

**For Immediate Release**  
**June 5, 2006**

Contacts

Mark Salvo, Sagebrush Sea Campaign • (503) 757-4221

Jacob Smith, Center for Native Ecosystems • (303) 546-0214

Carol Goldberg, PEER • (202) 265-7337

Amy Atwood, Western Environmental Law Center • (541) 914-8372

**San Miguel County Joins Coalition Seeking Gunnison Sage-Grouse Protection**

TELLURIDE, COLO. – San Miguel County in Colorado has formally joined an effort to protect the Gunnison sage-grouse under the federal Endangered Species Act. The County's action is in response to a decision six weeks ago by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to eliminate protections for the Gunnison sage-grouse and remove it from consideration as a "threatened" or "endangered" wildlife species. The county joins a growing coalition of local and national conservation groups who have warned the agency that it must reverse its illegal decision or face litigation.

The San Miguel County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously last week to join a formal "notice of intent to sue" the federal government. "It's great to see the county insisting that the Gunnison sage-grouse be protected under the Endangered Species Act," said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign.

The letter formally indicates that the coalition may file a lawsuit against the Fish and Wildlife Service after 60 days to challenge the agency's illegal removal of the grouse from the Endangered Species Act "candidate" species list and its refusal to protect the grouse under the Act. While its historic range included parts of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, 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 with fewer than 4,000 breeding individuals remaining.

"The Gunnison sage-grouse is an imperiled species," said Nicole Rosmarino, Conservation Director of Forest Guardians. "And none of the threats to the grouse have gone away with the government's decision."

Livestock grazing, oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation, and urbanization threaten the continued existence of Gunnison sage-grouse. 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.

"The government's own scientists were suppressed in this matter by political appointees within the Department of Interior," stated Jeff Ruch, Executive Director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), which has also now joined the coalition. "These political appointees ignored the government's own scientific findings."

By refusing to protect 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.

“We prefer that these issues be resolved cooperatively but when the federal government so egregiously breaks the law, local governments and community groups have no other choice but to go to court,” said Jacob Smith, Executive Director of the Center for Native Ecosystems.

“The federal government is on notice that a broad coalition of stakeholders will hold it accountable for its decision,” said Amy Atwood of the Western Environmental Law Center, which is representing San Miguel County, the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Native Ecosystems, Forest Guardians, The Larch Company, PEER and Sinapu in the litigation. “Those who care about the Gunnison sage-grouse have no choice but to challenge this indefensible and unlawful decision in court.”

###

*Read the Notice of Intent to Sue:*

[www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Gunnison\\_Grouse\\_Supp\\_NOI.pdf](http://www.sagebrushsea.org/pdf/Gunnison_Grouse_Supp_NOI.pdf)

*See a National Audubon Society report identifying Gunnison sage-grouse as one of America's top ten most endangered birds:*

[www.audubon.org/news/top10/top10.php](http://www.audubon.org/news/top10/top10.php)

*Find out more about the Gunnison sage-grouse:*

[www.sagebrushsea.org/sp\\_gunnison\\_grouse.htm](http://www.sagebrushsea.org/sp_gunnison_grouse.htm)