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Feds dismiss threat to sage grouse

Review: Fish and Wildlife Service says bird's population in Utah and Colorado has been stable for a decade

By Joe Baird

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that a rare sage grouse species that exists only in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah is not under immediate threat and does not merit federal protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Based on what it called a comprehensive review, the agency said in a decision issued Wednesday that threats to the Gunnison sage-grouse "are neither imminent nor of such magnitude" that the existence of the species is threatened.

The Gunnison sage grouse was added to the Fish and Wildlife Service's Endangered Species Act candidate list in 2000. But an analysis the agency completed last November found that the species' population has been stable for the past 10 years.

"Based upon the best available scientific and commercial information, including a recent population trend study and finding no evidence of substantial threats, the [Fish and Wildlife Service] has determined that the Gunnison sage grouse does not need protection under the ESA," said Mitch King, director of agency's Mountain-Prairie Region.

But that conclusion is disputed by environmental groups that argue that the Gunnison sage grouse's seven major population groups - six in Colorado and one that straddles the Utah-Colorado border in San Juan County - are under siege from energy development and grazing.

"We've seen a [habitat] decline of between 42 and 90 percent in the last half-century. What remains is very small, very limited," Nicole Rosmarino, a biologist with the New Mexico-based Forest Guardians. "Without the ESA listing, which we think it deserves, land use will not be modified to address the issue of Gunnison sage grouse habitat.

"Throw in issues like West Nile Virus," she added, "and what's being created is a situation that's pretty bleak for this rare bird."

Utah Division of Wildlife Resources officials last fall pegged the Gunnison sage grouse population in the state at about 100. The much more widespread greater sage grouse numbers between 13,000 and 15,000 in Utah.

The state received federal money for sage grouse habitat restoration last year, but how that figures in to the Gunnison sage grouse's habitat is unclear. DWR officials were unavailable for comment Thursday.

Rosmarino says she is unsure about the next step Gunnison sage grouse advocates will take, but noted that, during the six-plus years of the Bush administration, no species has been added to the Endangered Species Act list without litigation.