

**Biodiversity Conservation Alliance * Center for Native Ecosystems
Forest Guardians * Sagebrush Sea Campaign**

NEWS RELEASE

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Conservation Organizations: Feds Must Adopt Science-Based Solution to Avoid Sage Grouse ESA Listing

DENVER – A coalition of conservation organizations is seeking the adoption of science-based sage grouse conservation measures drafted by grouse expert Clait Braun to increase sage grouse populations and range, in order to avoid a new Endangered Species listing petition.

A media teleconference to discuss present and future sage grouse management and a possible new Endangered Species Act listing petition for the species will be held on Thursday, July 20, from 2:00-3:00 p.m. (MST) at (641) 297-5330; please enter passcode 742-7978.

“These conservation measures can help restore the number and range of this icon of the high deserts and reduce the need to list sage grouse as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act,” said Erik Molvar, a wildlife biologist with the Biodiversity Conservation Alliance in Wyoming. “These basic conservation measures represent a reasonable approach to grouse recovery that can help us achieve sage grouse recovery, and avoid listing and other more difficult measures should grouse populations continue to decline.”

“We can’t afford to allow land management practices to continue to degrade and destroy sage grouse habitat,” added Mark Salvo, director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. “Commercial use of our public lands must be compatible with the needs of sage grouse and other wildlife.”

Several new studies have been released this year showing rapid declines in sage grouse habitat and populations in western sagebrush basins. “There’s a lot of new science that has come out since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service denied the sage grouse protection under the Endangered Species Act in 2005,” added Molvar. “This science shows serious declines of important sage grouse populations resulting from both natural gas and coalbed methane drilling in the West. We

can achieve full oil and gas extraction and still protect the sage grouse in the West, but we need to change the methods that are used in the gas fields to get there.”

The Bureau of Land Management is currently rewriting seven of its land-use plans, covering over 18 million acres of public land in sage grouse country in Wyoming, Utah and northwestern Colorado. At the same time, gas-field development proposals totaling over 16,000 wells in sagebrush basin habitat are working their way through the approval process in Wyoming alone.

“An enormous number of oil and gas projects and federal land-use plans are currently on the drawing board,” said Josh Pollock, Conservation Director for Center for Native Ecosystems. “The BLM and other federal agencies need to use the best available technology to ensure that they’re compatible with maintaining healthy sage grouse populations and recovering populations that have been decimated.”

“It is clear that the sage grouse is continuing to decline, and the sheer volume of big oil and gas projects that are being approved without the necessary protective measures are just making it worse,” added Nicole Rosmarino, conservation director for Forest Guardians. “Our recommendations provide federal agencies with common-sense solutions like directional drilling and eliminating activity in key habitats during the most sensitive times of year so we can have gas production side-by-side with sage grouse conservation.”

Last month, Clait Braun unveiled a science-based blueprint for sage grouse recovery that, if implemented by land management agencies, is designed to increase sage-grouse abundance by 33% by 2015 and increase sage-grouse distribution by 20% by 2030. Key recommendations include minimizing habitat fragmentation; avoiding drilling and road construction in wintering habitats and within 3.3 miles of lek sites to protect breeding and nesting habitat; avoiding large-scale (>50 acres) sagebrush burning or removal; and optimizing livestock grazing methods to maintain and enhance sage-grouse habitats.

“Braun’s blueprint provides a practical way to reconfigure projects and plans to allow the sage grouse and other native wildlife to persist,” said Molvar. “If the federal agencies would implement this blueprint in their projects and plans, we’d be willing to hold off on a new Endangered Species Act petition to give these measures a chance to work.”

“Federal agencies must begin taking their multiple-use obligations seriously, instead of prioritizing resource extraction over all other values,” said Salvo. “This science-based approach focuses on the needs of sage grouse, rather than the needs of political stakeholders.”

Braun’s science-based *Blueprint for Sage Grouse Conservation and Recovery* is available on the Internet at

<http://www.nativeecosystems.org/sagegrouse/greater/Braunblueprint2006.pdf>. The latest scientific studies on the declines of sage grouse resulting from oil and gas development are available at www.voiceforthewild.org/SageGrouseStudies.

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