little or no decline (in Gunnison Sage Grouse population) since the 1950s, and that there was also no decline in the last 10 years," Mehlhop said.

Others see the numbers differently.

"According to the Colorado Division of Wildlife's own Gunnison Sage Grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan, the total population declined between 42 and 90 percent in the last 50 years," said Mark Salvo, coordinator of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, one of the national environmental organizations that sued the USFWS to protect the bird under the ESA.

"This is a political document and not an honest assessment of the status of Gunnison Sage Grouse," Salvo said. "Junk science has become a theme of the current administration."

Mehlhop acknowledged that virtually all analysis done prior to last fall indicated that the population trend for Gunnison Sage Grouse was on a downward path. But Garton, she explained, took the science a step further.

"He said you can't do things like simple statistics. It's more complex than that," Mehlhop said. "You can't do a linear regression analysis."

After the USFWS received the report that changed their thinking about sage grouse populations, they re-examined the perceived threats to the bird in its habitat - which predominantly is comprised of the Gunnison Basin. Their findings? Things weren't as bad there as they had thought, either.

"We reanalyzed the threats and we determined that they were not substantial," Mehlhop said.

She affirmed that local actions did play a role in the federal decision as well, particularly pointing to strengthened land use regulations and conservation easements that helped "control development."

Cochran said local efforts to protect the bird won't change much as a result of the decision.

"The species still needs protection," he said. "What we're being told is that, 'you folks asked to try to make a locally led program work, and here's your chance.' So, we're going to try to make it work."

For example, the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances effort that seeks volunteer landowner grouse protection efforts will continue even though the grouse is no longer an ESA candidate, Cochran said.

Some are already gearing up for this decision to be challenged in court.

"We'll face a lawsuit if that time comes, but we won't be surprised if it does," Mehlhop said.

Salvo said his and other environmental organizations would need to "weigh our options" in terms of pursuing legal recourse.

Other local opinions regarding the highly watched sage grouse decision were not available as of press time.