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New Listing Decision for Gunnison Sage-grouse?

Feds to Reconsider Previous Listing Decision Following Latest Investigation of Bush Administration's Interference with ESA

TELLURIDE, CO - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service filed a notice with the U.S. District Court in Washington, DC, last week stating that, in light of the latest investigative report on Bush Administration interference in the administration of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the agency may reconsider its position in current litigation over its refusal to protect Gunnison sage-grouse under the ESA in April 2006. The investigative report, released in December, was the second by the Inspector General for the Department of the Interior that found that former-Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julie MacDonald and other Bush Administration officials unduly influenced the listing decision making process for imperiled species, including Gunnison sage-grouse. The Fish and Wildlife Service indicated in its court filing last week that it will decide whether to continue defending the tainted "not warranted" Gunnison sage-grouse listing decision within the next 45 days.

"We are eager to secure this vital protection for the Gunnison sage-grouse as soon as possible. Long term viability of the species is unquestionably at risk now, and every additional delay decreases the likelihood of a full recovery," said Commissioner Joan May of San Miguel County, Colorado.

San Miguel County led a coalition of conservation and government accountability organizations to sue the Fish and Wildlife Service over its "not warranted" listing decision for the Gunnison sage-grouse in November 2006. Significant evidence was already available that Julie MacDonald and other officials had interfered with the listing decision for the species (http://www.sagebrushsea.org/sp_gunn_grouse_interference.htm#z). The latest report by the Inspector General confirms previous information that Bush Administration appointees pressured Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and other staff to avoid protecting species under the ESA.

"Our campaign to save the Gunnison sage-grouse is also a campaign to preserve America's West for future generations. Do we sacrifice this species for the immediate gain of finite resource extraction or do we conserve, develop alternatives and drill where it will not have such immense impacts?" commented Hilary White, Director of Sheep Mountain Alliance. "We hope that our new leadership will make an informed science-based decision to protect Gunnison sage-grouse."

Audubon, another organization that joined San Miguel County and Sheep Mountain Alliance in the listing litigation, has identified Gunnison sage-grouse as among the ten most endangered birds in the United States (www.audubon.org/news/top10/top10_endangered_species.pdf). The Endangered Species Coalition also released a report in December listing Gunnison sage-grouse as one of the most imperiled species in the country (www.sagebrushsea.org/release_gunnison_grouse10.htm). Other organizations joining the lawsuit include (in alphabetical order) Black Canyon Audubon Society, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Native Ecosystems, The Larch Company, Public Employees for Environmental Protection, and WildEarth Guardians.

“This is an easy decision for the Fish and Wildlife Service to make,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians. “The Gunnison sage-grouse population is now smaller than when federal biologists recommended listing and designating critical habitat for the species in 2005.”

The Gunnison sage-grouse is distinct from greater sage-grouse, identified by researchers as early as the 1970s and recognized as a new species by the American Ornithologists’ Union in 2000. While its historic range may have included parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona, the species now occurs only in eight small populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Gunnison sage-grouse have experienced significant declines from historic numbers and only about 4,000 breeding individuals remain. Livestock grazing, energy development, motorized recreation, and urbanization have contributed to the long-term decline of Gunnison sage-grouse.

Gunnison sage-grouse inhabit sagebrush steppe, among the most threatened ecosystems (www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Sagebrush_Sea_Factsheet.pdf) and avian habitats (www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/ABC_Threatened_Bird_Habitats.pdf) in the United States.

Fish and Wildlife Service filings in the Gunnison sage-grouse listing litigation:

www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Gunnison_Grouse_def_2d_Notice_re_2d_IG_Report.pdf.

www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Gunnison_Grouse_def_2d_Notice_re_2d_IG_Report_Gould_Decl.pdf.

A factsheet on Gunnison sage-grouse is available at www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Gunnison_Grouse_Factsheet.PDF.

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