

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



News Release

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Status Review Completed: Greater Sage-Grouse Not Warranted for Listing as Endangered or Threatened

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The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed its status review of the greater sage-grouse throughout its range and determined that the species does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act at this time, Director Steve Williams announced today.

This decision follows a recommendation made by agency senior regional scientists and managers that the sage-grouse does not warrant listing under the ESA. Williams publicly announced the regional recommendation on December 3, 2004.

"I have reviewed the work completed by our scientists and I am confident that they have conducted a thorough and rigorous review and their recommendation is based on the best available science," Williams said. "I concur with their recommendation that the greater sage-grouse does not warrant the special protections of the Endangered Species Act across its range. At the same time, the status review clearly illustrates the need for continued efforts to conserve sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis. I commend Federal and state agencies as well as the local working groups for their current efforts to maintain or improve sagebrush habitat and encourage them to continue to move forward with the new plans to develop and implement conservation strategies throughout the grouse's range."

Under the Endangered Species Act, a species is endangered if it is in danger

of extinction within all or a significant portion of its range, or threatened if the species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. The Service received three petitions to list the greater sage-grouse range-wide as endangered or threatened, and began a formal status review in April 2004. During the status review, the Service considered all the available scientific and commercial information on greater sage-grouse and their habitats, including information provided by State and Federal agencies and Tribes, as well as information provided through public comments. The review included the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-Grouse and Sagebrush Habitats, a compilation of sage-grouse and sagebrush literature and data.

The Service used a structured analysis process to evaluate the factors potentially threatening greater sage-grouse populations and sagebrush habitat including wildfire, invasion of non-native plants, livestock management, agricultural conversion, urbanization, mining and energy development, predation, disease and other threats.

As part of this process, independent scientists from State and Federal agencies and State universities participated in a facilitated discussion on the biology and ecology of sage-grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem. The panel included experts in greater sage-grouse, plant ecology, rangeland health, and invasive species who were asked to apply their expert judgment to independently estimate the extinction risk for greater sage-grouse at various timeframes into the future. However, these scientists were not asked for and did not make recommendations on the petition finding. Their estimates and discussions occurred in the presence of a team of Service senior-level biologists in order to help ensure these biologists were aware of a diverse range of scientific points of view.

As part of the final decisionmaking process, Service scientists and managers considered the independent experts views as well as all available scientific and commercial information in making their final recommendation. They determined that greater sage-grouse are not likely to become endangered or threatened in the foreseeable future. The Director then reviewed the recommendation and concurred.

Greater sage-grouse are currently estimated to number from approximately 100,000 to 500,000 individuals. Sage-grouse populations are estimated to have declined an average of 3.5 percent per year from 1965 to 1985. Since 1986, however, populations in several states have increased or generally stabilized and the rate of decline from 1985 to 2003 slowed to 0.37 percent annually for the species across its entire range.

These data and the fact that 92 percent of the known active leks (traditional sites where males and females congregate for courtship) occur in 10 core populations across eight western states, and that five of these populations are large and expansive, were important factors in the Service's decision, Williams said. In addition, approximately 160 million acres of sagebrush, a

necessary habitat for sage-grouse, currently exists across the western landscape.

Greater sage-grouse are found in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, eastern California, Nevada, Utah, western Colorado, South Dakota and Wyoming. They are also found in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The greater sage-grouse is a large, rounded-winged, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches long and two feet tall, weighing from two to seven pounds. It has a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes. Females are a mottled brown, black, and white color. Males are larger and have a large white ruff around their neck and bright yellow air sacks on their breasts, which they inflate during their mating display. The birds are found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet and are highly dependent on sagebrush for cover and food.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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