

## NEWS RELEASE

### For Immediate Release

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#### Contact:

- Josh Pollock, Executive Director, Center for Native Ecosystem • (303) 546-0214
- Mark Salvo, Director, Sagebrush Sea Campaign • (503) 757-4221
- Megan Corrigan, Staff Biologist, Center for Native Ecosystems • (303) 546-0214

## **Utah Habitat for Sage Grouse, Other Wildlife Spared from Oil and Gas Drilling**

### **BLM defers leasing on tens of thousands of acres to protect sensitive habitat, potential protected areas**

The Utah office of the federal Bureau of Land Management deferred oil and gas leases on 38,495 acres of sage grouse habitat after conservation groups protested their inclusion in the upcoming quarterly lease sale. In addition, the Utah BLM voluntarily deferred leasing on 157,731 acres, acknowledging it had not fully considered environmental impacts to natural resources such as the imperiled native plant Graham's penstemon and several potential Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. All told, the BLM withdrew or postponed leasing on more than 292,000 acres based in part on recent court decisions citing problems with their analysis of impacts to sensitive species and other natural values.

The Utah office of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) deferred oil and gas leases on 38,495 acres of sage grouse habitat after conservation groups protested their inclusion in the upcoming quarterly lease sale. In addition, the Utah BLM voluntarily deferred leasing on 157,731 acres, acknowledging it had not fully considered environmental impacts to natural resources such as the imperiled native plant Graham's penstemon and several potential Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. All told, the BLM withdrew or postponed leasing on more than 292,000 acres based in part on recent court decisions citing problems with their analysis of impacts to sensitive species and other natural values.

"This is an encouraging sign from the BLM in Utah," said Josh Pollock, Conservation Director at Center for Native Ecosystems, one of several groups which protested parcels in the Utah lease sale. "They seem to finally recognize they can't rush headlong into oil and gas drilling by discounting the impacts to sensitive wildlife and plants.

In November 2006, the Internal Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) ruled that the BLM must consider the impacts of oil and gas drilling on sensitive wildlife and plants and their habitat at the point when it offers public lands for leasing, not later. The IBLA also found that BLM's reliance on untested mitigation measures to protect sage grouse from oil and gas drilling impacts was illegal. The Utah BLM cited this IBLA ruling in deferring 72,838 of the 157,731 acres it voluntarily withdrew last week. Another recent ruling in U.S. District Court against the BLM in

Colorado found that the agency was failing to consider all the possible impacts of oil and gas drilling on habitat for at-risk wildlife and plants.

“Once the landscape is leased for oil and gas drilling, it’s often too late to add real protections for sage grouse and other sensitive wildlife,” said Megan Corrigan, staff biologist at Center for Native Ecosystems. “The BLM can and should be protecting habitat, instead of playing a shell game with their duty to analyze impacts. Pulling their leases in sage grouse habitat is a step in the right direction.”

New research on sage grouse populations in areas being drilled for oil and gas suggests that BLM’s current mitigations are inadequate to protect sage grouse from disturbance. In the Powder River Basin in Montana, researchers found that the ¼ mile buffers the BLM maintained around important sage grouse habitat areas and its seasonal timing limitations on oil and gas drilling activity still led to population declines for this highly imperiled wildlife species. Sage grouse distribution and range have declined by an estimated 56 percent, while overall sage grouse abundance has been reduced by as much as 93 percent from estimated historic levels. Oil and gas drilling remains a primary threat to the species’ sagebrush habitat throughout the eastern half of its range.

“It’s encouraging that the BLM and state agencies might finally be paying attention to the new research on sage grouse, but science informed us as far back as 1998 that oil and gas development harms sage grouse,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. “It’s high time we recognized that sage grouse need large expanses of habitat free from oil and gas wells and drill rigs to survive.”

Similar to Utah BLM, the BLM in Montana withdrew 73,600 acres from an August 2 oil and gas lease sale in part due to protest from the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department that sage grouse habitat would be affected. In contrast to the Utah BLM office, Colorado BLM sold numerous parcels in sage grouse habitat during its most recent lease sale, despite similar protests to those in Utah filed by Center for Native Ecosystems challenging their failure to analyze impacts to sage grouse.

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