

THE TELLURIDE WATCH

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Group Still Working to Protect the Gunnison Sage-grouse

Guest Commentary

By Leigh Robertson

Since 1997, the San Miguel Basin Work Group has been acting to protect the Gunnison Sage-grouse. Members of the work group have deeply mixed feelings about the recent federal decision to not list the Gunnison Sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species.

The work group was formed in the belief that local stakeholders working together in a cooperative, consensus-based manner was the first and best hope for the bird. We have always understood that listing was no panacea and would not bring additional (financial) resources to the table.

The work group always hoped that its successes might preclude the need for listing. So from this perspective, you would think that we would be slapping each other's backs over the recent decision. But things aren't that clear.

Locally and across much of the Gunnison Sage-grouse's range, the population is only hanging on or is in decline. In the San Miguel Basin, the bird and its habitat continues to be impacted by drought, predation, disease, and both residential and energy development.

Locally the bird's Endangered Species Act candidate status, now lost as a result of the recent federal decision, has proven to be an extremely useful tool in protecting the bird. Candidate status helped to steer oil and gas development away from occupied habitat in the San Miguel Basin. It was also a critical tool for raising money from Great Outdoors Colorado, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and others for habitat protection and restoration. The work group is uncertain what will happen now that the bird has lost this status.

While we would like to move on to other challenges, our experience on the ground tells us that all is not well for the Gunnison Sage-grouse in the San Miguel Basin. The work group believes there is a great deal of conservation work yet to do and will continue to implement actions designed to protect and improve conditions for the grouse. Only time will tell how significant this recent decision will prove to be for the bird's future.