



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS REGARDING THE 90-DAY FINDING ON 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.

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 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, so there will be no impact at this time on hunting seasons for these birds.

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.
- 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.

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, is expected to be completed in 2005. During this process the Service will consider input submitted from the states, other Federal agencies, and the public.

What information will be 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 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.

How do I submit comments for the Service's 12-month finding?

Both 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. Comments must be received by within 60 days after publication of the rule in the *Federal Register*.