

SAGEGROUSE DETERMINATION COMING SOON

Emotions and concerns run high as Wyomingites await the decision of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service whether or not to list the sagegrouse under the Endangered Species Act.

The decision had an original deadline of February 26, 2010, but the death of the agency's director, Sam Hamilton, from a heart attack on February 20, led Fish and Wildlife officials to request a one week extension to finalize their decision.

The new deadline has been scheduled for March 5, 2010, and many people await the landmark decision.

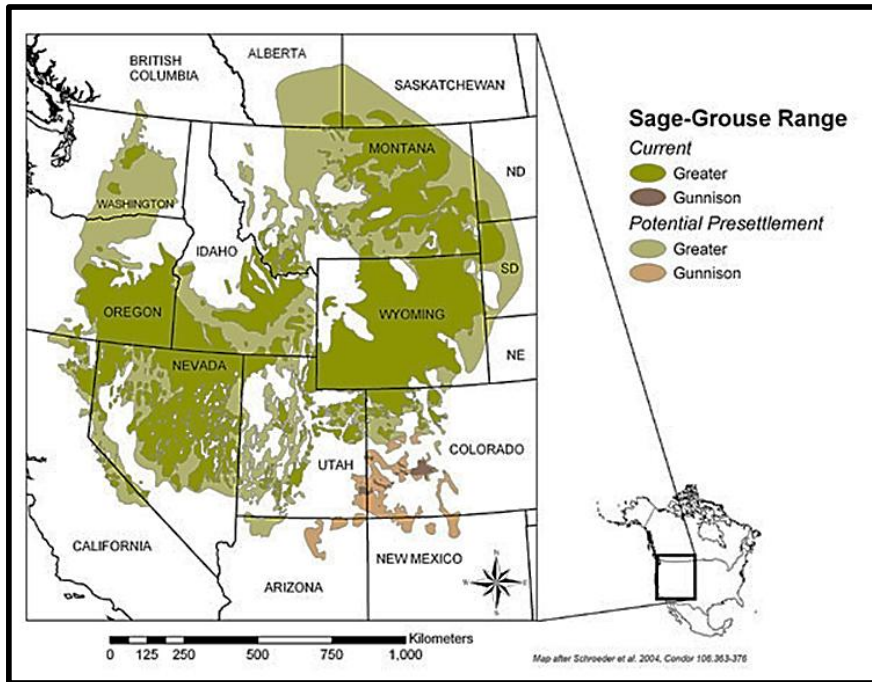
Sagegrouse, a chicken-size, brown bird, can be found in 11 states, but is particularly significant to Wyoming because biologists believe that about half of North American sagegrouse populations exist in Wyoming. Also, Wyoming's energy and ranching industries would be critically affected by the listing of the bird.



Associated Press writer, Mead Gruver, wrote in his article that environmentalists recommend that sage grouse be placed under the Endangered Species Act because conventional gas drilling in Wyoming has impacted the bird's sagebrush habitat. The article said they also suggest that coalbed methane drilling has "created breeding grounds for mosquitoes that transmit West Nile virus, to which sage grouse have little, if any resistance."

But at the same time, residents whose livelihood relies on oil, gas, coal, wind, and livestock fear that this new classification of sagegrouse may severely limit their activities and income. In a Seattle Times article, A deputy chief of staff to Gov. Dave Freudenthal, Ryan Lance, said an endangered listing would be "absolutely devastating" to Wyoming's economy. Since approximately 90% of Wyoming's income is created by these activities, the effects on the state's revenues would be extreme, particularly to the agricultural community. Also, severance tax income produced by the energy sector is utilized by the state to fund their school system and negative impacts to the financial health of the state directly affect the maintenance and staffing of the educational system.

An article by Rocky Barker for the Idaho Statesman stated that “despite the decline, the Fish and Wildlife panel in 2004 said the threat of extinction is low.” The article went on to say that sage grouse populations have declined an average of 3.5 percent per year from 1965 to 1985. “But since 1986, populations in several states...have increased or generally stabilized.”



The article went on to address the post-2004 sage habitat reduction caused by energy development, but added that “since then, Wyoming, Idaho, other states and the BLM also have taken steps to conserve sage grouse habitat.”

And this is a critical consideration because a national listing would override steps Wyoming has already taken.

An editorial to the Casper Star

Tribune put it succinctly:

“The sage grouse is not on the brink of extinction...In Wyoming, the population is holding its own, estimated at around 200,000 birds... The state Game and Fish Department, local grouse “working groups” and others have been working for several years to protect grouse habitat, and Gov. Dave Freudenthal issued an executive order directing state agencies to maintain and enhance grouse habitat in what is referred to as his “core areas” strategy....Even without such formal agreements, Wyoming has shown it is serious about protecting its sage grouse. That should be enough to prevent the federal government from swooping in to take control.”

If you would like your voice to be heard on the matter, The Big Horn Basin Local Sage Grouse Working Group will meet from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department’s regional office in Cody, and a public comment period will be made available. For more information on the meeting, contact Kathleen Jachowski at 307-587-3723.

The following articles are also good resources to find further information on the sage grouse decision we are all awaiting.

http://www.trib.com/news/opinion/editorial/article_d22ff04b-f96f-5611-9b63-ae18396bd0ee.html

<http://www.idahostatesman.com/2010/02/23/1091928/fish-and-wildlife-directors-death.html>

http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_14454761

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2011145026_apwysagegrouse.html

<http://www.flyrodreel.com/blogs/tedwilliams/2010/february/population-development-conservancy>

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2011104919_apwysagegrousemapping1stdwritethru.html