

## NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
Mountain-Prairie Region  
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### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to Initiate a Status Review of the Greater Sage-Grouse**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that substantial biological information exists to warrant a more in-depth examination of the status of greater sage-grouse. This finding will commence with a full status review of the species, and once the review is complete, the Service will determine whether to propose listing the species as either threatened or endangered.

The Service has completed its evaluation of three petitions to list the greater sage-grouse range wide as either threatened or endangered. The Service has determined that the petitions and other available information provide substantial biological information indicating that further review of the status of the species is warranted.

The information details loss, fragmentation, and degradation of sage-grouse habitat due to wildfire, invasion of non-native plants, livestock management, agricultural conversion, herbicide treatment and mining and energy development, among other causes.

The Service's decision commonly known as a 90-Day Finding is based on scientific information about the species provided in three petitions requesting listing of the species under the Act.

The Service is preparing to send this finding to the Federal Register.

“It is important to note that our finding regarding these petitions does not mean that the Service has decided it is appropriate to list the greater sage grouse,” explained Ralph Morgenweck, the Service's Director of the Mountain-Prairie Region. “Rather, this finding is the first step in a long process that triggers a more thorough review of all the biological information available. This process, which includes a request for input from the public, should be completed within 12 months of receiving the petitions.”

This status review will determine whether the greater sage-grouse warrants listing as a threatened or endangered species.

To ensure this status review is comprehensive, we are soliciting information from State and Federal natural resource agencies and all interested parties regarding the greater sage-grouse and its sagebrush habitat, Morgenweck added.

Based on the status review, the Service will make one of three possible determinations:

- 1) Listing is not warranted in which case no further action will be taken.
- 2) Listing as threatened or endangered is warranted. In this case, the Service will publish a proposal to list, solicit independent scientific peer review of the proposal, seek input from the public, and consider the input before a final decision about listing the species is made. Generally, there is a one-year period between the time a species is proposed and the final decision.
- 3) Listing is warranted but precluded by other, higher priority activities. This means the species is added to the Federal list of candidate species, and the proposal to list is deferred while the Service works on listing proposals for other species that are at greater risk. A warranted but precluded finding requires subsequent annual reviews of the finding until such time as either a listing proposal is published, or a not warranted finding is made based on new information.

Concern about long-term declines in sage-grouse populations has prompted western State wildlife agencies and Federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), 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 sage-grouse and other sagebrush-dependent species:

- For example, over the past five years, the BLM has worked with several western states on cooperative sage-grouse conservation projects and has established partnerships with communities throughout the West to conserve and restore sage-grouse habitat. These locally-driven efforts are designed to head off continued loss of America's important sagebrush ecosystems, which support hundreds of plant and animal species, including sage-grouse.
- Approximately one half of the sagebrush habitat in the United States is on land administered by the BLM. This year, BLM will continue to work on a variety of projects to map and monitor sage-grouse populations and habitat, develop cooperative conservation projects to conserve these game birds, and work with State and Federal partners on other conservation planning initiatives.
- The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is leading the preparation of a range wide conservation assessment of the sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat, with strong cooperation from the Federal agencies. The assessment, scheduled for completion in May of this year, will be a valuable source of information regarding sage-grouse ecology.
- 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.

Sage-grouse depend almost entirely on sagebrush for food and protection from predators. In the summer, the birds depend on the grass and plants that grow under the sagebrush to provide nesting material, as well as high-protein insects that are critical to the diet of chicks in their first month of life. In winter, more than 99 percent of their diet is sagebrush leaves and buds.

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 province of Alberta.

The greater sage-grouse is found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet. First described by Lewis and Clark during their expedition that began in 1804, it is an inhabitant of the open sagebrush plains. It is a large, rounded-winged, ground-dwelling bird, up to 30 inches in length 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 sacs on their breasts, which they inflate during their mating display.

Anyone wishing to submit information regarding the greater sage-grouse may do so by writing to the Field Supervisor, Wyoming Ecological Services Office, 4000 Airport Parkway, Cheyenne, Wyoming 82001 or by electronic mail to: [fw6\\_sagegrouse@fws.gov](mailto:fw6_sagegrouse@fws.gov). Comments must be received within 60 days after publication of this finding in the Federal Register.

For more information about the sage-grouse and this finding, please visit the Service's web site at: <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/irds/sagegrouse/>

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 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 fishery resource 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

governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

For more information about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, visit our home page at <http://www.fws.gov>

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## **Questions and Answers Regarding the Petitions to List the Greater Sage-Grouse**

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### **What is the Service's finding regarding the petitions to list the Greater Sage-Grouse?**

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has received three petitions to list the greater sage-grouse as threatened or endangered throughout its range. The Service has found that the petitions provide sufficient information that listing may be warranted and will begin a status review of the species.

This is the first step in the process to determine whether or not the greater sage-grouse should receive protection under the Endangered Species Act.

For more information about the petition and listing process visit the Service's web site at: <http://endangered.fws.gov/listing/petition.pdf>

### ***Sage Grouse Information***

#### **What is the greater sage-grouse?**

The greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is a large, ground-dwelling bird. Measuring as much as 30 inches in length and two feet tall, it weighs from two to seven pounds. It has a long, pointed tail with legs feathered to the base of the toes and fleshy yellow combs over the eyes. Males are larger than females and sport a white ruff around their necks in addition to the typical mottled brown, black and white plumage.

The greater sage-grouse is found at elevations ranging from 4,000 to over 9,000 feet. It is an omnivore, eating mainly sagebrush, some other soft plants, and insects. One of the most interesting aspects of the greater sage-grouse is its nearly complete reliance on sagebrush. These birds cannot survive in areas where sagebrush no longer exists.

#### **What is the range of the greater sage-grouse?**

The historic range of the greater sage-grouse included Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, South Dakota, North Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Mexico, Arizona, and the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and

Saskatchewan. Greater sage-grouse have apparently disappeared from Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

### **Why are we concerned about greater sage-grouse?**

Recent estimates indicate that greater sage-grouse populations have declined by approximately 86 percent from historic levels.

One of the greatest threats to greater sage-grouse populations may be the destruction and loss of sagebrush habitat. Sagebrush once covered approximately 156 million acres in western North America. Research indicates that almost none of the remaining habitat is unaltered. Approximately one-half of the original area occupied by greater sage-grouse is no longer capable of supporting greater sage-grouse on a year-round basis.

### **Why is sagebrush habitat so important to greater sage-grouse?**

Greater sage-grouse depend almost entirely on sagebrush for food, shelter, and protection from predators. In the summer, this species depends on the grass and plants that grow under the sagebrush to provide nesting material and cover, as well as high-protein insects for food. These insects are a critical food source for chicks in their first month of life. In winter, more than 99 percent of their diet is sagebrush leaves and buds.

Although sagebrush may seem hardy, it can take years to recover once it is removed by fire or other causes. A number of other species also depend on sagebrush habitat, including brewer's sparrow, burrowing owls, long-billed curlews, sage sparrows, sage thrashers, loggerhead shrikes, and pygmy rabbits.

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

Threats to the greater sage-grouse may include loss and degradation of sagebrush habitat due to wildfire, invasion of non-native plants, poor livestock management, agricultural conversion, and mining and energy development among other causes.

### **Will this finding impact hunting seasons for greater sage-grouse?**

Hunting seasons for sage grouse are regulated by State fish and wildlife agencies.

### **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.

- For example, over the past five years, the Bureau of Land Management has worked with several western states on cooperative sage-grouse conservation projects and has established partnerships with communities throughout the West to conserve and restore sage-grouse habitat. These locally driven efforts are designed to head off continued loss of America's important sagebrush ecosystems, which support hundreds of plant and animal species, including sage-grouse.
- Approximately one-half of the sagebrush habitat in the United States is on land administered by the Bureau of Land Management. This year, BLM will continue to work on a variety of projects to map and monitor sage-grouse populations and habitat, develop cooperative conservation projects to conserve these game birds, and work with state and Federal partners on other conservation planning initiatives.
- The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is leading preparation of a range wide conservation assessment of the sage-grouse and sagebrush habitat, with strong cooperation from the Federal agencies. The assessment, scheduled for completion in May of this year, will be a valuable source of information regarding sage-grouse ecology.
- 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.
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### ***Petition Information***

The Endangered Species Act directs that to the maximum extent possible, within 90 days of receiving a petition, the Service is to make a finding as to whether the petition contains sufficient biological information to indicate that further review of the status of the species is warranted. This is known as a **90-day finding**.

### **What information did the Service use to make this 90-day finding?**

The Service examined the information contained in and referenced by the petitions, along with information in its files, to make the 90-day finding. This included information previously received from the States within the greater sage-grouse range.

### **Does this 90-day finding constitute a final decision to list the greater sage-grouse?**

No. The 90-day finding is not a decision to list the greater sage-grouse. This is the first step in the process to determine whether or not the greater sage grouse should be listed as a threatened or endangered species.

The Service will now conduct a comprehensive range wide status review of the greater sage-grouse. The result of this review, known as a 12-month finding, should be completed by early 2005. During this process the Service will consider input submitted from the States, other Federal agencies, and the public.

### **What information will the Service use to make the 12-month finding?**

During this status review, the Service will solicit all available information on the species' status, trends, and threats. The 12-month finding will be based on all available data, including the additional information gathered during the public comment period.

State conservation assessments and management plans as well as other efforts related to greater sage-grouse conservation activities on Federal, Tribal, and private lands will be considered during this decision-making process.

### **What are the possible outcomes of the 12-month finding?**

Based on the status review, the Service will make one of three possible determinations regarding the greater sage-grouse:

- 1) Listing is not warranted – in which case no further action will be taken.
- 2) Listing as threatened or endangered is warranted. In this case, the Service will polish a proposal to list, solicit independent scientific peer review of the proposal, seek input from the public, and consider the input before a final decision about listing the species is made. Generally, there is a one-year period between the time a species is proposed and the final decision.
- 3) Listing is warranted but precluded by other, higher priority activities. This means the species is added to the Federal list of candidate species, and the proposal to list is deferred while the Service works on listing proposals for other species that are at greater risk. A warranted but precluded finding requires subsequent annual reviews of the finding until such time as either a listing proposal is published, or a not warranted finding is made based on new information.

### **How do I submit comments on Service's 12-month finding?**

Information regarding the petitions to list the greater sage-grouse and the Service's 90-day finding are available on the Service's web site at:

<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/birds/sagegrouse/>

Anyone wishing to submit information regarding the greater sage-grouse may do so by writing to the Field Supervisor, Wyoming Ecological Services Office, 4000 Airport Parkway, Cheyenne, Wyoming 82001 or by electronic mail to: [fw6\\_sagegrouse@fws.gov](mailto:fw6_sagegrouse@fws.gov). Comments must be received within 60 days after publication of this finding in the Federal Register.