

Update on Status Review for the Greater Sage-Grouse
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
December 3, 2004

Q. What has the Fish and Wildlife Service done about the greater sage grouse so far?

A. Three organizations petitioned the Service to list the greater sage grouse as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. In accordance with the process outlined in the ESA, the Service completed an initial evaluation of those petitions in April 2004 and determined that the petitions provided substantial information. The agency then began a complete status review of the greater sage grouse to determine if listing the species is warranted. Public comments were requested. The status review, including a decision on whether listing is warranted, is due to be completed by December 29, 2004.

Q. What is the next step in this process?

A. Based on the status review, the Service must determine whether listing the species is not warranted, warranted, or warranted but precluded by higher-priority listing actions for other species. Under this process, if listing a species is found to be “warranted,” the next step is a formal proposal for listing with an opportunity for public comment. If listing is found to be “not warranted,” there is no further action under ESA. If the finding is “warranted but precluded,” the species becomes an official candidate for listing, but generally without the regulatory protections provided by the ESA, and its status is reviewed annually until such time as the Service either proposes to list it or determines that new information indicates that listing is no longer warranted.

Q. Has the Service reached a final decision on whether listing the sage-grouse is warranted?

A. No. The Director will render a final decision on the status review by December 29, 2004. In the meantime, the Service has gathered an extensive scientific record on the conservation status of the sage grouse, coordinated with range States on the status of their resident populations, and conducted a recent meeting with expert scientists to receive their individual views on the extinction risk, if any, faced by the greater sage grouse. All of the scientific data accumulated are now being used to prepare a decision document that will be presented to the Service’s Director for final review early in December.

Q. Can you tell us what the conclusion in the document being prepared by the Service’s field scientists will be?

A. At this stage in the process, based on the accumulated scientific data and the individual input received from the outside scientists, agency scientists have recommended to the Service Director in favor of a finding that listing the greater sage grouse is not warranted. Completion of the decision-making must await the drafting, review, and final approval of the status review by late December. Many complex scientific and technical issues must be addressed thoroughly in the status review finding, and no final agency determination can, or will be made until these analyses are reviewed and approved. Further information on the status of the Service's decision making will not be provided until the actual decision is announced.

Q. What information are your scientists using to make this recommendation?

A. In order to make a determination based on the best scientific data available, the Service has reviewed scientific information provided by the States, Federal agencies, and interested parties and has used several coordinated teams to compile and review existing data and additional information received through public comment. 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 also included the conservation assessment of greater sage-grouse and its habitat developed under the auspices of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA). The assessment included data on the status of the sage-grouse and its habitat 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.

Q. Can you tell us who the outside experts were who reviewed the scientific information and provided their assessments of extinction risk?

A. The scientists included experts in greater sage-grouse, plant ecology, rangeland health, and invasive species. These scientists are employed by other Federal and State agencies and universities.

Q. Did these scientists recommend whether the Service should list the greater sage-grouse?

A. No. The expert scientists were not asked for and did not make recommendations on the listing decision. They participated in a facilitated discussion which occurred in the presence of a team of regional Service managers in order to help ensure these managers were aware of a diverse range of scientific points of view.

Q. Who is making the recommendation that listing is not warranted?

A. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional managers and senior scientists have made a recommendation of not warranted. They are now preparing the finding that will be submitted to the Service Director for his decision.

Q. If the Service finds listing the sage-grouse is not warranted, does that mean there is no concern about the species' future?

A. 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 point the Service's staff has recommended to the Director that neither of these standards has been met. Regardless of the outcome of the impending decision, the scientific data and the recommendation suggest that continuing attention is needed to conserve greater sage-grouse and sagebrush habitats on a long-term basis. Federal and State agencies and private landowners need to move forward on planned conservation efforts on behalf of the species and its habitat and expand on those underway. Threats to the sagebrush ecosystem vary across the expanse of this habitat type. Generally however, management efforts should be focused on the control of invasive species, proper management of oil and gas development, and stemming the loss of sagebrush habitat associated with infrastructure (e.g. power lines, roads, fences, etc).

Q. How many sage-grouse are there?

A. Current estimates range from 142,000 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.

Q. What is a greater sage-grouse and where do they live?

A. 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.

Q. How much sagebrush habitat is there?

A. Current sagebrush habitat is estimated at 100 – 150 million acres – 54 percent of historic acreage.

Q. Is the Greater Sage Grouse the only wildlife dependent upon sagebrush habitats?

A. 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 pending), the Sage Sparrow (obligate), the Brewer's Sparrow, the Sharp-Tailed Grouse (petition pending seeking emergency listing), Swainsons Hawk, the Loggerhead Shrike, and the White-Tailed Prairie Dog.

Q. What is being done to conserve greater sage-grouse?

A. 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.

- 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.

Q: Have you used the structured decision process on other species?

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