



**For Immediate Release**

**Date:** March 5, 2010

## **SAGE-GROUSE DECISION A “WAKE-UP CALL” ABOUT DECLINE OF BIRD AND ITS SAGEBRUSH HABITAT**

***Encouraging signs, but business-as-usual not enough***

**DENVER** – A new Federal scientific finding on Greater Sage-grouse is a **wake-up call about the bird’s dwindling numbers and its disappearing sagebrush habitat**, the National Wildlife Federation said today.

According to today’s announcement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Greater Sage-grouse will have to wait in line for Endangered Species Act protection behind higher-priority species. This so-called “warranted but precluded” designation means federal land managers will continue to treat the sage-grouse as a sensitive species and monitor its numbers and health throughout its range in 11 Western states.

Most populations of Greater Sage-grouse have been declining for years due to pressure from energy development, grazing, farming, invasive species, fires, herbicides and more recently the West Nile virus. In fact, 20 of 27 sage-grouse populations have declined since 1995, according to the latest analysis, while only seven populations were stable or increased during the same period.

Besides highlighting the plight of an important Western species, today’s announcement sends a strong warning about the decline of the sagebrush habitat where sage-grouse live. Overshadowed by the West’s majestic mountains and forests, sagebrush provides vital food and cover to sage-grouse and many other species, including pronghorn antelope and mule deer.

**“Unfortunately, sagebrush is the most overlooked and underappreciated Western landscape,”** said Kate Zimmerman, senior policy analyst for the National Wildlife Federation in Colorado. **“If we don’t pay attention to what science is telling us, sage-grouse and other sagebrush species – even pronghorn antelope – could end up in deeper trouble.** Losing this unique habitat would also be devastating for the many people who enjoy outdoor recreation or rely on tourism in sagebrush country.”

Although the USFWS ruling was encouraging because it was based on science and recognizes the sage-grouse’s predicament, important questions remain about how the bird’s habitat will be managed to stem further declines, said Ben Deeble, sagebrush habitat expert with the National Wildlife Federation in Montana.

**“A business-as-usual approach isn’t going to conserve the sage-grouse or its sagebrush habitat,”** Deeble said. “Now that the federal government acknowledges the decline of sage-grouse, we need to ensure that its land-management agencies reconcile their energy-development practices with the latest wildlife science. And we need strategies to cope with the impacts of drought, fires and invasive species brought on by climate change.”

Another key to saving sage-grouse is increased collaboration among state and federal agencies, private organizations and landowners, he said.

“A few governors have already taken steps to protect sage-grouse in their states, and we need to build on that momentum,” Deeble said. “Now we need partnerships on both public and private lands to properly manage and enhance the best remaining habitats.”

After giving the public 90 days to comment on its proposal, the USFWS is expected to publish a final finding within a year.

*The [National Wildlife Federation](#) is America's conservation organization inspiring Americans to protect wildlife for our children's future.*

**Contacts:**

- Blair Johnson, National Wildlife Federation, 303-887-9429, [bjohnson@nwf.org](mailto:bjohnson@nwf.org)
- Aislinn Maestas, National Wildlife Federation, 202-797-6624, [Maestas@nwf.org](mailto:Maestas@nwf.org)