

Nevada's Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) conservation strategy

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In Nevada the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) can be found in increasingly fragmented populations throughout northern Nevada and south to near Goldfield. Despite its extensive distribution in Nevada, the isolated nature of individual populations of the Greater Sage-Grouse is a concern. For example, the birds that occur in Mineral and Esmeralda Counties appear to be part of a population that is genetically distinct from other Sage-Grouse populations in central and northern Nevada.

The Greater Sage-Grouse is a sagebrush obligate, and its microhabitat associations are complex. Recent evidence indicates that the individual populations are surprisingly fussy about local conditions, such as host-plant quality and community composition. Individual birds may “migrate” as much as 100 miles in search of suitable nesting, foraging, and lekking grounds.

Many factors may be at play in the ongoing decline of the Greater Sage-Grouse, but the major player clearly is habitat degradation. Together, range fires and habitat fragmentation have resulted in dramatic losses of suitable habitat for the Greater Sage-Grouse. In particular, there have been severe losses of extensive, healthy sagebrush communities that provide the following: a lush offering of forbs (especially important for the hens before they lay their eggs), a rich arthropod fauna (important for the young birds); and protection from predation (important at all times of the year). Other threats to the species include overhunting and poaching.

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Nevada's efforts to conserve the Greater Sage-Grouse have three significant strengths. First, Nevada Division of Wildlife head Terry Crawforth has assumed a lead role in an interagency sage-grouse recovery plan. Under Crawforth's leadership, we can be confident that

a successful plan will be developed here in Nevada, and we expect that the plan will have broad applicability in other states as well. Secondly, Nevada Governor Kenny Guinn has indicated his support for conservation of the Greater Sage-Grouse in Nevada, and he has formed a special team to advance the cause of conservation implementation for the species. This team was appointed in August of 2000, and it plans to publish a plan in June of 2001. Third, the Northeastern Nevada Stewardship Committee in Elko provided help by independently determining that local conservation planning – using state, local, and federal personnel in a collaborative process – could develop a detailed recovery plan for the species.

Throughout the American West, the Greater Sage-Grouse showed a dramatic decline during the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The decline appears to continue unabated at the present time. State by state – and in sagebrush ecosystem by ecosystem – biologists have reported the same trends. The range of the Greater Sage-Grouse is retracting, and Greater Sage-Grouse numbers are down. Historically, North America's largest grouse was found in fifteen states and three Canadian provinces. By the end of the Twentieth Century, British Columbia, Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas and Nebraska had no Greater Sage-Grouse populations.

Two species of sage-grouse are found in North America. The species found in Nevada is the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*). This species has an extensive, but highly fragmented, range in western North America. Another species, the Gunnison Sage-Grouse (*C. minimus*) has a very limited range in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Both species are in urgent need of conservation efforts.

The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) developed a concern for the plight of the birds in 1996 as a result of a report from their Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee. The WAFWA report concluded that the Greater Sage-Grouse did not merit listing under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act, but that the bird did need conservation management actions to arrest its decline. WAFWA developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among its member states to begin developing local conservation plans, to conduct genetic testing of populations, to develop habitat models, and to develop a minimum viable population model. They accomplished these tasks with varying success that depended on state agency budgets and other work program priorities.

By 1998, concern about the Greater Sage-Grouse had spread into the conservation and environmental communities. Rumors about petitions to list the Greater Sage-Grouse as either Threatened or Endangered began to circulate widely across the West. Several symposia were held to discuss the status of the Greater Sage-Grouse across its range. In June of 1999, the Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Committee convened a special session of its members to review the status of the Greater Sage-Grouse. The Technical Committee recommended that WAFWA, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service draft an MOU to pledge interagency cooperation and a division of labor. This collaborative effort would accomplish a series of tasks designed to arrest the decline of the Greater Sage-Grouse and other sagebrush obligates, such as the Sage Thrasher, Sage Sparrow, and Brewer's Sparrow. WAFWA felt that if the conservation agencies could halt the decline of the habitat and the species, then listing the Greater Sage-Grouse as an endangered species would not be required.

The cornerstone of WAFWA's conservation strategy is to develop a nationwide network of local area conservation plans. WAFWA plans would be designed to meet the conservation agreement criteria developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The challenges, which are many, include ensuring that each state within the range of the Greater Sage-Grouse encourage and promote local or regional conservation plans that cover all populations of the species. All agencies agreed to participate in local area or regional conservation planning. The directors of WAFWA will monitor all of the efforts through a Framework Team, which includes members from four states and each federal agency.

In May of 1999, several groups filed a petition with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the two remaining Greater Sage-Grouse populations in Washington State as either threatened or endangered. In January of 2000, the Fish and Wildlife Service received a petition to list the Gunnison Sage-Grouse. The Washington State petition is currently under a status review, wherein the U.S. Fish and Wildlife is reviewing all available data to determine if the population(s) merit protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Gunnison Sage-Grouse was upgraded to a candidate species at about the same time that a petition for its protection was delivered to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Fish and Wildlife Service prioritizes its review of species for endangered species listing, from species in immediate threat of extinction, to existing petitions on file, next to candidate species identified by the Service, and finally to "new" petitions. The "new"

petition filed last year was rejected because the species already has a higher priority for review.

Is a range-wide petition for the Greater Sage-Grouse likely? Are petitions for additional distinct population segments likely? Nobody really knows. The groups that have been petitioning have provided several rumors, but we will know only when a petition is delivered to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Nevada Governor's team is scheduled to have local area planning processes up and running in October of 2001. The Team has been in close contact with Nevada counties and planning organizations. At the present time, a subcommittee of the Governor's team is developing proposed planning units covering the range of the Greater Sage-Grouse within Nevada. These planning unit boundaries will be based upon input from landowners and other citizens. The local planning cycles for the plan will last approximately 1½ to 2½ years.

The result of a valid local area conservation plan will be a document that directs actions that benefit the Greater Sage-Grouse and other sagebrush obligates, including the Sage Thrasher, the Sage Sparrow, the Brewer's Sparrow, the Pygmy Rabbit, and the Sagebrush Lizard. The plans must identify the resource and prescribe actions that improve the resource or maintain it if appropriate. These actions need to have performance clauses. Once an action takes place, tools must be used to evaluate the effects of that action so the next prescription can adapt to what was learned.

If all of the states implement Greater Sage-Grouse conservation agreements that cover the landscape where the species ranges, we will continue to have these magnificent birds at the turn of the next century. By arresting the decline of this species, we also will avoid having the bird listed as an Endangered Species, and we will have learned how to develop local solutions to global problems.