

5,000 Sage-grouse

By Larry Hyslop



Male Sage-grouse, photo from USFWS

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is considering the listing of the Greater Sage-grouse as an endangered species. One concern is isolated populations having less than 5,000 birds, but this concern is only in local areas. This information comes from the difficult to read and interpret USFWS document “12-Month Findings for Petitions to List the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) as Threatened or Endangered”.

There is no magic number of Sage-grouse needed to prevent listing. Current population numbers are mere estimates since it is impossible to count all Sage-grouse. If the bird is listed as endangered, the listing will be based on continued negative population trends due to continued loss of habitat.

The only firm population data here in Elko County comes from the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW). They count birds, mostly dancing males, on trend leks each spring. NDOW only has counts on a significant number of leks for the past 8 years, but this data does show a slight downward trend.

The primary reason the bird may be listed is dwindling quality Sage-grouse habitat. This is often because of fragmented habitat. Sage-grouse use a variety of sagebrush habitat throughout the year. Problems occur when quality habitat gets cut up into smaller chunks. The document states in the western half of their range, this habitat fragmentation happens most often from wildfires and cheatgrass monocultures. Good habitat is also cut up by human infrastructure such as roads, pipelines and power lines.

The USFWS is concerned that a small population of birds could become isolated from other birds within this fragmented habitat. If this isolated population drops below 5,000 birds, it could mean their genetic viability is reduced enough to put them in danger of becoming extinct. This concern over a minimum of 5,000 birds is in small, isolated populations, not across the entire West. According to the document, this minimum number comes from outside researchers and may not be the best estimate of the minimum number of birds needed to keep small, isolated populations healthy. The USFWS feels this number seems to be the best guess available.

These small, isolated populations are not as big a worry here in Elko County as in other areas of the West. Northern Nevada, along with southern Idaho and Oregon, is called a Sage-grouse stronghold because it contains large blocks of contiguous, quality habitat. But the USFWS listing document states if the bird is listed, it will be listed across its entire range. The birds’ problems vary across the West, but birds in all areas are having problems.

Elko County may have more habitat and more birds than other areas, but even our Sage-grouse population shows a slight downward trend. If the bird is listed, and everyone hopes it will not be listed, it will be because of this negative population trend due to loss of habitat.

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