



April 12, 2006

Gunnison sage grouse left off endangered list

By Sally Spaulding

The Gunnison sage grouse is not declining, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which decided Wednesday not to list the bird as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

But the scientific evidence that the agency said “showed no imminent threats to the species” and that populations had remained stable for the last 50 years, is being contested.

Several biologists involved with sage grouse research have called the decision a sham, claiming the Fish and Wildlife Service used “junk science” to reach a political conclusion.

“The decision is not a biological document, it’s a political document,” said Clait E. Braun, a retired Colorado Division of Wildlife employee who was in charge of sage grouse research from 1973-1999.

“The data they used interpreted the Gunnison sage grouse’s populations as stable, which is clearly erroneous.”

The Fish and Wildlife Service relied on a Nov. 2005 “trend analysis” from a researcher at the University of Idaho, said Pat Mehlhop, candidate conservation coordinator for the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Mountain-Prairie Region.

The research found that, unlike previously thought, the chicken-sized bird had experienced little to no decline over the last 50 years.

The study also found that threats to the grouse’s habitat were “not substantial,” Mehlhop said, a point highly contested by several scientists.

Jessica Young, a biologist at Western State College in Gunnison and a longtime sage grouse researcher, said the study was the first time she had ever seen the assertion that the species hadn’t declined in the last 50 years.

“Usually there’s controversy over the amount and the extent, but the fact they were in decline has never been a point of debate or the assertion that there won’t be habitat change,” she said.

Erin Robertson, a staff biologist at the Center for Native Ecosystems in Denver, points to Glade Park as an example of the research’s statistical failures in accurately portraying the reality of the bird’s situation.

“The research the service is using for its decision suggests that Glade Park’s Gunnison sage grouse population has increased close to 10 percent in the last 10 years,” she said.

But the population on Glade Park disappeared in the late 1990s, she said.

John Toolen, a Division of Wildlife conservation biologist, said the reason for the bird’s disappearance from the area included development and the perils that come with it.

He said there was even a house on top of an old lek, the breeding ground where male grouse “strut” for their female mates.

“Glade Park is the perfect example of habitat loss,” Braun said. “When Fish and Wildlife Service says habitat isn’t being lost, gosh, I’m not sure where they’re looking.”

Officials estimate about 4,000 of the birds exist in seven populations, six in Colorado and one in both Colorado and Utah on 1,820 square miles.

The historic range of the bird was in southwestern Colorado, northwestern New Mexico, northeastern Arizona and southeastern Utah on 21,370 square miles, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Mehlhop said the decision to not list the species as threatened or endangered would also remove it from the candidate list. Candidate species are plants or animals the Fish and Wildlife Service has determined need to be listed as threatened or endangered but the action is precluded by higher priorities for other species.

The Gunnison sage grouse was added to the candidate list in 2000, she said.

“When we put the Gunnison sage grouse on the candidate list, we perceived threats of high magnitude,” Mehlhop said. “Now we’ve decided those threats are not substantial.”

The decision is final and does not include a public comment period; however, the decision could be challenged in court, Mehlhop said.