



Protecting Wildlife for our children's future



Frequently Asked Questions

About Greater Sage-Grouse and the Endangered Species Act

What is a Greater Sage-grouse?

The Greater Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is a large game bird native to sagebrush habitat in the western North America and noted for its elaborate courtship displays. Today it is found in 11 western states (WA, ID, OR, MT, UT, CO, NV, CA, WY, ND, SD) and two Canadian provinces (Alberta and Saskatchewan). To thrive, sage-grouse populations require vast expanses of high-quality sagebrush grasslands. Some populations are migratory, and individual sage-grouse may use 200 square miles of habitat annually. Sage-grouse have lower reproductive rates and longer life-spans than most game birds, and are highly sensitive to habitat disturbance. A second species, the Gunnison Sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus minimus*), is found only in Colorado. Because of the sage-grouse's requirements for large tracts of high quality habitat, they are considered an "umbrella" species for the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem; that means adequate efforts to maintain sage-grouse populations will likely also ensure the survival of hundreds of other wildlife and plant species in the American West.

Why are Greater Sage-grouse being proposed for Endangered Species protection now?

Sage-grouse populations have disappeared from six states and provinces during the last century; elsewhere its occupied range has contracted significantly and is increasingly fragmented. Since 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has received seven petitions from individuals and organizations to list Greater Sage-grouse as "threatened" or "endangered" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2005, the USFWS found that Greater Sage-grouse were "not warranted" for new federal protections anywhere in their range. That decision was challenged and a federal court in Idaho ordered the USFWS to prepare a new decision by March 2010.

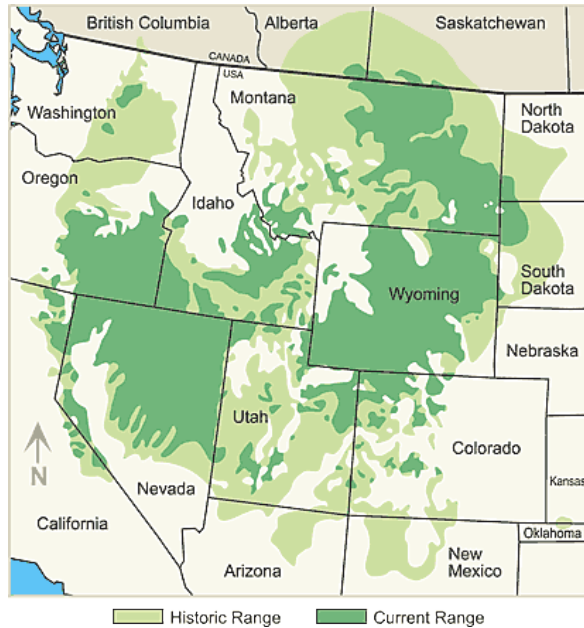


Photo: Steve W. Sherman, Lonewolf Photography

What does the population data show?

The latest population analysis published in *Studies in Avian Biology* (Garton et al. 2010 In press) shows that 20 of 27 known sage-grouse populations have declined since 1995 and that seven populations are stable or increasing.

during the same period. Several populations are small and isolated, and only remnant populations survive in the periphery of the range in Canada, the Dakotas, Washington and California. Although there are at least 300,000 Greater Sage-grouse now, Garton’s models suggest that 75 percent of today’s sage-grouse populations will decline to less than 500 individuals each within 100 years.



What factors are believed to be causing sage-grouse declines?

Habitat loss is the principle cause of sage-grouse population declines. Habitat loss is driven by many factors, including : urban development; agriculture; roads; energy production; and the creation of large reservoirs. Other factors affecting habitat and reducing adult survival and reproductive success, stressing populations and contributing to declines include: the invasion of exotic weeds and trees , spraying or intentional fires set to eradicate sagebrush, climate change with associated increases in wildfire and drought, wire fences and transmission lines that fragment habitats and cause lethal collisions, and overgrazing by livestock. In addition, since arriving in 2005 and spreading to most states, the West Nile virus has proven highly lethal to sage-grouse.

What are the roles that state and federal governments play in managing Sage-grouse?

States with Greater Sage-grouse populations manage population monitoring and hunter harvest. All states have prepared sage-grouse management plans specific to their populations. Those plans describe the threats to populations and habitats, and tools for reducing the threats. Five years ago an expert panel convened by the USFWS did not consider hunting harvest to be contributing to sage-grouse extinctions anywhere. States can rapidly suspend hunting if populations are declining from unrelated factors, and have done so in several places already (examples: Washington state and North Dakota, and parts of Idaho, Colorado, Oregon, Nevada and California).

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is responsible for managing the majority of remaining sage-grouse habitat. It already considers Greater Sage-grouse a “sensitive species” and has developed a national conservation strategy. However this has not yet halted the permitting of activities known to harm sage-grouse populations in important habitats. Separately, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is piloting new programs to bring substantial financial aid to private landowners willing to adopt practices beneficial to sage-grouse habitats and populations.

What are the implications of a “listing” to public and private lands?

A “threatened” or “endangered” listing would require the USFWS to identify “critical habitat” for Greater Sage-grouse and prohibit adverse modification of these habitats. The agency would also prohibit actions which jeopardize survival of the species, and require permits for any “take” of greater sage-grouse on public or private lands. Preparation of “biological assessments” would determine if certain activities would further imperil the

species. Several types of activities permitted on public lands, such as energy development, construction projects, and livestock grazing, would likely be subjected to such analysis. If grouse populations instead received a “warranted but precluded” designation, no new protections will be required on any lands. However, states and agencies may act to limit activities that could cause populations to decline further. Also, private landowners or companies may voluntarily develop “candidate conservation agreements with assurances” (CCAA) with the USFWS guaranteeing good habitat and population conservation practices, and several regions are working with the USFWS to draft CCAs.

How does sage-grouse conservation affect development of conventional and renewable energy resources?

If USFWS determines that the sage-grouse warrants protection under ESA, but the agency is “precluded” by higher priorities from proceeding with a listing decision at this time, there may be no effect on energy development on either federal or private lands. BLM will continue to treat sage-grouse as a “sensitive” species on federal lands. No sage-grouse protection under ESA would be required on private lands. However, should the Great Sage-grouse be listed as either threatened or endangered, conventional and renewable energy projects within critical habitat on federal lands would have to be conducted in manner that would not result in “adverse impacts” to habitats. This might require that drill rigs, wind turbines and other infrastructure be placed a safe distance from breeding, nesting and winter habitats. Some public lands might be closed entirely to energy development because safe distances could not be maintained. Energy development on private lands could also be impacted. The ESA prohibits “taking” of an endangered or threatened animal, unless permitted by the USFWS. “Taking” can mean habitat alteration resulting in harm to the species. Current research indicates that energy development can harm sage-grouse if conducted without appropriate safeguards.

What are the National Wildlife Federation and its affiliates doing for sage-grouse conservation?

NWF and its state affiliates have been encouraging sage-grouse conservation at various levels for more than a decade. However, we have not been involved in any of the petitions or litigation to list sage-grouse under the Endangered Species Act. Staff and volunteers have been involved in developing state conservation plans, serving on local sage-grouse working groups, and helping governors designate “core areas” and wildlife corridors where habitat protection will be prioritized. NWF has formally appealed various planning and leasing decisions for public lands where they contradicted best habitat management practices for sage-grouse. We have also supported research and private-lands conservation programs aimed at answering key questions about grouse or designed to create public-private partnerships for their conservation. (This work has been guided in part by four resolutions advanced by affiliates and adopted at NWF’s national meetings regarding sage-grouse and sagebrush-steppe habitat conservation.)

What are the next steps in the listing and legal process?

After the USFWS publishes its “Proposed 12-month Finding” concerning the listing of Greater Sage-grouse, the public will have 90 days to comment on it. The USFWS will consider comments and publish a final finding within one year.

Need more information?

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