



Challenges Face the Greater Sage-Grouse

Habitat is the key to keeping the birds off the Endangered Species List.

The western United States is home to North America's largest native grouse, the greater sage-grouse. As its name implies, this bird depends upon sagebrush. Its nesting sites, daily diet and breeding behaviors—nearly all aspects of its life—are heavily intertwined with sagebrush habitat. To sustain sage-grouse populations, this habitat must include large, relatively undisturbed areas of healthy sagebrush as well as other native vegetation.



Occupied greater sage-grouse habitat



The problem

Greater sage-grouse populations first declined when early settlers started to inhabit their range. Housing and agricultural activities permanently removed habitat, while other factors also took a toll, including unregulated hunting, invasive plants and predation. As biologists learned more about sage-grouse ecology, they tried to reduce negative impacts on the birds and their habitat. Today, widespread population growth, long-term drought, intensive energy development, large-scale wildfires and disease pose threats to sage-grouse populations and habitat in portions of the West. In some areas, these threats are increasing in scope and severity.

Utah's management plan

With the many problems facing greater sage-grouse, the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) anticipated there would be efforts to list the species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The DWR convened a sage-grouse working group and completed a statewide management plan in 2002. The plan was revised and updated in 2009.

Controversy and conservation efforts

In December 2003, a group of organizations petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to consider a rangewide listing of the greater sage-grouse under the ESA. Such a listing would shift primary management of the bird and its habitat from the state to the federal government.

Many organizations were motivated to take action and prevent federal listing. In Utah, natural resource agencies, private landowners, conservation groups, energy companies, local businesses, sportsmen, citizens and elected officials began working together to help sage-grouse.

The DWR—as part of Utah’s Watershed Restoration Initiative—played a key role in restoring hundreds of thousands of acres of sage-grouse habitat. The Utah Legislature also recognized the danger of a federal listing and appropriated \$2 million in 2007 to augment sage-grouse conservation efforts. That funding supported habitat projects, research needs and a biologist specifically assigned to sage-grouse. While Utah was focused on proactive efforts, the status of sage-grouse became mired in a protracted legal battle.

Current status and outlook

In March of 2010, after years of legal wrangling over the status of the greater sage-grouse, the USFWS ruled that federal listing under the ESA was warranted, although there were other species that had higher priority. The USFWS cited two reasons for the warranted finding:

- 1. Habitat loss, fragmentation and conversion to agriculture**
- 2. Lack of regulatory mechanisms to protect against further losses**

The sage-grouse is now a candidate for listing, which means the USFWS reviews its status annually.

In response to the 2010 listing decision, both the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) began efforts in late 2011 to address the two warranted factors listed above. The efforts include revising all their land-use plans within the range of sage-grouse to ensure adequate regulation. The BLM issued two Instructional Memorandums (IMs) to outline and guide this process until the land-use plans are revised. All revisions are scheduled to be completed by fall of 2014.

State officials, including DWR biologists, are participating with these federal agencies as they update their plans. However, there are concerns about how the plans might affect access, growth and development. To address these concerns, the governor’s office has established a committee of senior-level public and private officials to take a fresh look at the sage-grouse issue in Utah and to generate a set of actionable measures to recommend to the governor.

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