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## **County doesn't want sage grouse protection**

**By Beverly Corbell**

GUNNISON — The Center for Biological Diversity recently filed a lawsuit against the Department of Interior over its failure to name the Gunnison sage grouse and 55 other species as endangered, but the suit is not supported by Gunnison County, where many of the sage grouse live.

“Gunnison County has not and will not sign onto that lawsuit,” said Jim Cochran, Gunnison sage grouse coordinator for Gunnison County.

In April, Gunnison County commissioners approved new regulations to prevent development on the birds’ habitat in the Gunnison Valley. Local regulations are preferable to federal involvement in the Gunnison sage grouse’s future, Cochran said.

According to the Black Canyon Audubon Society, Gunnison sage grouse number between 3,000 and 4,000 and live in only six Western Slope counties: Ouray, Delta, Montrose, Gunnison, Hinsdale and San Miguel.

San Miguel County joined others, including the Black Canyon Audubon Society, in another lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity last year against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for not listing the Gunnison sage grouse as an endangered species, said Becky King of the San Miguel County attorney’s office. But Gunnison County did not join that suit, either.

Instead, Gunnison County is relying on its own plan that was developed in 1997, according to Gunnison County’s official Web site.

“Having long been involved with management of the Gunnison sage grouse, Gunnison County has been and will continue to be proactive to insure the preservation of this unique and important species,” the Web site says.

Cochran said Gunnison is the only county in the state to enact local legislation to protect the Gunnison sage grouse, and that’s the best way to save the species because federally mandated protection would hurt local control.

“Gunnison County’s position is that we believe that a locally led program, not listing it under endangered species, is more effective in preserving the grouse,” he said. “If it becomes listed it would come under (U.S.) Fish and Wildlife, and we feel like we have a good program.”