ing up."

Blunck sat there and watched as the who's who of halfpipe skiers dropped into the pipe. By the time all was said and done, Blunck's score held up and he stepped up onto the second spot on the podium.

"It was kind of surreal but I realized all of the training I've done has finally paid off," says Blunck.

"It was just a matter of time," adds Chase. "He's a great skier and a good competitor."

Immediately following the event, talk of an invitation to the X Games for Blunck started circulating.

Games invitation,'" explains Blunck. "It's crazy. My first thought was, 'WOW, this isn't real.'"

"He's demonstrated his abilities," says Chase. "His skiing spoke for itself. But, it's not just about getting into the X Games; it's about getting there and making some noise."

The next day Blunck received the official invitation and put together two solid runs to qualify for the slopestyle finals at the Whistler event.

He will also compete in the halfpipe competition on Thursday, January 17 before returning to Colorado

says Blunck. "One new trick that I've landed and hopefully a second trick that I will work on the week before X Games."

As for Sochi, the qualification process is still somewhat dubious with numerous variables in play, most of which are out of Blunck's hands.

"Now it's just about keeping himself in the top spots," says Chase. "Keep skiing well and not worry about it."

"It helps that I got my name out there more," adds Blunck.

# Gunnison sage grouse proposed as endangered species

*Calling for stronger local conservation efforts*

[ BY ALISSA JOHNSON ]

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced last week that it is recommending listing the Gunnison sage grouse as an Endangered Species.

The agency also proposed designating 1.7 million acres of critical habitat for the species—including 736,802 acres in the Gunnison Basin. That could have major repercussions for development and recreation in Gunnison County, and it's an outcome local groups have been trying to circumvent.

"It's not a surprise, but it is a disappointment," says Gunnison County wildlife coordinator Jim Cochran. The county's Gunnison Sage Grouse Strategic Committee, local land management agencies and private stakeholders like the ranching community have been working to both protect the Gunnison sage grouse population and keep land management in local control.

Locally, stakeholders have been developing a candidate conservation agreement, enacted land use regulations that include review of projects proposed in sage grouse habitat and sought conservation easements to protect the species. But those steps don't go far enough, according to the Federal Register Notice filed by the Fish and Wildlife Service on Friday, January 11.

"They appear not to have recognized any of the conservation efforts that the state, the local governments, the county and private individuals have put forth for 20 years now," Cochran said.

According to the Federal Register Notice filed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation due to increasing development are the principal threats to the Gunnison sage grouse. But citing future population growth and development, the document also stated there were "inadequate local, State, and Federal regulatory mechanisms (e.g. laws, regulations, zoning) to conserve the species."

But Patty Gellatt, Fish and Wildlife Service supervisor, said the agency is very appreciative of the ongoing conservation efforts. She made a point of recognizing the entities involved in that process over that last 20 years. Protections simply need to go further.

"There are some limited protections in Gunnison County. They do have a review procedure for projects that are proposed in sage grouse habitat," Gellatt said. San Miguel County also has a clause in some of its regulations to seek input from Colorado Parks and Wildlife for projects in sage grouse habitat. "But as far as the other populations, there's no local land use stipulations to protect those populations," said Gellatt.

That's one point that some local stakeholders are hoping to refute in coming weeks. A 60-day public comment period gives stakeholders the chance to submit new information or scientific data to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Cochran said Parks and Wildlife staff are already surveying counties in the Gunnison Basin to determine whether existing wildlife protections might also offer protection to the sage grouse.

Cochran hopes that over the next nine months—the Fish and Wildlife Service has to make its final decision by September 30 of this year—the county and its partners can convince the Fish and Wildlife Service that a status of "Threatened" will provide adequate protection for the sage grouse and give the county a little more flexibility in managing development and sage grouse protection.

Cochran also wants more clarity on the potential designation of critical habitat in areas where sage grouse are not currently found. In the decision document, the Fish and Wildlife Service states that some habitat restoration may be required to support the sage grouse population as it recovers and grows into currently unoccupied areas.

"Limiting the designation of critical habitat in this unit only to currently occupied areas would be inadequate to ensure the conservation of the species," the decision states.

The document continues, "Some unoccupied habitat areas within this unit consist of lands that recently supported sagebrush-dominant plant communities but are currently in agricultural production or are currently subject to encroachment by coniferous trees or shrubs, most commonly piñon juniper or mountain shrub plant communities. These areas require restoration to reestablish or enhance sagebrush communities to support the primary constituent elements of Gunnison sage-grouse nesting or broodrearing habitat."

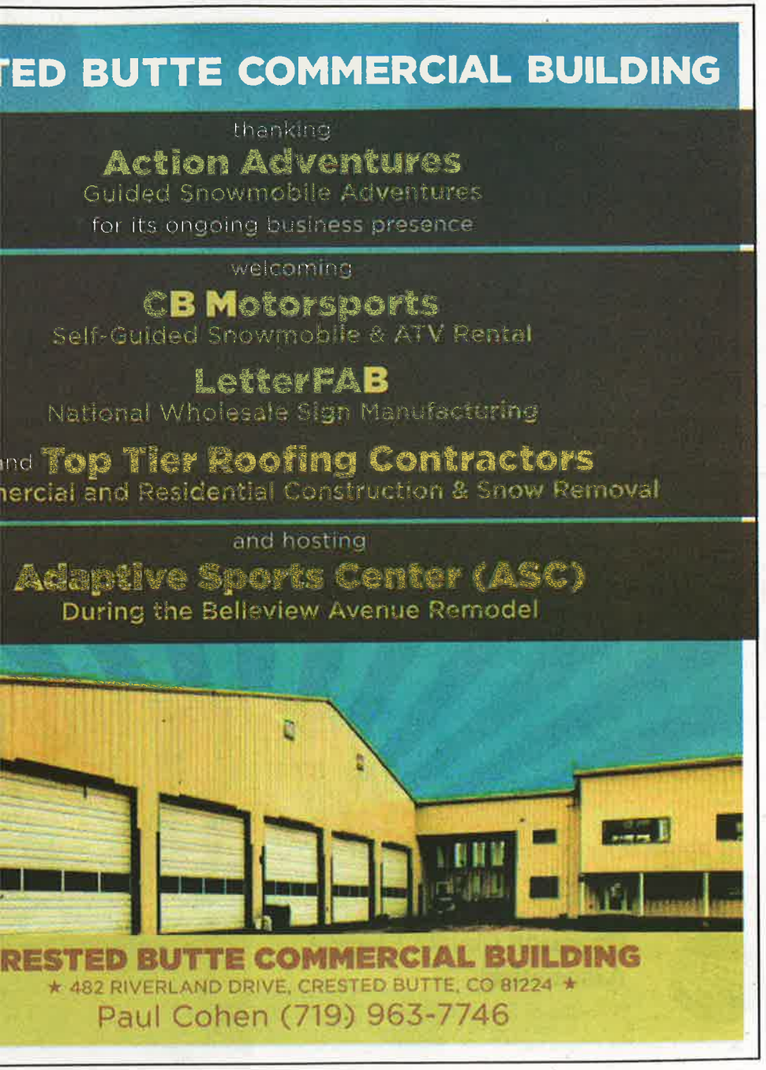
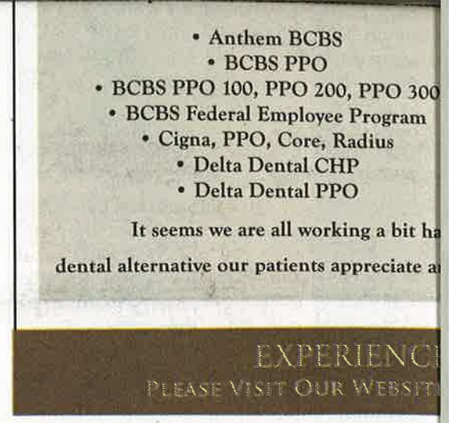
One such area may lie south of the city of Gunnison and runs all the way to Hinsdale County. According to Cochran, since the area is primarily forest, he wonders if restoration would be required. It's one of the many questions he'll seek to address as he reviews the entire decision document for the county.

There are more than 200 pages to review in order to understand the full decision, and that will be the next step for agencies like the Bureau of Land Management as well. Gunnison field officer Brian St. George said he's still digesting the proposal.

The Board of County Commissioners is opting to wait for input from Cochran and others once they've had the chance to do a full review. "Since the decision came out, the Sage Grouse Committee hasn't met. They'll be working on official comments for the county and bringing those to the commissioners for commissioners," said commissioner Paula Swenson on Tuesday, January 15.

In the meantime, Cochran believes there may be some hope for a reduced status. He said, "The Fish and Wildlife Service has repeatedly offered the example of the Dunes Sage Brush lizard in northwestern Texas. They proposed it as threatened and in the intervening year it took to get to the final rule they actually delisted it," Cochran said. "There's a carrot out there."

Gellatt herself has encouraged the Gunnison Sage Grouse Strategic Committee to take a close look at that example—very strong protective measures were put in place with assurances that they would happen, and the agency was able to change its determination.

But she did caution, "In the case of the Gunnison sage grouse it becomes more difficult. The lizard occurs in a very specific habitat which can be avoided, and when we're talking about sage brush habitat it occurs in such large areas, and that's what the bird needs—large areas of habitat, so total avoidance is more difficult."

Members of the public who are interested in learning more can opt to attend one of three open house-style meetings: January 23 in Gunnison, January 30 in Montrose, and January 31 in Dove Creek from 5 to 7 p.m. Presentations will be repeated at 5:15 and 6:15 p.m. to give more people the chance to attend.