

# 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 have one year to make a final decision whether to list 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. After a yearlong review, the final rule could be published before March 2013.

The Gunnison sage-grouse was officially designated as a separate species from greater sage-grouse (*C. urophasianus*) in 2000. The historic distribution of the species may have included southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, northeastern Arizona, and northwestern New Mexico. Today, there are approximately 5,000 breeding individuals in seven separate populations in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. The largest of those populations consists of about 4,000 birds inhabiting the Gunnison Basin. Predation, fragmentation, and loss of habitat due to human activity were identified by the USFWS as primary factors contributing to the bird's declining populations. In Utah, this species occur primarily on private land located east of Monticello, Utah, in San Juan County. Utah populations have benefitted from the enrollment of 35,000 acres of agricultural land in the Conservation Reserve Program. The Monticello, Utah, and Dove Creek, Colorado, Local Working Groups (LWGs) combined their efforts in 2006 to develop and begin implementation of the interstate conservation plan. For more information about the LWGs efforts visit the website [www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org).

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By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

County government involvement in wildlife management is crucial to effective collaborative conservation efforts for sage-grouse. County officials often attend working group meetings, lek visits, and field tours. They contribute valuable knowledge on county plans, county priorities, and coordination opportunities. In addition to participation by elected officials, county Extension agents also help increase communication 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.

In the first few months of 2011, USU Extension staff have teamed up with Utah Division of Wildlife 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.

## 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 perilously close to a state highway, and birds frequently fly onto the middle of the road 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, several members of the group helped place flyers at key locations in nearby towns. The flyers warn residents to slow down as they near that area to avoid hitting the birds.

# NEW MODELING APPROACH SEEKS TO IDENTIFY AND MAP ESSENTIAL UTAH SAGE-GROUSE HABITAT

By Todd Black, Utah State University

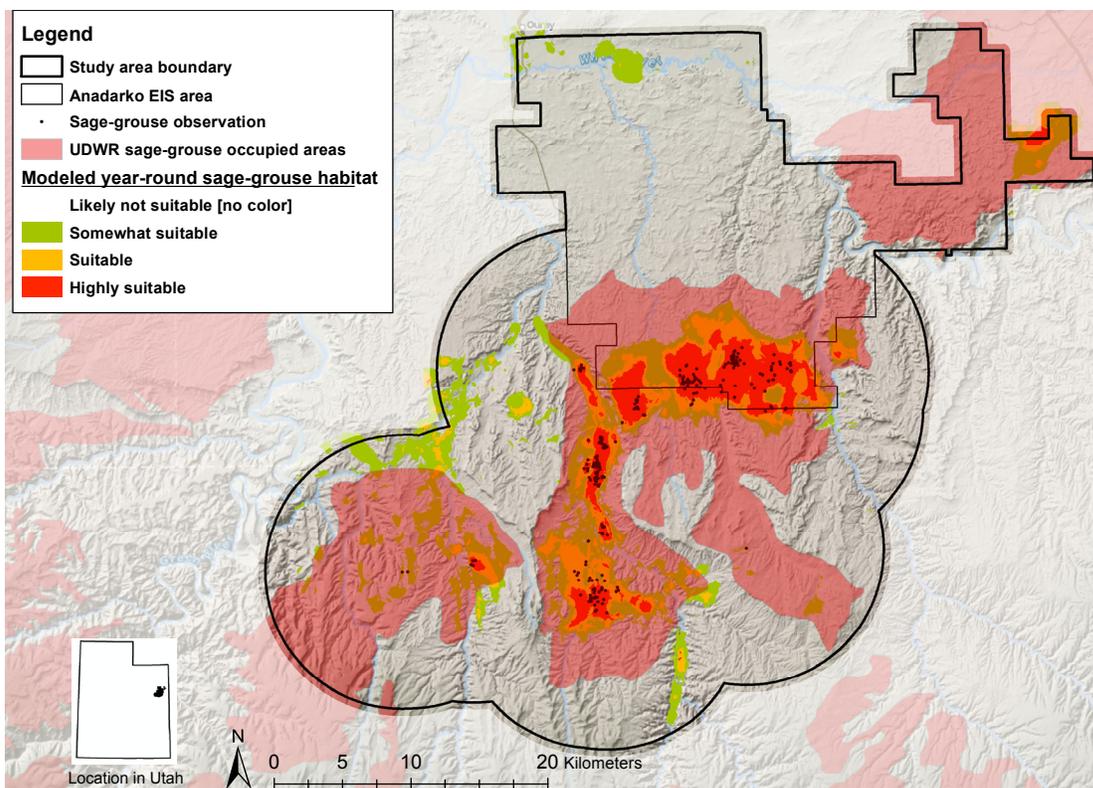
With the designation of both Utah's sage-grouse (*Centrocercus* spp.) species as candidate species for listing for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) also has suggested the need for states to refine their existing habitat maps. In both decisions, the USFWS cited habitat loss and fragmentation as the greatest threats to species extinction.

Utah's 11 sage-grouse local working groups in sharing the USFWS concerns, have identified the mapping of essential sage-grouse habitat as one of their priority conservation strategies. 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 are often lacking at the fine scale needed to implement projects and conservation strategies at a local/population level.

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 preliminary results of the model/map will provide a portable tool for wildlife managers and the local working groups to use in guiding 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 that although good solid data were used to build the model, more field work is needed to validate its predictions.

A final thought with these forthcoming sage-grouse habitat models, it's important to note that they are just models. They will not be perfect and will need further validation and input as more information and technologies become available. However, they are based on proven scientific processes and methods that are defensible and will hopefully give us better direction in our planning and implementation efforts.



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

***If it's not good for communities, it's not good for wildlife.***

### **Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program Mission**

Utah's Community-Based Conservation Program is dedicated to promoting natural resource management education and facilitating cooperation between local communities and natural resource management organizations and agencies.

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[www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org)

### **MEET THE GRADUATE STUDENTS!**

By Nicki Frey, Utah State University

In March, Heather Hedden began her research project on greater sage-grouse fence-line mortality and general habitat use. Her project is funded by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR), and has received huge support in volunteer hours from both groups. Heather's project focuses on sage-grouse in Hamlin Valley, just east of the Nevada border in Iron and Beaver counties.

The Southwest Desert Local Working Group (SWARM) considers Hamlin Valley to be a sage-grouse stronghold; however, very little is known about grouse in this large valley. Heather's data will improve the ability of BLM and UDWR to conduct habitat projects in Hamlin Valley to benefit sage-grouse.

Also in March, Cheyenne Burnett began her research project on greater sage-grouse use of lands zoned for wind energy in Iron County. Her project is funded by BLM; already her project has been supported by 100 volunteer hours from members of SWARM. Cheyenne intends to determine habitat use and movements of a complex of grouse populations that utilize six leks around Minersville and the Bald Hills. Her data will be used to create a simple "hot spot" model of habitat use in advance of leasing lands for wind energy developments, so these hot spots can be avoided during development.



*Hamlin Valley research site. Photo courtesy of Nicki Frey.*