

**Washington Post**  
**Houston Chronicle**  
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## **Gunnison Sage Grouse Won't Be Put on List**

**By Judith Kohler, Associated Press**

DENVER — Federal officials announced Wednesday that they have decided against placing the Gunnison sage grouse on the endangered species list, saying the bird's numbers have stabilized or increased over several years.

The decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reverses one in 2000 that designated the bird as a candidate for the list, meaning it needed protection but wasn't a priority.

A new analysis of data from Colorado and Utah state wildlife agencies showed that the number of Gunnison sage grouse increased to an estimated 4,500 to 5,000 birds from about 3,000 in 2003, said Pat Mehlhop of the regional Fish and Wildlife office in Lakewood.

"We said, 'Let's look at these trends more thoroughly and determine if they are as large a threat as we first perceived them to be when we put (the grouse) on the candidate's list,'" Mehlhop said.

Environmental groups had petitioned to have the bird listed as threatened or endangered after it was classified as a candidate for federal protection.

"This is going to be a blow to conservation efforts," said Erin Robertson, staff biologist for the Denver-based Center for Native Ecosystems, who also contended that the population estimates are questionable because of differences in formulas used from 2003 to 2005.

The Gunnison sage grouse, about one-third smaller than the greater sage grouse, is found only in western Colorado and an area straddling the Colorado-Utah border. The bird's historic range was 21,370 square miles over the Four Corners area of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and Colorado and Utah state wildlife agencies have signed a conservation plan to protect the bird.

In Colorado, the state Division of Wildlife is trying to enlist landowners' help to protect the bird. The state has applied to the federal government to enter into conservation agreements, aimed at giving landowners more certainty about land use in exchange for protecting the grouse.

Colorado Division of Wildlife spokesman Tyler Baskfield said the federal agency's decision showed that the state's program and partnerships are working.

Robertson of the Center for Native Ecosystems said the agreements with landowners were important, but noted that 54 percent of the bird's habitat is on federal land. She said about 1,700 acres of potential habitat area were being offered in the May 11 oil and gas lease auction by the Colorado office of the Bureau of Land Management.

Western Colorado and parts of Utah are experiencing record gas drilling rates amid a regionwide energy boom.

Mehlhop said the Fish and Wildlife agency considered the potential effects of energy development on the sage grouse. She said only one of the bird's seven population centers likely would be affected by the area's natural gas drilling.

Regarding the population estimates, Mehlhop said state wildlife biologists had expressed concerns that some grouse might have been counted more than once because deep snows last year delayed the birds' movement from lower to higher elevations. But she said data showed the numbers have been stable for the past 10 years.

Scientists who agreed with the conclusions after reviewing the analysis discussed possible problems with double-counting male birds due to the late snows and the small sample size.

Mehlhop said research showed that most declines in population occurred before 1958 because of loss of habitat, sagebrush.

Robertson said she believed the statistical analysis wasn't an accurate portrayal because wildlife agencies used different methods to count the grouse.

"It's not a complete picture of what's happening. That's why just by crunching numbers you could conclude the population is increasing," Robertson said.

The Bush administration has focused on private, voluntary conservation programs to protect sage grouse across the West. There are about 100,000 of the greater sage grouse, which looks like a large quail. The government estimates up to 16 million once inhabited the sagebrush-covered expanses of the Western United States and Canada.