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Gunnison Sage-Grouse Gets Another Chance at Protection *Most Populations Declined Again in 2009*

Telluride, CO – A western Colorado county and a coalition of national and regional conservation organizations have agreed to settle a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service challenging an April 2006 decision not to list the highly imperiled Gunnison sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. The agreement, which was filed yesterday in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., requires the agency to prepare a new listing decision by June 30, 2010. The agency determined in March that its April 18, 2006, denial of Endangered Species Act protection to Gunnison sage-grouse was tainted by interference from former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julie MacDonald and other Bush Administration officials.

"We are eager to secure 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 full recovery," said Commissioner Joan May of San Miguel County, Colorado.

The settlement follows discouraging news this spring: annual counts revealed that all but two populations of Gunnison sage-grouse continued to decline in 2009. Some populations have been reduced to fewer than 10 birds.

"Endangered wildlife like Gunnison sage-grouse deserve a fair chance at protection," said Erin Robertson, Senior Staff Biologist for Center for Native Ecosystems in Denver. "After years of political interference, it is time for a speedy, unbiased decision that will provide the Gunnison sage-grouse the help it needs."

Audubon has identified Gunnison sage-grouse as among the ten most endangered birds in the United States. The Endangered Species Coalition also released a report last December listing Gunnison sage-grouse as one of the most imperiled species in the country. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar released a report in March, *The State of the Birds 2009*, that found that western deserts and grasslands—home to Gunnison sage-grouse and other sensitive species—are among the most degraded habitats in the country.

"We are keen to have federal protections in place, not only to protect this species in serious decline but also an important native landscape of the West that serves as its habitat," said Hilary White, Director of the Sheep Mountain Alliance.

In addition to San Miguel County, conservation organizations seeking to list Gunnison sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act include (in alphabetical order) Audubon, Black Canyon Audubon Society, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Native Ecosystems, The Larch Company, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Sheep Mountain Alliance, and WildEarth Guardians. The coalition is represented by attorneys with the Center for Biological Diversity, San Miguel County, and Western Environmental Law Center.

"Gunnison sage-grouse populations and habitat conditions have worsened in recent years," said Mark Salvo, Sagebrush Sea Campaign Director for WildEarth Guardians. "Listing would help recover the species."

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, oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation, and urbanization have contributed to the long-term decline of Gunnison sage-grouse.

"If the agency makes a new decision based on science and not politics, our children and grandchildren may be able to see this iconic species in the wild," said Amy Atwood, senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.

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