

# THE COMMUNICATOR

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## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES LISTING GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE AS ENDANGERED UNDER ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) published draft rules in the Federal Register on 10 January, 2013 to begin the process to protect the Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) under the Endangered Species Act. The Gunnison sage-grouse is one of two species of sage-grouse that occur in Utah. In Utah the species is only found in San Juan County, where its habitat is primarily on private land.

The USFWS estimates the Gunnison sage-grouse now occupies only approximately seven percent of its historic range. Approximately 5,000 breeding birds remain in sagebrush and adjacent meadow and streamside habitats in and around the Gunnison Basin in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.



*Photo courtesy of Phoebe Prather.*

Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources have involved local communities, federal agencies, and private partners through local working groups to identify and implement voluntary conservation strategies to conserve Gunnison sage-grouse habitat. These efforts have stabilized the largest remaining Gunnison sage-grouse population in the Gunnison Basin of Colorado. However, the smaller populations have continued to decline.

Utah's population had been one of the bright spots, until recent severe winters have impacted the population. The Utah population declines have been attributed to habitat fragmentation, particularly the loss of important tall sagebrush winter habitat. Still populations levels appear to have stabilized.

At this point, the USFWS draft rules should only be considered a proposal. It does not represent any final decision. As a result of this preliminary decision, the USFWS has opened a 60-day public comment period and is hosting a series of public meetings to seek new information from the public and the scientific community before making a final listing determination. A meeting has been scheduled in Monticello, Utah on February 7, 2013, from 5-7 PM. The meeting will be held in the Monticello High School (164 S 200 W). The meeting will be an open house format with a presentation at 5:15 and 6:15 PM.

IN THIS ISSUE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES LISTING GUNNISON SAGE-GROUSE AS ENDANGERED UNDER ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT.....	1
CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATION .....	2
HEATON FAMILY PRESENTED THE LEOPOLD CONSERVATION AWARD.....	3
LANDOWNER-FOCUSED EVENTS PROVIDE INFORMATION ON SAGE-GROUSE INITIATIVE FUNDING .....	4
UPCOMING EVENTS .....	4
CBCP MISSION STATEMENT.....	4



By Terry Messmer, Utah State University

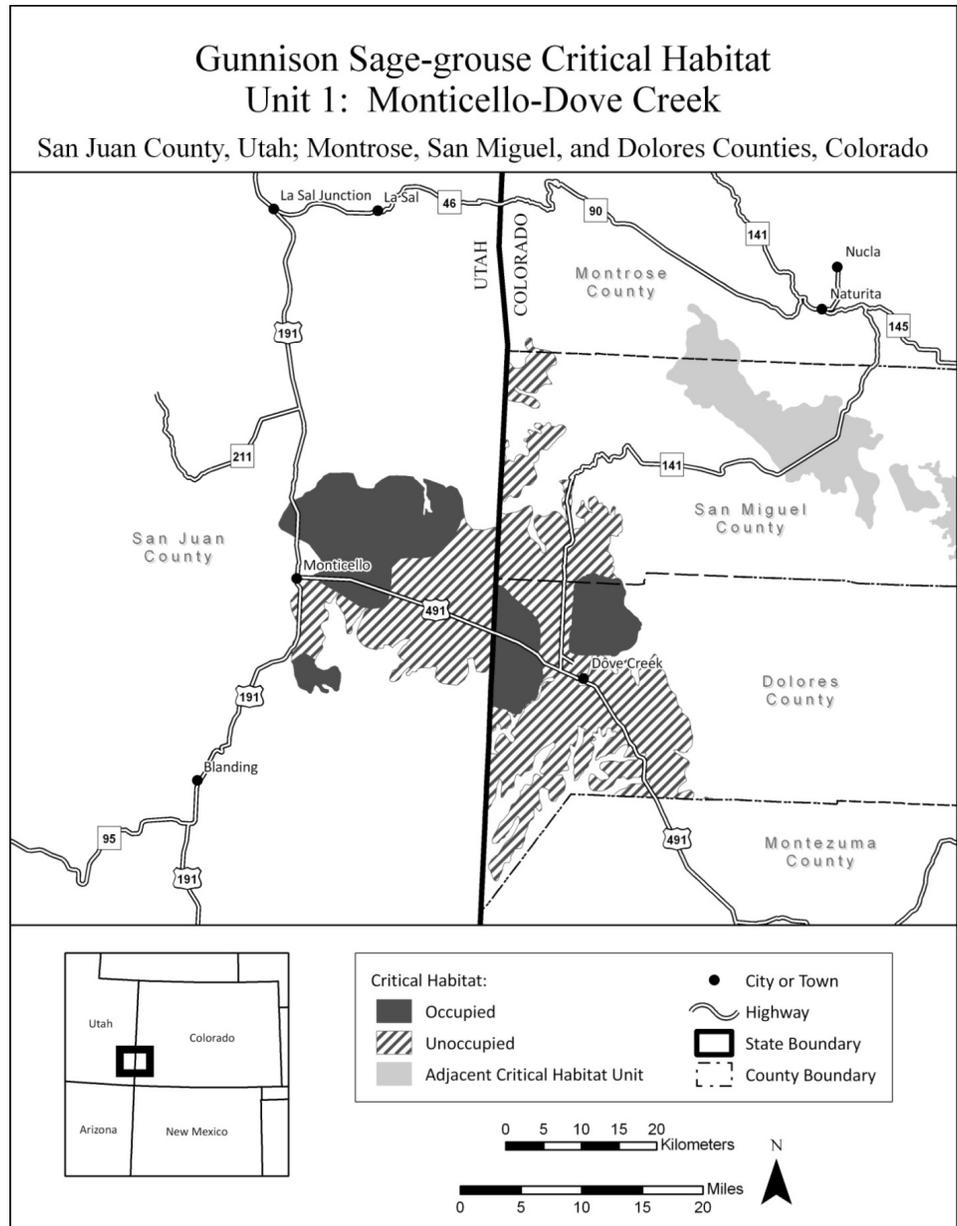
Often with a decision to list a species under the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS is required to also propose potential critical habitat. The USFWS has proposed 1.7 million acres of “critical habitat” which affects both San Juan and Grand Counties in Utah. The phrase “critical habitat” has regulatory consequences. It is the area that the USFWS believes is essential for the conservation of the species. If a land use or action is designated as being detrimental to this habitat, it could be restricted.

Earlier this year, the President directed that any future designations of critical habitat carefully consider all public comments on relevant science and economic impact, including those that suggest methods for minimizing regulatory burdens. If the listing is finalized, any potential critical habitat designation will include a full analysis of economic impact, including impact on jobs, and will strive, to the extent permitted by law, to avoid unnecessary burdens and costs on states, tribes, localities, and the private sector.

Finalizing the listing and any potential critical habitat designation would not necessarily result in any restrictions on human activities. Only if an activity required federal actions, funding or permitting would the agency in question need to work with the Service to avoid, reduce or mitigate potential impacts to the species or its habitat should it be listed.

The USFWS is requesting input from the public before making final listing and critical habitat decisions. Comments on each proposed rule must be received within 60 days, on or before March 12, 2013. The drafts rules can be accessed at the web address provided below.

<https://www.federalregister.gov/public-inspection/search?conditions%5Bterm%5D=gunnison+sage-grouse>



Map copied from the GuSG Critical Habitat Federal Register Jan 2013, page 101.

Excerpts from Leopold Conservation Award Website:

Sand County Foundation, the Utah Farm Bureau Federation, the Utah Cattlemen's Association, Trout Unlimited and Western AgCredit were pleased to name the Heaton Ranch as the recipient of the 2012 Leopold Conservation Award. The Heaton family were presented the Leopold Conservation Award at the Utah Farm Bureau Convention in last fall.

"The Heaton family have made conservation a family tradition," said Brent Haglund, Sand County Foundation President. "Through adaptive management techniques, innovation and outreach, the Heaton family are going a long way to ensure that the agricultural operation and its natural resources will, not only endure, but thrive for future generations."

The Heaton Ranch, located in Alton, Utah, is family owned and operated by Karl and Raymond Heaton – first cousins. The ranch's 140,000+ private and federal acres support abundant wildlife populations – including sage grouse and a premier trophy mule deer herd – and 1,250 head of cattle. Each fall, the ranchers trail cattle 100 miles to the south and graze on winter forage on the Arizona Strip – the area of land north of the Colorado River and Grand Canyon in Arizona.

"We are very excited to present this award on behalf of the farmers and ranchers of Utah," Leland Hogan said. "This award, however, is great for all of Utah because the recognition and funding helps to preserve and enhance our open space. Utah's farmers and ranchers have a long history of land preservation and a deep commitment to preserving Utah's natural resources. As stewards of the land we want to ensure that history continues well into the future."

"These cattle pay for all the conservation work we do. Conservation is a top priority for us, and we recognize that's what's kept us in business today," said Karl Heaton. "They'd like to put summer homes out here, but we're maintaining open spaces. We're an agriculture ranch and that's how we want to keep it."

The Leopold Conservation Award, named in honor of world-renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold, is comprised of \$10,000 and a Leopold crystal. The award is presented annually in eight states to private landowners who practice responsible land stewardship and management.

The Leopold Conservation Award in Utah is made possible through the generous support of Western AgCredit, Utah Farm Bureau Federation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Trout Unlimited, Utah Association of Conservation Districts (UACD) and Ag Credit.

For more information, please visit [www.leopoldconservationaward.org](http://www.leopoldconservationaward.org).



Left to right: Ray, Kevin, and Karl Heaton. Photos courtesy of Ron Francis, Utah NRCS.



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

### LANDOWNER-FOCUSED EVENTS PROVIDE INFORMATION ON SAGE-GROUSE INITIATIVE FUNDING

By Lorien Belton, Utah State University

Two of the collaborative sage-grouse groups in northern Utah recently held successful events for landowners. The Morgan-Summit and the Uintah Basin Adaptive Resource Management groups (MSARM and UBARM) each sponsored an event.

The MSARM group sponsored a lasagna dinner and open house to share information about Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI) funding; federal and state planning efforts; and several other topics related to grazing and sage-grouse conservation.

In Roosevelt, the Uintah Basin sage-grouse group co-sponsored a workshop with NRCS, local Utah State University (USU) Extension, and two local Conservation Districts. Presentations covered SGI opportunities and several other topics of interest to cattle ranchers. Everyone was treated to lunch by the Conservation Districts.

At the January 7th event in the Morgan-Summit area, Tammy Koldyke presented the Sage-grouse Initiative. The program has \$2.8 million for 2013 in Utah. Landowners who sign up for the sage-grouse initiative will be given "regulatory predictability" for practices in their SGI-NRCS plan, in the event that the species is ever listed. A wide range of practices is can be funded, including pinyon-juniper removal, grazing management plans, fence markers, and many others. Landowners can sign up at any NRCS office. Tammy Koldyke is the primary contact for the SGI program in the Morgan-Summit area (and most other counties in northern Utah as well.) Anyone signing up now will be placed in consideration for projects in 2014.

The MSARM group also heard several other presentations. Lorien Belton, the group facilitator, provided updates on how federal and state sage-grouse planning efforts relate to one another. Thomas Hoskins, from the NRCS Coalville office, reviewed the importance and value of photo point monitoring, particularly for gauging range condition. Shane Green, also from NRCS, explained several key management rules for grazing that can help encourage better grazing on the range and can help improve habitat for sage-grouse as well as increasing forage availability and range health for livestock.

#### 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.

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.

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

In Roosevelt, similar information on SGI and the regulatory predictability was provided by Natasha Gruber, the SGI biologist in that area. In addition, the group was treated to a presentation by Jim Keyes, USU Extension agent for Agriculture and Natural Resources in San Juan County. He spoke about winter nutrition requirements for cattle in the third trimester, protein supplements, and other issues in cattle nutrition, particularly in severe weather and low temperatures. He also addressed plant responses to grazing and answered questions about grazing monitoring.

Between the two events, more than fifty ranchers attended. Similar events are being planned for landowners in the Strawberry Valley and West Desert areas. Contact Lorien Belton at [lorien.belton@usu.edu](mailto:lorien.belton@usu.edu) or 435-770-2413 if you have suggestions or would like additional information.

#### UPCOMING EVENTS

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|-----------------------|---|
| Feb. 7 from 5 to 7 PM | USFWS Public Comment on Gunnison Sage-grouse in Monticello      |
| Feb. 13 at 10 AM      | CCARM meeting   |
| Feb. 13 at 1 PM       | WDARM meeting   |
| Feb. 19 at 3 PM       | UBARM meeting   |
| Feb. 19 at 6 PM       | West Box Elder CRM meeting                                      |
| April 12 or 19        | PARM Lek Count (depending on weather and female lek attendance) |
| April 23 at 1 PM      | Rich County CRM meeting   |

See [www.utahcbcp.org](http://www.utahcbcp.org) for more details and contact information.