



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Questions and Answers Greater Sage Grouse 12-Month Finding Status Review Completed

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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.