

NEWS RELEASE

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Mono Basin Sage Grouse Move Closer to ESA Protection

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that it will consider listing Mono Basin area sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in response to conservationists' petition to protect the grouse as a "distinct population segment." The Mono Basin area sage grouse is an isolated, genetically distinct population of greater sage-grouse located in and near the Mono Basin in California and Nevada. Fewer than 5,000 Mono Basin area sage grouse remain.

Conservation and faith organizations petitioned to list the Mono Basin area sage grouse as a "threatened" or "endangered" distinct population segment under the ESA in 2005. The agency issued a negative finding on the petition in December 2006. The Center for Biological Diversity, Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Western Watersheds Project, and Desert Survivors sued the Fish and Wildlife Service in federal court in August 2007, and the agency agreed to revisit its decision and provide a new finding by April 25, 2008. The new positive "90-day" finding initiates a longer 9-month status review to determine whether the subpopulation should be listed under the ESA.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has finally acknowledged that Mono Basin sage grouse are threatened with extirpation from a plethora of unacceptable land uses and environmental factors," said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians.

"This is an important step in gaining legal protection for the sage grouse from expanding ORV use, development, and grazing that is destroying its habitat in the Mono Basin," added Lisa Belenky, Staff Attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Geneticists discovered that Mono Basin area sage grouse are genetically distinct from other sage grouse in 2005. Research indicates that Mono Basin sage grouse have "a unique history of isolation distinct from all other populations" and that they are "at least as divergent from other populations of the greater sage-grouse as *Gunnison sage-grouse* are from the greater sage-grouse."

Despite their distinct genetic traits, Mono Basin sage grouse appear and behave as other greater sage-grouse, and have the same habitat requirements as other sage grouse. Unfortunately, like other sage grouse populations, Mono Basin sage grouse populations have fallen precipitously

since the early 1900s. A species that was once described as abundant now only exists in small, isolated populations in the region. Sage grouse habitat in the Mono Basin area has been degraded and eliminated by livestock grazing; off-road vehicle use; residential development; pinyon-juniper encroachment; invasive species; wildfire; mining; and the placement and construction of roads, fences and transmission lines.

“BLM and Forest Service are jeopardizing the survival of these marvelous birds by permitting livestock grazing across the fragile sagebrush landscape,” said Katie Fite, Biodiversity Director for Western Watersheds Project. “From the barbed wire fences grouse collide with, to cattle eating native grasses and spreading weeds—all this takes a toll.”

Listing under the federal Endangered Species Act would provide broad protection to the Mono Basin area sage grouse, including a requirement that federal agencies ensure that any action they carry out, authorize, or fund will not “jeopardize the continued existence” of this unique population of the species.

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