

ENDANGERED SPECIES: Gunnison sage grouse listing presents opportunities, challenges (05/15/2008)

Eryn Gable, special to Land Letter

MONTROSE, Colo. -- The possible listing of the Gunnison sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act presents opportunities and challenges for its future conservation, participants in a sage grouse "summit" here said yesterday.

The Fish and Wildlife Service decided in 2006 to remove the Gunnison sage grouse from its list of candidate species for ESA protection after an analysis of data from Colorado and Utah showed the bird's population had increased to as many as 5,000 birds, up from 3,000 in 2003 ([Greenwire](#), April 13, 2006). San Miguel County and a coalition of environmental groups -- including the Sagebrush Sea Campaign, Center for Native Ecosystems, Center for Biological Diversity and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility -- filed a lawsuit later that year challenging that decision, but the groups are still waiting for a ruling on their claims.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's 2006 decision to not list the grouse is one of several listing decisions in which former Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie MacDonald allegedly prevented agency biologists from recommending listing the species.

The Gunnison sage grouse's historic range may have included parts of Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Utah, but it now lives in small, isolated populations centered around the Gunnison Basin in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Gunnison sage grouse are smaller than greater sage grouse and have distinct genetic, physical and behavioral characteristics, including longer tail feathers and unique visual and acoustical patterns in their mating displays.

National significance of Gunnison sage grouse status

Jessica Young of Western State College of Colorado said recognition of the Gunnison sage grouse's plight at a national and international level is vitally important to conserving the species. While listing under the Endangered Species Act itself is not necessarily essential, Young said some kind of recognition is needed.

"I do think the lack of recognition [of the grouse] as a conservation issue on the national level does impede the resources and collaboration at the local level," Young said.

As an example of the problems that the bird's listing limbo has caused, Jim Garner, a wildlife conservation biologist for the Colorado Division of Wildlife, noted that local landowners were reluctant to sign onto candidate conservation agreements once the species was removed from the candidate species list.

Sage grouse. Photo courtesy of USDA.

"A lot of landowners kind of looked at that decision and said, 'These things aren't even a candidate right now. I'm not

going to bother,'" Garner said.

Although Gunnison sage grouse is no longer a candidate species, Garner said there are still opportunities to protect habitat for the birds through the acquisition of easements and land titles as part of the Colorado Wildlife Habitat Protection Program.

Habitat can also be protected for the birds under the Agriculture Department's Conservation Reserve Program, which encourages farmers to enter contracts to take highly erodible cropland and environmentally sensitive acreage out of agricultural production. Terry Messmer of Utah State University noted that about 36,000 acres are currently enrolled in the program in San Juan County, which was designated as a "priority conservation area" because of the Gunnison sage grouse in 1998.

Gary Skiba, a biologist with the Colorado Division of Wildlife, said his agency would prefer not to see the bird listed under the Endangered Species Act, saying that the federal law can sometimes get in the way of collaborative conservation efforts.

"The Division of Wildlife views a listing of a species as a failure," Skiba said. "It's a failure of our society to take care of its natural resources. It's a failure of the agencies to mobilize the resources that we need to protect these species. So, from that standpoint, we don't want to see species listed."

Skiba noted that the agency's ultimate goal is not just to keep the bird off the ESA list, but to recover it. "This isn't about avoiding listing as such. It's about getting species to a point ... where they don't need the protection of the Endangered Species Act."

"What we want to do is get sage grouse to the point where people are complaining about sage grouse poop on their lawns," he added.

Impacts to grazing

Greg Peterson, a local landowner, said he fears an ESA listing could damage the collaborative relationships that have already been established. But his greatest worry is that listing could hamper the livestock industry by forcing cattle off public lands and thereby putting more pressure on private lands.

"My fear as far as when the bird's listed is the first thing that'll happen is there'll be a lawsuit filed with an injunction to prohibit livestock grazing on federal lands until there can be data showing that there's no injury from grazing to the bird," he said. "That can take a long time to ever figure that out."

Although there has been little empirical evidence about sage grouse responses to grazing, Messmer said his research has shown that land in the Conservation Reserve Program provides crucial breeding and summer habitat for Gunnison sage grouse. When grazing was allowed in CRP acreage during the 2002 drought, most birds avoided the areas being grazed, he said.

Still, Peterson expressed doubts that eliminating grazing from sage grouse habitat would be beneficial to the bird. "I think that if we eliminate these livestock-sage grouse relationships on the federal lands and potentially private lands, I'm not so sure that that's going to be positive for the species," he said.

Funding concerns

One of the big questions surrounding listing of the Gunnison sage grouse is what would happen to funding of efforts to protect the bird. Al Pfister of the Fish and Wildlife Service noted that 28 cents of every dollar needed for recovery of animal species is actually appropriated to the agency.

But Sue Navy of the High Country Citizens' Alliance said conservation funding could come from other sources besides the federal government. "I believe that there would be funding available from a lot of other sources. I think that there would be a lot more synergy and energy generated by the Endangered Species Act designation that would bring in funding from places nationwide," she said.

One funding source that may not step up to the plate if the bird is listed, however, is the state of Colorado. Skiba noted that

the state has already spent \$300,000 on Gunnison sage grouse conservation over the last three years, but there may be more reluctance to continue such funding levels if the bird is listed.

"There are people in the state agencies who, once a species is listed, kind of feel like it's the federal government's problem," Skiba said.

Despite all the uncertainty and concerns about the effects of listing the Gunnison sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act, Pfister said the act has already been successful in protecting the bird because the threat of a listing has generated so much attention. "If it weren't for the potential for an ESA listing, people wouldn't be doing some of the things they [are] doing," he said.

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