

## Gunnison sage grouse gets federal protection to prevent extinction

Updated: 11/12/2014 12:06:39 PM MST

DenverPost.com



FILE - This April 2014 photo provided by Colorado Parks and Wildlife shows a Gunnison sage grouse with tail feathers fanned near Gunnison.

Federal wildlife officials on Wednesday committed to the ecological rescue of the Gunnison sage grouse, which has been forced to the brink of extinction by development in the West.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service director Dan Ashe declared the grouse officially threatened under the Endangered Species Act, rebuffing last-minute appeals by Colorado leaders who contend voluntary protection is sufficient to save it.

Fewer than 5,000 Gunnison grouse have survived, only in parts of western Colorado and southeastern Utah — a 7 percent patch of their natural habitat.

"The things that you (in Colorado) have done are not for naught," Ashe said in a meeting at The Denver Post. "We could, potentially, see a fast-track toward recovery. There's been a lot of good work done."

Protecting grouse under the act means development on their habitat, including oil and gas exploration, must be restricted. However, listing the grouse as threatened, rather than endangered, gives greater latitude because it allows an exception for accidental killing to reduce the liability of landowners.

Gov. John [Hickenlooper has said Colorado will sue the federal government](#) if the Gunnison grouse is listed as endangered or threatened.

For years, western Colorado [counties have touted voluntary efforts](#) to protect the Gunnison sage grouse. Over the past month, western Colorado officials and conservation groups intensified a campaign of proposing additional voluntary protection measures to try to head off, or at least delay, federal action.

Protecting grouse typically means closing roads on sage brush habitat, especially from March to May, to keep people, vehicles and machinery away while grouse are nesting.

Colorado officials proposed closing or re-routing roads used by oil and gas companies. They tried to persuade the federal Bureau of Land Management — a sister agency to the Fish and Wildlife within the Department of Interior — to do more to protect grouse from the impact of oil and gas activities on federally controlled land in Colorado. Hickenlooper weighed in directly with Interior Secretary Sally Jewell.

Fish and Wildlife Service [biologists since 2010 have said Gunnison grouse need protection](#) to survive. But the federal government, facing political resistance and other priorities, has delayed action.

The decision Wednesday to finalize a proposal for federal protection meets a court-ordered deadline as part of a negotiated settlement with environment groups led by Wildearth Guardians.

Spiky-feathered brown-and-white ground-dwellers about the size of a chicken, Gunnison grouse number 4,750 overall, according to state data given to federal biologists. A core population of 4,000 in Gunnison County, which dropped sharply after drought a decade ago, has stabilized. Three of six peripheral groups in western Colorado, ranging in size from about 10 to 200 grouse, are declining.

"That small population size," Ashe said, "is a substantial issue."

The Gunnison grouse is related to the [greater sage grouse, also imperiled](#), and found across 11 western states.

Colorado's voluntary measures, such as county biologists reviewing development permits, are expected to continue alongside the official federal designation and protection for grouse.

"We've created a community culture around conservation and stewardship. We'd like to stick with that," said Jonathan Houck, a Gunnison County commissioner.

State officials exploring legal options said they're concerned an official federal listing could hurt the momentum of these efforts.

And private landowners working voluntarily to help grouse, focused on preventing a federal Endangered Species Act listing, have "alluded to" perhaps not continuing their participation, Houck said.

"They are not going to revert," he said.

Wildlife biologists emphasize that the grouse is an indicator species and that restricting development on grouse habitat also will help preserve antelope, deer, elk and hundreds of other species that depend on healthy ecosystems.

"The bottom line is that science shows that Gunnison sage grouse still face threats that put them at risk of extinction. Those threats have not been fully addressed through collaborative efforts," Rocky Mountain Wildlife biologist Megan Mueller said.

"The most productive path forward now is for everyone to continue to work together and build on existing efforts so that we can eliminate the remaining threats to the species. Through continued collaboration we can ensure species recovery and a rapid removal of the Gunnison sage grouse from the Endangered Species list."

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