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## NEWS

### Sage grouse will keep BLM protections

By Sally Spaulding

The Bureau of Land Management plans to continue upholding protections for the Gunnison sage grouse, despite the fact the bird was determined healthy enough to stay off the endangered species list last week.

"Right now we're going to continue as is," said Theresa Sauer, spokeswoman for the Colorado state office of the BLM. "We will still do the efforts we have been doing because we still want to keep the Gunnison sage grouse off the endangered species list."

Sauer said the agency was working on a strategy with the state and other partner agencies to come up with a plan to manage habitat occupied by the grouse. Until the strategy is complete, Sauer said, the BLM's protection efforts would not change.

More than 50 percent of the grouse's habitat is on land managed by the BLM, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The BLM has afforded protections to the bird, particularly for oil and gas drilling.

The BLM has required special drilling stipulations in habitat occupied by the Gunnison sage grouse and has deferred thousands of acres of known habitat from oil and gas lease sales.

For now, those protections won't change, but some biologists worry they could slowly disappear.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided Wednesday not to list the bird as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service also removed the bird from the candidate species list, meaning it will no longer be considered for listing.

"The BLM didn't necessarily need to defer the leasing of habitat, but they may not do that now," said Erin Robertson, staff biologist at the Center for Native Ecosystems in Denver. "What's the incentive for the BLM to not lease an area if the Fish and Wildlife Service says there are no threats to the bird?"

Officials with the Fish and Wildlife Service said they considered the potential effects of energy development on the sage grouse in making the decision to not list the bird. They said only one of the bird's seven population centers likely would be affected by the area's natural gas drilling.

Robertson 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 BLM.

Clait E. Braun, a retired Colorado Division of Wildlife employee who was in charge of sage grouse research from 1973-1999, said he worried once the initial "buzz" of the listing decision died down, things would return to normal.

"I think people will proceed cautiously in the short term, but they'll go back to what they've always done," he said. "Why pinch someone economically when the species is no longer even a candidate for the (endangered species) list?"