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Opinion

Feds care little about sage grouse

Bill Grant

The announcement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service earlier this month that the Gunnison sage grouse would not be listed under the Endangered Species Act should not have come as a surprise to the conservation and scientific communities that have been working for protection of the birds. Under Bush administration policies, not one endangered species has been added to the list without a court battle. It would have been naïve to expect that our little Western Slope grouse would break that pattern.

The Gunnison sage grouse seemed like an ideal candidate for ESA listing. Once widespread in the Four Corners area, today they are found only in small areas of southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The original range of the bird, estimated at approximately 21,376 square miles, has been reduced today to about 1,822 square miles or 8.5 percent of its original range.

As early as 1995, representatives of governmental agencies, ranchers, county government, conservationists, scientists and interested individuals developed a conservation plan to encourage volunteer efforts to improve the sagebrush range and restore the declining population in Gunnison County where the most birds survive. Much of the motivation for this grassroots effort at improving habitat was to avoid an ESA listing, but despite implementation of the plan in 1997, the grouse population continued to decline.

In 2000, the USFWS designated the Gunnison sage grouse a candidate for protection under ESA, and in 2005, a study was undertaken to determine the bird's status. Research up to that point indicated the grouse population was in decline throughout its range. Several isolated populations were threatened with extinction. Under these terms, it seemed likely that a bird named by the National Audubon Society as one of the 10 most endangered avian species in the country would qualify for protection.

In a pattern all too familiar under the Bush administration, USFWS ignored the findings of experts who have studied the bird and its habitat for years. Instead their decision was based on a statistical analysis of questionable accuracy. This analysis, which concluded that Gunnison sage grouse populations were stable over the past 50 years, though it defies both common sense and scientific research, provided the rationale needed to deny even the limited status of "threatened" to this increasingly rare bird. At least two of five scientists who reviewed the analysis for USFWS seriously questioned the methods and results of the study, as do Dr. Clait Braun and Dr. Jessica Young, the two foremost experts on the Gunnison sage grouse.

Dr. Young characterizes the report's conclusion as "surprising . . . given other pieces of evidence." She goes on to suggest "several assumptions were built into the use of the method which make the results biologically meaningless." She concludes, "The study simply is not biologically relevant to the Gunnison Sage-grouse population status and its conclusions lead to disturbing uses within the listing determination."

Dr. Braun concludes that the report “is without scientific merit,” possibly because it was based on insufficient information. He points out that the grouse have gone extinct in five counties in Colorado and one in Utah since 1990. They survive now in only six Colorado and one Utah counties, and may be extinct in four of them within ten years, he predicts. “Does this information lead one to conclude that populations are stable?” he asks.

With the USFWS ruling against protecting the sage grouse, it may become difficult to hold together the coalition that has helped slow decline of the population over the past few years. Those who saw it only as a way to head off an ESA listing may now feel they have no need to humor the grouse in their land use planning. Without this protection, the grouse may decline even more quickly.

Reassurances that the USFWS will continue to manage land for the bird’s protection are hardly reassuring. Areas leased for oil and gas come under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, which routinely subordinates all other values to oil and gas. If they can justify drilling in the habitat of the black footed ferret, there can be little expectation that the sage grouse will change their drill at all costs policy.

Other agencies also may not conform to USFWS principles. Only after extensive negotiations was San Miguel County able to persuade the Colorado Department of Wildlife to re-route a road away from an active sage grouse area rather than through it. The San Miguel County Open Space Commission publicly called for listing of the bird, prior to this decision, and the county commissioners will now be considering joining a coalition of groups that may sue to get the bird listed under the ESA. They recognize that only comprehensive protection under the ESA can prevent these threats to the grouse.

The only hope for the sage grouse may be its day in court. Questions about the validity of the science behind the decision can only be resolved by the thorough review a court case would require. Bush administration policy made that inevitable from the beginning.

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