

For Immediate Release

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Gunnison Sage-grouse Suffers Setback

Feds Refuse to Protect Rare Bird

Denver, CO – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has denied protection to the Gunnison sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act, according to a signed decision document received by conservation organizations today. The Gunnison sage-grouse was previously a “candidate species” awaiting protection under the Act, indicating that the agency had the highest level of concern for the grouse. Scientists have warned that Gunnison sage-grouse may become extinct without protection.

“Denying these critical protections now is another nail in the coffin for Gunnison sage-grouse,” said Erin Robertson, Staff Biologist for Center for Native Ecosystems.

The decision, reportedly submitted yesterday for publication to the Federal Register, discounts important data of major declines in Gunnison sage grouse range and total population. For example, although the rangewide conservation plan for Gunnison sage-grouse admits that the species now occurs in only about nine percent of its former range, the agency determined that the grouse will persist long-term based on the unsupported and irrational expectation that the species will suffer no further habitat loss in the future.

“This is a political document and not an honest assessment of the status of Gunnison sage-grouse,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign. “Junk science has become a theme of the current administration. This decision was made by political appointees in Washington, D.C. for political reasons.”

Gunnison sage-grouse have experienced significant declines since the 1950s, when population data were first collected for the species. According to the Colorado Division of Wildlife’s Gunnison Sage-Grouse Rangewide Conservation Plan, the total population declined between 42-90 percent in the last 50 years. The Audubon Society recently declared the Gunnison sage-grouse one of the ten most endangered birds in the United States.

“Dozens of plants and animals have gone extinct due to the delay in listing,” said Nicole Rosmarino, Director of the Endangered Species Program for Forest Guardians. “The Bush Administration’s refusal to protect the Gunnison sage-grouse may doom this bird to the same fate.”

By failing to list Gunnison sage-grouse as threatened or endangered now, and without some level of accountability in land management, grouse numbers are likely to continue to decline, probably resulting in listing as "endangered" rather than "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act and severely curtailing the considerable flexibility a threatened listing would provide public land management agencies and landowners.

The Gunnison sage-grouse is distinct from greater sage-grouse. Researchers observed as early as the 1970s that Gunnison sage grouse display different mating rituals and plumage than greater sage-grouse. The Gunnison sage-grouse was recognized as a new species by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2000.

Livestock grazing, oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation, and urbanization threaten the continued existence of Gunnison sage-grouse. For example, the Bureau of Land Management plans to auction an additional 1,750 acres of potential Gunnison sage grouse habitat near Dove Creek, Colorado for oil and gas drilling next month. Severe drought in recent years has exacerbated the effects of these human impacts. West Nile virus, a disease that is fatal to greater sage-grouse, has also been discovered in Gunnison sage-grouse range.

While its historic range included parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and perhaps Kansas and Oklahoma, the species now occurs only in eight small populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Gunnison sage-grouse have experienced significant declines in recent years and fewer than 4,000 breeding individuals remain.

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The Audubon Society report identifying Gunnison sage-grouse as one of America's top ten most endangered birds is available at <http://www.audubon.org/news/top10/top10.php>.

A photograph of Gunnison sage-grouse by Louis Swift is available on the Audubon Society website at <http://www.audubon.org/news/top10/download.php>.

Additional information on Gunnison sage-grouse is available on the Sagebrush Sea Campaign website at www.sagebrushsea.org/sp_gunnison_grouse.htm.

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