

*News Release*

# **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Protects Gunnison Sage-Grouse as Threatened Under Endangered Species Act**

***For Immediate Release***

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**Gunnison sage-grouse. Credit: Mike Danzenbaker.**

DENVER, Colo. - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has determined that the Gunnison sage-grouse, a ground-dwelling bird found only in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, requires the protection of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as a threatened species.

The Service originally proposed to list the species as 'endangered' under the ESA in January 2013, but efforts by the two states, tribes, local communities, private landowners and other stakeholders to conserve the species and its habitat have helped reduce the threats to the bird sufficiently to give it the more flexibly protected status of 'threatened.' The Service's efforts to work with plaintiffs to extend the court settlement deadline to allow more time for development of conservation commitments by counties and states were unsuccessful, and therefore the agency must proceed with this listing and critical habitat designation today.

Today's listing decision will have no impact upon many of the area's agricultural landowners. Those who previously entered into agreements known as 'Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances' need only to continue to abide by those agreements in order to fully comply with the ESA. Other landowners who participate in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service programs including the 'Sage-Grouse Initiative,' 'Working Lands for Wildlife' and the 'Conservation Reserve Program,' can continue to implement the practices covered by those programs with the knowledge that they will be consistent with the ESA.

In addition, because the Service has determined that the species is 'threatened,' instead of 'endangered' the ESA provides the Service the flexibility to tailor the conservation measures needed to protect the species through a special 4(d) rule, which it intends to propose in early 2015 to allow still other ranchers, farmers and other landowners who commit to Gunnison sage-grouse conservation to continue to manage their lands without additional restrictions.

"USDA's partnerships with farmers and ranchers in voluntary efforts such as the 'Sage Grouse Initiative' and the 'Conservation Reserve Program' are helping to support both sound wildlife habitat management and agricultural production," said Jason Weller, Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief. "By harnessing innovative approaches included in today's announcement, USDA is committed to working with producers to voluntarily plan and deliver conservation activities that will help them be productive and give them certainty that they are in compliance with the ESA."

"While many people hoped that the extraordinary conservation efforts by our partners in Colorado and Utah would resolve all the threats faced by the Gunnison sage-grouse, the best available science indicates that the species still requires the Act's protection," said Service Director Dan Ashe. "This is a work in progress, however, and we will continue to join our partners in protecting and restoring the rangelands with the hope

that, in the near future, the Gunnison sage-grouse will no longer need additional protection."

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To build on recent work between the state, counties, and other stakeholders, the Service and the Governor of Colorado will convene stakeholders within the next few weeks, to discuss the upcoming 4(d) rule and steps to expeditiously return full management authority to the states of Colorado and Utah through delisting.

"We applaud the combined efforts of our many agency and local partners, as well as private landowners across the species' range, for tackling the significant challenges faced by the Gunnison sage-grouse," added Ashe. "Colorado Parks and Wildlife and Gunnison County in particular are to be commended for their many years of diligent, effective work to conserve habitat through easements and conservation agreements with landowners. Their work has made a difference that will allow more flexibility in managing this species under the ESA."

Noreen Walsh, Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region, said that the Service will take steps to minimize the impact of the threatened designation on activities that do not harm the species or contribute to its overall conservation.

"Our goal is to make sure we use of all the tools in our tool kit as we work with partners toward the recovery of this bird and the long-term conservation of its habitat," Walsh said. "We want to build upon the great work of Gunnison County and more recently Montrose, Dolores and San Miguel, to continue to foster growth of these populations in a way that recognizes the protections already in place. We hope to continue to work with our partners to recover this unique species and return it to exclusive state management as quickly as possible."

The Service will propose a 4(d) rule, which would tailor restrictions to only those that are necessary for the conservation of the species. Such a rule may exempt from ESA restrictions a number of ongoing activities, including properly managed livestock and ranching activities; routine agricultural practices on existing row crops, hay fields, and pastures; habitat improvement or protection projects conducted under the federal 'Sage-Grouse Initiative' or 'Conservation Reserve Program'; and limited expansion of existing agricultural, residential and commercial facilities. This proposed rule, if adopted, would be finalized in 2015.

By limiting ESA restrictions to only those that are necessary for the recovery of the sage-grouse, the Service would endeavor to promote land uses that are more favorable to the bird, such as ranching, and encourage continued participation in the USDA's 'Sage-Grouse Initiative' and 'Conservation Reserve Program.'

In making the listing determination, the Service found that, thanks to conservation efforts led by Gunnison County and Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Gunnison Basin population, which includes about 80 percent of the remaining birds, currently appears stable. However, six smaller, isolated satellite populations, stretching from the edge of the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado to the edge of southeastern Utah, are much less robust, with populations as small as 16 birds and as large as 200. If anything happened to the core population, healthy satellite populations would be essential to enable the species to rebound.

"The health of sage-grouse in and around the Gunnison Basin is a key indicator of the health of sagebrush habitat, which also supports activities such as ranching and big-game hunting which are central to the western way of life in the area," Walsh added. "Efforts focused on recovery of sage-grouse populations will reap long-term benefits for rangelands and the economy of the region."

Concurrent with publication of the final rule, the Service is designating 1.4 million acres of critical habitat as necessary for the species' recovery and survival, including the satellite populations. The critical habitat designation only affects actions of federal agencies and it does not establish a refuge, restrict access to private land, or affect private activities on private lands.

The final critical habitat designation has been reduced by approximately 275,000 acres below the proposed designation, reflecting exclusion of properties with existing sage-grouse conservation plans or conservation easements, and refinement of some boundaries based on updated maps. In addition, the proposed Poncha Pass unit was removed from the final critical habitat designation because this landscape has demonstrated over time that it is not capable of supporting a self-sustaining population of Gunnison sage-grouse.

Once numerous in sagebrush and nearby meadow and streamside habitats in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, Gunnison sage-grouse have declined to approximately 5,000 breeding birds occupying between seven and 12 percent of their historical range.

The Gunnison sage-grouse is a distinct species from the greater sage-grouse, a larger bird which exists across a much broader range throughout the West and, in some places, faces different threats. The decision on the Gunnison sage-grouse in no way predetermines a decision on the greater sage-grouse, which the Service is independently evaluating.

First recognized as a species in 2000, the Gunnison sage-grouse is about two-thirds the size of the greater sage-grouse. It exhibits distinct plumage and behavioral characteristics and has a much smaller population and smaller, more fragmented range than its cousin.

In September 2010, the Service determined that listing the Gunnison sage-grouse under ESA was warranted but precluded by higher priorities.

In January 2013, the Service proposed to list the Gunnison sage-grouse as endangered, due to a variety of threats including habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation associated with residential and human development across its range and, in particular, in the Gunnison Basin. Using new information received during the public comment period and the peer-review process, the Service reevaluated residential development and found it to be currently a lower-level threat to the Gunnison Basin population than previous analysis indicated.

The Service's final listing and critical habitat rules, and additional information about the Gunnison sage-grouse are available [here](#).