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## Questions and Answers: Regarding the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Candidate Species Status

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## **Questions and Answers**

### **Regarding the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Candidate Species Status**

#### **What is the Service's determination regarding the status of the Gunnison sage-grouse?**

After evaluating all the available scientific and commercial information regarding the Gunnison sage-grouse, including an analysis of the threats to the species and sagebrush habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is warranted. However, listing the Gunnison sage-grouse at this time is precluded by the need to address other listings of higher priority.

The Gunnison sage-grouse will be added to the list of candidate species under the ESA and will be proposed for listing when funding and workload priorities for other listing actions allow.

If the Service proposes the Gunnison sage-grouse for listing in the future, the public will have an opportunity to comment.

As a candidate species, the Gunnison sage-grouse will not have Federal protection and will remain a state-managed species.

#### **Why did the Service make this decision?**

Recent science accepted for publication by the Cooper Ornithological Society 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. Currently, habitat fragmentation resulting from the direct and functional loss of habitat due to residential and road development in all populations, including the largest population in the Gunnison Basin, is the principal threat to Gunnison sage-grouse.

Functional habitat loss also contributes to habitat fragmentation as sage-grouse typically avoid areas affected by human activities, including noise, even when sagebrush remains intact. The collective disturbance from human activities around residences, roads, and other human infrastructure, along with other threats such as invasive plants, reduces the effective habitat, making these areas inhospitable to Gunnison sage-grouse.

Human populations are increasing in Colorado and throughout the range of Gunnison sage-grouse. The resulting habitat loss and fragmentation is diminishing the probability of Gunnison sage-grouse persistence. The fragmented nature of the remaining habitat amplifies the negative effects that factors such as predation and genetics are having on the current populations.

The Service believes that because of these factors, the Gunnison sage-grouse and its habitat should be protected under the ESA.

#### **What is a candidate species?**

Candidate species are plants and animals for which the Service has sufficient information on their biological status and threats to propose them for listing as endangered or threatened under the ESA, but for which development of a proposed listing regulation is precluded by higher priority listing actions to address species in greater need.

Candidate species receive no statutory protection under the ESA. The Service encourages voluntary cooperative conservation efforts for these species because they are, by definition, species that warrant future protection under the ESA.

### **What is being done to conserve Gunnison sage-grouse?**

State, federal, and local working groups as well as private landowners have developed ongoing and proposed conservation efforts to benefit the Gunnison sage-grouse across its range. We commend these conservation partners and encourage them to continue these efforts.

The Service and the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) have worked cooperatively to further the conservation interests of Gunnison sage-grouse through implementation of a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) that was finalized in late 2006. Since that time, the CDOW has been actively engaged in working with local landowners to implement conservation measures to benefit the Gunnison sage-grouse under the CCAA. This CCAA is a voluntary agreement whereby local landowners commit to implement conservation measures that will aid in the recovery of the Gunnison sage-grouse and in return, receive assurances that they will not be subject to future land use restrictions should the Gunnison sage-grouse become a listed species.

The CCAA outlines important conservation measures to assist the species, and provides regulatory protection to enrolled landowners. However, due to its voluntary nature, the CCAA provides no long-term regulatory protection for the species.

The CDOW has been a leader 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.

Local working groups have developed conservation plans for six of the seven Gunnison sage-grouse populations as well as a range-wide conservation plan.

The Service recognizes these ongoing and proposed conservation efforts by all entities across the range of the Gunnison sage-grouse. At this time, the measures, although individually positive, do not cumulatively address the primary threat of habitat fragmentation.

The Service will continue to work with agencies and landowners to further implement ongoing and future conservation measures that will help conserve Gunnison sage-grouse and provide for

the long-term recovery of the species.

**Now that the Service has designated the Gunnison sage-grouse as a "candidate," what will happen next?**

When a species becomes a candidate it is given a "listing priority number" (LPN). This number is given because there are not enough Service personnel, time, or money to propose all the candidate species for listing. The purpose of the LPN is to ensure that the species that are in the most trouble are given the highest priority.

We have assigned an LPN of 2 to the Gunnison sage-grouse, which places it near the top of the Service's nationwide listing priorities.

It is difficult to predict how long it might be before the Service prepares a proposed rule for the Gunnison sage-grouse, as it will depend on the number of LPN 2s that must be addressed by the Service and the funding available. While the Gunnison sage-grouse is a candidate, we will review its status and work with States, other Federal agencies, private landowners, and other partners to step up efforts to conserve the species.

**What if the Gunnison sage-grouse is proposed for listing again?**

When a "warranted but precluded" finding is made for a species, the Service classifies it as a candidate for listing. If the Service proposes the Gunnison sage-grouse for listing in the future, the public will have an opportunity to comment. When the Service proposes a species for listing, it opens a public comment period, which allows the public an opportunity to provide comment and information on the proposed listed species. The Service then considers all received information in finalizing its listing decision.

**If the Gunnison sage-grouse is listed in the future, what activities could be impacted?**

Depending on the type of vegetation where a proposed action will occur and the extent and scale of the action, activities such as residential development, road development and access, recreational activities, grazing, energy development, fenceline and/or powerline construction, vegetation control/management, and land-use conversions may require consultation with the Service. If consultation is necessary, the Service will work with the landowner to develop measures that if implemented would reduce or eliminate harm to the species and its habitat.

**What can landowners do to conserve candidate species?**

The Service works with private landowners, Tribes, and other Federal and State agencies including other programs within the Fish and Wildlife Service to forge voluntary conservation agreements that benefit candidates and other species-at-risk. We provide technical assistance on designing and implementing conservation actions to address threats identified in our species assessments.

The Service and other federal partners can provide technical and financial assistance for

conservation of candidate species on private land. The Service provides financial and technical assistance to landowners seeking to conserve candidate species on their land through its Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Additional financial assistance is available through various Service grants and agreements, as well as through Farm Bill and Department of Defense programs. In addition, the Service has the ability to take advantage of the additional management flexibility afforded to candidate species by facilitating development and implementation of Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs) and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs).

CCAs are formal, voluntary agreements between the Service and one or more parties to address the conservation needs of one or more candidate species. Participants voluntarily commit to implement specific actions designed to remove or reduce threats to the covered species. CCAs can involve both Federal and non-Federal lands. Development and implementation of CCAs can provide CCA participants with a strong indication of how activities will be conducted when a species becomes listed. For non-Federal landowners seeking regulatory assurances, CCAAs are an effective tool. A CCAA provides participating property owners with a permit containing assurances that if they implement certain conservation actions for species included in the agreement, they will not be required to implement additional conservation measures beyond those in the CCAA in the event the species becomes listed. Also, additional land, water, or resource use limitations will not be imposed on them should the species become listed in the future, unless they consent to the change. For additional information on these tools, see <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/what-we-do/cca.html>

### **What if someone has important information regarding Gunnison sage grouse?**

The public is encouraged to continue to provide information to the Service regarding the status of the Gunnison sage-grouse. Information provided by the public is an important source in making the best possible decision. Information can be provided to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Colorado Field Office, 764 Horizon Drive, Building B, Grand Junction, Colorado 81506-3946.