

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

March 5, 2010

Contact

Michael J. Connor, Ph.D., Western Watersheds Project • 818-345-0425

Mark Salvo, WildEarth Guardians • 503-757-4221

Mono Basin Area Sage Grouse Need Federal Protection *Feds Determine Bi-State Population “Warranted but Precluded” from Listing*

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the “Bi-State” or Mono Basin area sage grouse population warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act, but that listing them is precluded by higher priorities. The Bi-State sage grouse are large, ground nesting birds that are found in the vicinity of Mono Lake on the border of California and Nevada. The total population of Mono Basin area sage-grouse is estimated at fewer than 5,000 birds and is declining.

“These magnificent birds need Endangered Species Act protection now,” said Michael Connor, California Director for Western Watersheds Project. “Because most of their remaining habitat is public land, listing would force government agencies such as the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to better manage these lands to recover the species. Without this added protection the Mono Basin sage grouse will continue to decline”

Mono Basin area sage grouse are a genetically distinct population of greater sage-grouse. Geneticists have noted that Mono Basin area sage grouse have "a unique history of isolation distinct from all other populations" and are "at least as divergent from other populations of the greater sage-grouse as Gunnison sage-grouse are from the greater sage-grouse."

“The Endangered Species Act recognizes the importance of protecting distinct populations if these are important to a species’ evolutionary legacy. The Service has agreed that the Mono Basin area sage grouse fits the bill as a distinct population segment, but has chosen not to list either the Mono basin area population or the greater sage-grouse” said Connor.

Despite their genetic differences, Mono Basin area sage grouse have similar appearance, behavior and habitat requirements as other sage-grouse. As their name indicates, they are dependent on sagebrush for their survival. Unfortunately, like other sage-grouse populations, Mono Basin area sage grouse populations have fallen precipitously since the early 1900s. A species that was once described as abundant and was a popular game bird with hunters, it 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.

“There is a high risk of the grouse disappearing from most of its current range in the Bi-State area,” said Mark Salvo, Director of the Sagebrush Sea Campaign for WildEarth Guardians. “Listing might save the population from extirpation—a ‘warranted but precluded’ determination might not.”

The Stanford Environmental Law Clinic, Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Western Watersheds Project, Center for Biological Diversity, and Christians Caring for Creation petitioned to list the Mono Basin area sage grouse as “threatened” or “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act in 2005. The Fish and Wildlife Service initially issued a negative finding on the petition in December 2006, which conservation organizations challenged in federal court for failure to apply the proper standard of review to the petition. The Service announced a new, positive finding on the listing petition in April 2008 and initiated a full status review to determine whether the subpopulation should be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The range of Mono Basin area sage grouse is about 7,000 square miles, an area about one and half times the size of Los Angeles County. They occur in small localized populations within this range, many of which are in danger of extirpation. Research from 2008 found that nest initiation and chick survival were reduced among sage-grouse studied in Mono County, California.

Mono Basin area sage-grouse are threatened by a multitude of factors:

- West Nile virus, a disease that is almost always fatal to sage-grouse, is killing Mono Basin area sage grouse in the Bodie Hills.
- The Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 released Masonic Mountain, Mormon Meadow, Walford Springs and Granite Mountain wilderness study areas from protection. All of these areas include habitat for Mono Basin area sage grouse, which might now be more difficult to protect from adverse land uses.
- Continued management activities on federal public land threatens Mono Basin area sage grouse: livestock grazing is authorized throughout their habitat, which degrades habitat and disturbs nesting females; an ill-advised prescribed fire burned sage-grouse habitat on the Forest Service Bridgeport Ranger District; interest in gold mining has increased and the Bureau of Land Management is considering a mining proposal in the Bodie Wilderness Study Area; a sheep grazing operation was inadvertently located on top of a sage-grouse lek, an area where males strut in the courting season, on a BLM grazing allotment in the Desert Creek area; the Forest Service has failed to draft a new environmental impact statement for livestock grazing on 11 grazing allotments covering more than 410,000 acres in Mineral and Lyon counties after withdrawing the Great Basin South EIS under appeal in 2008.

WildEarth Guardians and Western Watersheds Project are regional conservation organizations with offices throughout the West, including California.

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