

Fed official: Sage grouse 'will be listed'

County urged to consider changes to land use regs

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A high-ranking Colorado regional supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) did not mince words this week when he said that it's only a matter of time before the Gunnison Sage-grouse is "listed" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) as threatened or endangered.

In a meeting Tuesday with the Gunnison County

Commissioners over the local implications of a recent FWS decision, Al Pfister, Western Colorado Field Office supervisor for the agency, said that a final listing decision is "highly likely" within the next three years.

"The species is in some dire straits," he said, "and it will be listed."

Pfister said an 18-month process has to occur before the

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final listing decision could take effect, and it's yet to be initiated.

"Once we get the assignment to start working on the proposed rule, we'll let people know," he explained. "What we've done in the past is try to get that word out as quick as possible so the affected entities can provide us information they think is relevant."

The FWS announced in September that the imperiled bird is "warranted" for listing, but "precluded" by higher priorities — the same status the bird was given in 2000.

The Gunnison Basin population of the sage grouse — the largest in its range of seven groups, spanning across western Colorado and into Utah — has remained stable over the last decade. Yet, other populations have declined drastically in recent years.

"The Gunnison Basin is by far the key to the species' survival," Pfister said.

FWS' decision in September gave the Gunnison Sage-grouse a listing priority number (LPN) of 2. Candidate species are ranked between 1 and 12. The lower the

number, the higher the priority. Candidates are rarely given an LPN of 1, said Pfister.

There are about 250 ESA candidates. The number of candidates currently with a LPN of 2 nation-wide is in the "mid- to upper-forties," said Pfister.

However, he explained that the Gunnison Sage-grouse has the highest priority of all species in the FWS' eight-state Mountain-Prairie Region.

For that reason, Pfister urged the County Commissioners this week to begin thinking about creating a plan for conserving habitat to a greater degree than they have been — including possible habitat mitigation measures through a credit system for development called "conservation banking."

Commissioner Paula Swenson, who sits on the local Sage-grouse Strategic Committee, said that the group believes the county needs to look at possible changes to its land use regulations — specifically, at ways of directing development in a manner that certain habitat can be preserved.

"It may become something along the lines of zoning," said Swenson.

FWS stated in its decision doc-

ument last year that the county's regulations "do not provide adequate regulatory authority to protect sage-grouse from development or other harmful land uses that result in habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation."

In 2000, FWS decided that declines in the population of the Gunnison Sage-grouse made it warranted for listing. However, then, as is the case now, other priorities precluded that action.

A settlement in 2005 ultimately forced the agency's hand in acting on a listing decision, and in April 2006 FWS determined that listing the bird was not warranted, thereby removing it as a candidate species.

That decision was challenged in court, resulting in the September announcement and the bird's renewed "warranted but precluded" status.

What's changed between 2006 and now suggesting that an ESA listing might finally be enacted?

"There's a lot more science that specifically says there are problems and documents those problems," said Pfister.

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