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

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 decision-making 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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## Q&A's – Sage Grouse 12-Month Finding

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### **What is the Service's determination regarding the status of the greater sage-grouse?**

After evaluating all the available scientific and commercial information regarding sage-grouse, including an analysis of the threats to sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat, the Service has determined that protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is not warranted.

### **What information did the Service use to make this decision?**

The Service based its final determination on the accumulated scientific data provided by State and Federal agencies and Tribes, as well as data and information provided through commercial and public comments. The review of relevant materials included the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (WAFWA) Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-grouse and Sagebrush Habitats for all 11 states where the species currently occurs in the U.S. Scientific peer review of the Conservation Assessment was conducted by the Ecological Society of America.

### **Why did the Service conduct a range-wide status review of the greater sage-grouse?**

The Service received three petitions to list the greater sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species from the American Lands Alliance, the Institute for Wildlife Protection, and Mr. Craig C. Dremann. In April of 2004, the Service completed its review of the petitions and determined that the petitions as well as other information in our files provided substantial biological information indicating that further review of the status of the greater sage-grouse was warranted. The Service then initiated a full status review to determine whether listing of the greater sage-grouse was warranted.

### **What is a status review?**

A status review is an in-depth examination of all the scientific information relating to a species and its habitat.

The Service sought out all available scientific and commercial information on sage-grouse population trends, as well as information on the loss and modification of sagebrush habitat. The purpose of the status review was to determine whether the greater sage-grouse warranted listing as endangered or threatened under the ESA. This differs from a 90-day petition finding, for which we are only required to evaluate the information in the petitions and what is available in our files.

### **How did the Service make this determination?**

The Service used several coordinated teams to compile and review existing data and additional data and information received through public comments. This process included reviewing information on past and on-going activities that influence greater sage-grouse populations and habitat, as well as planned conservation efforts.

The Service employed a structured analysis process to evaluate the threats to the species. Included in this process was the use of an expert panel of independent scientists to discuss and prioritize all the available biological and ecological information. The panelists used their independent expert judgment to estimate the extinction risk for greater sage-grouse by analyzing the resilience and vulnerability of the species to changing environmental conditions. The panel included experts in greater sage-grouse, plant ecology, rangeland health, and invasive species.

### **How did the Service determine the extinction risk for greater sage-grouse?**

After a facilitated discussion on the biology and ecology of sage-grouse and the sagebrush ecosystem, the expert panel members were asked to independently apply their judgment to estimate the extinction risk for greater sage-grouse at various timeframes into the future. These exercises and discussions occurred in the presence of the team of Service senior-level biologists to help inform the status review decision.

Using all the available scientific data relating to greater sage-grouse as well as the discussion with the expert panel, the Service determined that greater sage-grouse are not likely to become endangered or go extinct in the foreseeable future. "Foreseeable future" is defined in this case as 30 to 100 years using a formula that incorporates 10 sage-grouse generations (approximately 30 to 50 years) and two sagebrush ecosystem restoration cycles (approximately 60 to 100 years).

### **Has the Service used the structured decision process for other species?**

Yes. The structured decision process employed in this instance has been used with work on the slickspot pepper grass, the North Charlotte goshawk, the Archipelago gray wolf, and the five-year status reviews for the marbled murrelet and northern spotted owl.

### **Who served on the expert panel?**

The panel included scientists from Federal and state agencies and several State universities who are 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.

### **Since the status of greater sage-grouse does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, does that mean that there is no concern about the species' future?**

No. Under the Endangered Species Act, for a species to be listed it must be endangered (in danger of extinction within all or a significant portion of its range) or threatened (likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future). At this time, the status of sage-grouse does not meet either standard. However, the scientific data directs attention to the continuing need to conserve greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat on a long-term basis. Federal and state agencies and private landowners recognized this need several years ago and instituted conservation efforts that continue to be planned and implemented today.

### **What are the primary threats to greater sage-grouse?**

Threats to the sagebrush ecosystem vary across the expanse of this habitat type. Generally, however, conservation efforts should be focused on the most important threats such as: control of invasive species, proper management of oil and gas development, and careful planning of infrastructure development (e.g. power lines, roads, fences, etc.) in order to minimize the loss of sagebrush habitat.

### **How many sage-grouse are there?**

Current estimates range from approximately 100,000 to 500,000 individuals. Sage-grouse populations declined an average of 3.5 percent per year from 1965 to 1985. Since 1986, however, populations in several States have generally stabilized or even increased in recent years and the range-wide rate of decline slowed to an average of 0.37 percent per year from 1986 to 2003.

### **What is a greater sage-grouse and where do they live?**

Greater sage-grouse are large, rounded-winged, ground-dwelling birds, up to 30 inches long and two feet tall, weighing from two to seven pounds. They have 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 displays. They are found in 11 States: Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Small populations are also found in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan.

### **How much sagebrush habitat is there?**

Current sagebrush habitat is estimated at approximately 160 million acres – about half of historic acreage.

### **Is the Greater Sage Grouse the only wildlife dependent upon sagebrush habitats?**

No. In fact, the following wildlife species are either partially or entirely dependent upon sagebrush habitat: Pronghorn Antelope (also benefits from grassland habitats), the Sage Thrasher, the Gunnison Sage-Grouse (different species--in UT and western CO), the Pygmy Rabbit (petition finding pending), the Sage Sparrow (obligate), the Brewer's Sparrow, Ferruginous hawks, the Loggerhead Shrike, and the White-Tailed Prairie Dog.

### **What is being done to conserve greater sage-grouse?**

Concern about long-term declines in greater sage-grouse populations has prompted western State wildlife agencies and Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to engage in a variety of cooperative efforts aimed at conserving and managing sagebrush habitat for the benefit of greater sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species.

- Beginning in 1998, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA), FWS and BLM formed a cooperative relationship to identify and implement conservation strategies throughout the range. This effort led to the WAFWA Conservation Assessment of Greater Sage-Grouse and Sagebrush Habitats, a compilation of sage-grouse and sagebrush literature and data.
- Western States that include portions of the current range of sage-grouse are developing conservation plans to address issues such as habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation, and to identify opportunities for habitat restoration and enhancement. The goal is to find and implement local solutions for sage-grouse conservation.
- Since 2001 the Service has provided Utah with \$2.4 million and Washington with \$730,000 for the restoration of sagebrush habitat. Through its Landowner Incentive Program, the Service also provided \$1.4 million to Montana to improve the management of sagebrush habitat on private lands there.
- The Shoshone and Arapaho tribes, on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, will use part of a recently awarded \$190,000 Tribal Wildlife Grant to monitor sage-grouse populations, develop a management plan for the grouse and its habitat, and enhance the sagebrush ecosystem.
- BLM has produced the final version of an interim national strategy outlining additional steps it will take to maintain, enhance and restore sage-grouse habitat on America's public lands. The strategy will guide BLM field offices until state and local sage-grouse conservation plans, developed in collaboration with state wildlife experts, are completed and made part of BLM land-use plans.