
Sage grouse may be listed as endangered

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The Gunnison sage grouse, found only in parts of southwest Utah and Colorado, may be reconsidered for listing as an endangered species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), which is in charge of listing species, filed notice in federal court in Washington, D.C., this week that it would reconsider its 2006 decision about the bird.

The notice was a response to an Inspector General report that found former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julie MacDonald and other Bush officials interfered with federal biologists' decision-making on multiple endangered species, including the Gunnison sage-grouse.

In a 2006 news release, FWS said it was not considering the bird for listing because its population was not declining and because threats to the sage-grouse were neither imminent nor of such magnitude that they threatened or endangered the species' existence.

But groups that challenged the decision argued that politics -- not science --- played the major role in keeping the bird off the lists, an argument bolstered by the Inspector General's December report.

An estimated 4,000 breeding Gunnison sage-grouse remain in habitat reduced in part by livestock grazing, oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation and urbanization. The Gunnison species was identified by researchers in the 1970s as distinct from the more common greater sage-grouse and recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2000 as a new species.

Diane Katzenberger, spokesperson for the FWS' Denver office, confirmed the notice had been filed. "We are negotiating with the plaintiffs in the case for a date for a determination for a status review to be made."

"We are eager to secure protection for the Gunnison sage-grouse as soon as possible," said Commissioner Joan May of San Miguel County, Colo., which led a coalition that sued the FWS. "Long term viability of the species is unquestionably at risk now, and every delay decreases the likelihood of full recovery."

According to Utah-based Wayne Martinson of the National Audubon Society, most of the birds in Utah are on private land.

In addition to San Miguel County, plaintiffs that sued FWS included Audubon, Black Canyon Audubon Society, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Native Ecosystems, the Larch Company, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, Sheep Mountain Alliance, and WildEarth Guardians.

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