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**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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**Gunnison Sage-Grouse to be Designated
a Candidate for Endangered Species Protection**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it has determined that the Gunnison sage-grouse, a bird species found only in southwestern Colorado and extreme southeastern Utah, warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but that proposing the species for protection is precluded by the need to address other higher priority species.

The Service has completed a comprehensive status review — known as a 12-month finding — and determined that there is sufficient scientific and commercial data to propose listing the species as threatened or endangered throughout its range. However, the Service is precluded from beginning work immediately on a listing proposal because its limited resources must be devoted to other higher priority actions.

The Service will add the Gunnison sage-grouse to its list of candidate species and review its status annually. When a “warranted but precluded” finding is made for a species, the Service classifies it as a candidate for addition to the federal list of threatened and endangered species. If the Service proposes the Gunnison sage-grouse for protection under the ESA in the future, the public will have an opportunity to comment. As a candidate species, the Gunnison sage-grouse will remain a state-managed species.

The Gunnison sage-grouse currently exists in seven populations, six in Colorado and one in both Colorado and Utah. These include the Gunnison Basin, San Miguel Basin, Monticello-Dove Creek, Pinon Mesa, Crawford, Cerro Summit-Cimarron-Sims Mesa, and Poncha Pass populations. The Gunnison Basin population is the largest and represents the best opportunity for long-term conservation of the species. Gunnison sage-grouse historically occurred in southwestern Colorado, northwestern New Mexico, northeastern Arizona, and southeastern Utah.

In April 2006, the Service published a finding that listing the Gunnison sage-grouse as a threatened or endangered species was not warranted. The Service determined that the rangewide population of the Gunnison sage-grouse was stable and threats to the species were not significant to current, known populations.

The Service and the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) will continue to work cooperatively to further the conservation interests of the sage-grouse. Since 2006, the CDOW has worked with private landowners, who have expressed an interest in participating in voluntary conservation efforts, to implement conservation actions under a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA).

The CDOW has been one of the leaders in conducting important research to enhance our understanding of the life history needs of Gunnison sage-grouse. Results of their research should provide managers with critical information that will assist in the species management. The CDOW has also been actively involved in the establishment of conservation easements that reduce the impacts of habitat fragmentation and protect habitat from future residential development. The CDOW has taken the lead and provided funding for the initiation and implementation of a captive-breeding and translocation program that has shown optimistic results to date.

Recent scientific information demonstrates the sage-grouse's need for large expanses of unfragmented blocks of sagebrush and the influence of human-related activities on the long-term conservation of sage-grouse. Habitat fragmentation resulting from the direct and functional loss of habitat due to residential and road development in all populations poses the principal threat to Gunnison sage-grouse.

The Service acknowledges state, Federal, and local working group partners as well as private landowners for their ongoing and proposed conservation efforts across the range of the Gunnison sage-grouse. All parties are commended for their conservation efforts and are encouraged to continue these efforts.

“While the Service has found that the Gunnison Sage-grouse warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act, I strongly support our private and public conservation partners and their ongoing work to conserve this species,” said Stephen Guertin, Regional Director of the Service's Mountain-Prairie Region. “The Service will continue to collaborate with the individuals, communities, agencies and organizations to improve the status of this imperiled species.”

Local conservation groups have developed plans for six of the seven populations as well as a range-wide Gunnison sage-grouse conservation plan. While these efforts will help conserve Gunnison sage-grouse, they are at this time not adequate to address the primary threat of habitat fragmentation in a manner that effectively reduces or eliminates the most significant contributors to this threat. All of the conservation efforts are limited in size and have not been implemented at the scale (even when considered cumulatively) that would be required to effectively reduce the threats to the species across its range.

The Service will continue to work with partners to develop, implement, and monitor conservation measures to address the threats and conserve the Gunnison sage-grouse. The Service strongly supports the continued implementation of conservation measures and existing plans that reduce habitat fragmentation and thereby promote the long-term conservation and recovery of Gunnison sage-grouse. The continued efforts of all private, county, state, and Federal partners are needed to achieve long-term conservation and recovery of Gunnison sage-grouse.

The Gunnison sage-grouse is a unique species. Its mating display, physical appearance, and smaller size distinguish it from the greater sage-grouse, which is found in 11 different western states. Both species of sage-grouse are known for their elaborate mating rituals and are considered indicator species of the overall health of sagebrush ecosystems.

Gunnison sage-grouse depend on a variety of shrub-steppe habitats throughout their life cycle and are dependent on sagebrush. Their diet consists of 100 percent sagebrush in the winter, and forbs and insects during the remainder of the year. In addition to serving as a primary year-round food source, sagebrush also provides cover for nests and from predators. Thus, Gunnison sage-grouse distribution

is strongly correlated with the distribution of sagebrush habitats, with large expanses of unfragmented habitat providing better overall habitat conditions. Gunnison sage-grouse exhibit strong loyalty to particular areas that provide for their breeding, nesting, brood rearing, and wintering seasonal habitat needs.

The remaining 4,000 to 4,500 Gunnison sage-grouse currently occupy approximately 940,000 acres scattered across the seven isolated populations. The Gunnison Basin population encompasses approximately 590,000 acres and over 87 percent of the species' total number of birds. The remaining six populations contain highly fragmented patches of sagebrush habitat, from 10 to approximately 200 birds each.

In November 2006, San Miguel County (Colorado), Center for Biological Diversity, WildEarth Guardians and others filed a lawsuit regarding the not-warranted finding. Under a stipulated settlement agreement, the Service agreed to submit a 12-month status review finding to the Federal Register by June 30, 2010. The Court approved an extension of the June 30, 2010, deadline to September 15, 2010.

The public is encouraged to provide information to the Service regarding the status of the Gunnison sage-grouse. Information can be provided to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Colorado Field Office, 764 Horizon Drive, Building B, Grand Junction, Colorado 81506-3946.

For more information about the Gunnison sage-grouse, visit the Service's web site at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/birds/gunnisonsagegrouse> or contact Dan Reinkensmeyer or Al Pfister at 970-243-2778 ext. 39 and 29, respectively.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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