

# THE COMMUNICATOR

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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to Evaluate Whether to List Gunnison Sage-grouse

By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

On September 27, 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) issued a decision to not list Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The USFWS determined that, although the Gunnison sage-grouse warrants protection under the ESA, protection would be delayed while they addressed the needs of other high priority species.

However, on March 13, 2011, the USFWS received authorization to prepare a new proposed listing rule. As part of that rule, the USFWS proposes to designate critical habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse. If the USFWS decides to list the Gunnison sage-grouse, it will mark the end of a decade-long effort to list the species under the ESA. The Gunnison sage-grouse was originally placed on the candidate species list in January 2000 shortly before the USFWS received a petition to list the species. It was removed in 2005 after a status review showed the populations were stable.

Now that funds have become available and it has approval, the USFWS will prepare a proposed rule using data about the species and its habitat. After publication of the proposed rule in the Federal Register and a 60-day public comment period, the USFWS will publish a final rule listing the Gunnison sage-grouse as threatened or endangered. The USFWS will also designate critical habitat at the same time a listing decision is issued. The USFWS is asking Utah and Colorado for guidance in identifying areas that should be considered for a designation as critical habitat. It is anticipated the draft listing rule will be published prior to March 2012.

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By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

County government involvement in wildlife management is crucial to effective collaborative conservation. They contribute valuable knowledge on county plans, county priorities, and coordination opportunities. In between county governments and local working groups.

Here are just a few examples of how counties contribute to local working groups in Utah:

- In the West Desert and Uintah Basin, we almost always have a county commissioner in attendance at working group meetings.
- Working with county weed managers enables groups to more effectively address weed issues by tapping into existing networks to handle weeds. Weed managers in Wasatch and Tooele counties have been particularly active with the working groups.
- Working with county planning staff and commissioners ensures that when development issues arise that could impact sage-grouse, the working group can provide thoughtful, proactive input to help the county avoid situations that might cause controversy later. The working groups strive to keep County Commissions and County Councils apprised of issues that may be of relevance.
- Working groups in Strawberry Valley and Morgan-Summit have county staff or consultants who regularly attend working group meetings and provide input on planning issues, county priorities and procedures.

Resources employees to make presentations to county commissioners and council members, providing information on sage-grouse needs, current status, and actions taken by the local working groups.

The staff of the Community-Based Conservation Program at Utah State would like to thank all the counties who have been participating in the local working group efforts for their continued involvement and proactive interest.

Working with county government ensures that when issues arise that could impact sage-grouse, the working group can provide input to help the county make informed decisions

MSARM TAKES ACTION TO PROTECT SAGE-GROUSE

WATCH OUT FOR SAGE-GROUSE!

From February to April, male sage-grouse (sage chickens) strut to attract females.

They have a strutting ground at the top of the hill between Henefer and East Canyon Reservoir, right next to Highway 65 -- and sometimes, they dance on the highway.



Please slow down as you crest the hill!

For more information, contact the Morgan Summit Adaptive Resource Management group, your local sage-grouse working group. Facilitator: Lorien Belton 435-770-2413

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

One of the greater sage-grouse leks in the Morgan-Summit area is located just at the crest of the hill during strutting season. Approaching drivers cannot see the birds until they are dangerously close, and there have been numerous anecdotal accounts of birds being hit by vehicles. The working group (MSARM) is approaching the problem from several angles. In addition to ongoing work to place permanent, fold-down road signs along the highway to warn motorists in advance, the working group is also working to place permanent, fold-down road signs along the highway to warn motorists in advance, and to place permanent, fold-down road signs along the highway to warn motorists in advance.

By Todd Black, Utah State University

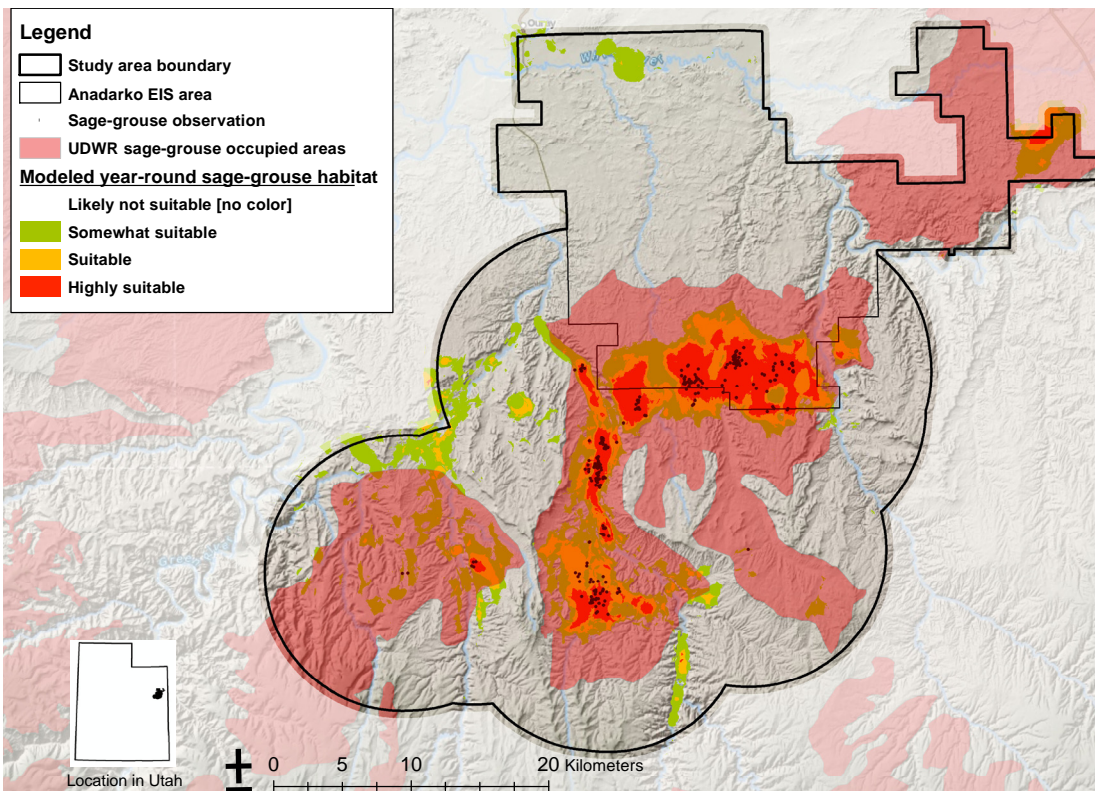
With the designation of both Utah's sage-grouse (*Centrocercus* spp.) species as candidate species for listing for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS cited habitat loss and fragmentation as the greatest threats to species extinction.

Utah's sage-grouse have been identified as a priority conservation strategy. What this really means is, we need a better map to identify sage-grouse seasonal habitats. To date wildlife managers and researchers have struggled with this task both at a local working group level and a state wide. Most of the habitat maps that are currently in use are based on expert knowledge of the local biologist or wildlife managers. This knowledge has been essential in developing polygons on maps to identify key habitats. We also have used historical maps based on sagebrush distribution to guide management actions. For the most part, these maps work fairly well for statewide planning efforts but...

That was then, this is now. Given the number of sage-grouse locations with accompanying vegetation and habitat measurements available across the state from various University-based research projects and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) monitoring efforts, there is now an opportunity to use real-time data in a Geographical Information System (GIS) to validate existing maps and model sage-grouse habitat state wide. This kind of information will really start to give researchers and managers an idea of what habitats sage-grouse are actually using.

Late last year, researchers at Utah State (USU) and Brigham Young Universities began compiling vital rate and seasonal movement for the purpose of modeling nesting, brood-rearing, and winter habitat. USU has completed a pilot project in the Uintah Basin in the East Bench area and a statewide winter habitat and critical winter habitat model will soon follow. Research partners are optimistic that future conservation actions. "These models are another tool to have in the tool box to help us with making habitat management decisions and with sage-grouse populations issues," stated Jason Robinson, UDWR sage-grouse coordinator. Research partners point out...

The model is perfect and will need further validation and input as more information and technologies become available. However, they are based on current data and modeling efforts.



*Predictive Brood Rearing Habitat Model for the East Bench Area of the Uintah Basin, Utah. Model courtesy of Todd Black.*

