

SAGEBRUSH SEA CAMPAIGN

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NEWS RELEASE

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Sage Grouse Denied Protection under the Endangered Species Act

The U.S. Department of the Interior announced today that, despite strong scientific evidence that the greater sage grouse may be facing extinction, it will not protect the western icon under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has previously reported that the sage grouse has declined between 69-99 percent from historic numbers.

“The greater sage grouse has suffered precipitous declines over the past four decades,” observed Erin Robertson, staff biologist for the Center for Native Ecosystems. “Losing the sage grouse would be a tragedy on par with losing the passenger pigeon.”

The Department of the Interior justified its decision based on its hope that local working groups will protect and restore sagebrush habitat that is critical to the sage grouse’s survival. However, the so-called conservation plans drafted by these groups do too little to recover the species. Some local plans that the Department of Interior relies upon have yet to be written.

“The state and local working groups were convened to avoid listing the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act more than recover the species from the threat of extinction,” explained Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. “Local conservation plans are mostly window dressing and are insufficient to save the grouse.”

The health of sage grouse populations across the West is an important indicator for the health of the entire sagebrush landscape. This “Sagebrush Sea” has been fragmented, degraded and destroyed by excessive land use for more than a century. Livestock grazing, agricultural conversion, herbicides and pesticides, skewed fire regimes, oil and gas development, mining, off-road vehicle use, urban sprawl, and the placement and construction of utility corridors, roads and fences have degraded and eliminated sage grouse habitat throughout its range. As the sage grouse declines, we know the entire sagebrush ecosystem is declining as well.

“Avoiding extinction for a few more years isn’t good enough,” said Jon Marvel, director of Western Watersheds Project. “The states need to step up to the plate and actually recover this bird, not only from the brink of biological extinction, but back to adequate numbers to sustain a healthy and sustainable harvest by hunters.”

Conservation organizations, and their scientific and legal experts will carefully review the decision before deciding their next course of action.

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