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## *Local News*

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### **Gunnison sage-grouse won't get ESA protection**

By Matt Hildner

MONTROSE — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Wednesday that the Gunnison sage-grouse will not be eligible for protection under the Endangered Species Act and has been stripped of its status as a candidate species.

The decision ends a six-year period as a candidate species for the bird, which has populations scattered throughout Montrose and San Miguel counties but is heavily based in Gunnison County.

"Based on the best available scientific and commercial information, including a recent population trend study and finding no evidence of substantial threats, the service has determined the Gunnison sage-grouse does not need the protection of the ESA", said Mitch King, director of the service's Mountain-Prairie Region, in an agency press release.

The release said the lack of population declines for the species led the USFWS to determine that threats to the species are "neither imminent nor of such magnitude that they threaten or endanger the existence of the species."

In a draft of the decision obtained by the Daily Press, the agency concluded that much of the species' habitat loss and population decline occurred prior to 1958.

The same document estimates the bird's population at 5,774, including the largest population of 4,763 in the Gunnison Basin in Gunnison and Saguache counties.

The decision concluded that the smaller population groups, including the one whose habitat ranges from Cerro Summit to Sims Mesa in Montrose County, "have a high probability of extirpation in the foreseeable future."

The figures used by the USFWS were higher than an estimate conducted by the Colorado Division of Wildlife last year that found a total population of 4,775.

The decision to de-list the bird, which the Audobon Society recently named as one of the country's 10-most threatened bird species, angered environmentalists, who claimed that the USFWS used faulty science to reach its conclusions.

"This is a political document and not an assessment of the status of Gunnison sage-grouse," said Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, in a press release. "Junk science has become a theme of the current administration. This decision was made by political appointees in Washington D.C. for political reasons."

Sue Navy, vice president of the High Country Citizens' Alliance and a member of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Working Group, said the agency's decision puts more pressure on the local government.

"Fish and Wildlife would have added another layer to that and taken the onus off the county," she said.

She hoped Gunnison County would continue its interim plans to mitigate the effects of residential development on the birds when the building season starts.

"Locally, I think people are still determined to do everything they can to save the sage-grouse," she said.

For ranchers in the Gunnison Basin, some of whom might have been subject to federal grazing permit restrictions or takings on private land, the decision was a small reprieve, according to Jim Cochran, Gunnison County sage-grouse coordinator.

"It doesn't change that much, just that the uncertainty of the candidacy species has been removed," he said. "I think for the ranching community and the community as a whole the work continues."

Cochran added that the community still had incentive to continue the conservation programs long-term because the bird could again become a candidate for protection.