Jim Cochran

From: Griffin - DNR, Kathy <kathy.griffin@state.co.us>
Sent: Monday, May 05, 2014 1:45 PM
To: Jim Cochran; David Baumgarten
Subject: Fwd: Science backs us up on sage grouse!

A report from NRCS....not exactly "science" but an interesting read.

Kathy

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Ver_Steeg - DNR, Jeff** <jeff.ver_steeg@state.co.us>
Date: Mon, May 5, 2014 at 1:27 PM
Subject: Science backs us up on sage grouse!
To: Chad Bishop <Chad.Bishop@state.co.us>, "Velarde, Ron" <Ron.Velarde@state.co.us>, Patt Dorsey - DNR <patt.dorsey@state.co.us>, "McLaughlin, Craig" <Craig.McLaughlin@state.co.us>, "Pusateri, Francie" <Francie.Pusateri@state.co.us>, "Griffin, Kathy" <Kathy.Griffin@state.co.us>, "Petch, Brad" <Brad.Petch@state.co.us>, Jim Gammonley <jim.gammonley@state.co.us>

FYI

ENDANGERED SPECIES:
Sage grouse listing could slow signups for voluntary conservation -- report

Scott Streater, E&E reporter
Published: Tuesday, April 29, 2014

A new federal report appears to bolster the long-held position of Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) and other Western leaders that a federal endangered listing of the greater sage grouse could impede voluntary partnerships with ranchers and other landowners that are viewed as key to restoring the bird and its dwindling habitat.

Critics, however, counter that the Endangered Species Act includes numerous provisions protecting landowners who partner with federal agencies on voluntary conservation measures, even if a species is ultimately listed.

The Fish and Wildlife Service must decide by late 2015 whether to propose listing the greater sage grouse as threatened or endangered.

At issue is an eight-page **report** from Jason Weller, chief of the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), outlining the federal and private investment over the past four years in public-private partnerships designed to conserve the grouse and the effectiveness of these efforts, as well as speculating on the impacts an ESA listing might have on these programs.

Hickenlooper and Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval (R) last month requested the report in their capacities as chairman and vice chairman, respectively, of the Western Governors' Association.

In it, NRCS reports that more than $350 million has been invested since 2010 in voluntary projects with private landowners and other partners to protect the sage grouse and its habitat.

Most of that money -- more than $250 million -- has come from NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), which partners with ranchers on voluntary efforts to manage lands to protect sage grouse. Through programs like this, NRCS has partnered since 2010 with 953 ranches on conservation measures covering 3.8 million acres across the grouse's 11-state range, according to the report.

In addition, more than $107 million has been invested in that time by private landowners and other local agencies, according to the report, which calculates that since 2010, these efforts have resulted in establishing nearly 400,000 acres of conservation easements on private land and removing 276,000 acres of invasive conifers that destroy the grouse's sagebrush steppe habitat. These efforts have also resulted in marking more than 530 miles of fence lines, "preventing 2,800 sage-grouse fence collisions annually" that are one of the primary threats to the bird's survival.

"My objective for the collective SGI efforts, 'on-the-ground' conservation work and the results of science-based evaluations documenting the effectiveness of that work have always been to support a 'not-warranted' listing decision for sage-grouse," Weller wrote in a cover letter accompanying the report. "I still believe this objective is possible."

But once the bird is proposed to be listed as threatened or endangered, participation in the voluntary efforts can dry up, Weller acknowledged in the report.

That's what appears to have happened after Fish and Wildlife last fall formally proposed listing as threatened a genetically unique population of sage grouse found only in two states -- Nevada and California -- and commonly referred to as the "bi-state" or Mono Basin population (***Greenwire***, Oct. 25, 2013).

Between 2010 and 2013, NRCS had enrolled a growing number of landowners in both states in SGI projects totaling $26 million for conservation easements and removal of invasive plants, according to the report.

But since that listing proposal for the bi-state population, "landowner interest has declined precipitously," the report said.

"While several factors likely influence landowner participation, it appears this decline is associated with the FWS proposal to list the bird in the fall of 2013," the report states. "There were 13 producers who had submitted early SGI applications" for funding of conservation projects in fiscal 2014 "and withdrew their applications shortly after the listing announcement."

Fish and Wildlife earlier this month agreed to revisit its proposal to list the bi-state population, saying there is "substantial disagreement" over the science used to justify the proposed listing (***Greenwire***, April 9).

But Western lawmakers have long expressed this concern, which is one reason why Hickenlooper and Sandoval last month asked NRCS for the information compiled in the report.

Hickenlooper, in particular, has been vocal about his belief that the states and partnerships with private landowners will be enough to save the sage grouse. Hickenlooper in January wrote a letter to the Bureau of Land Management complaining that a proposed BLM plan for managing 1.6 million acres of federal land with grouse habitat in northwest Colorado does not properly balance existing land uses such as energy development and ranching with species conservation (***Greenwire***, Jan. 15).

"It's our thought that providing economic incentives for landowners to voluntarily work for sage grouse conservation initiatives is going to have more rapid results and greater conservation than a listing of the species," said Joe Rassenfoss, a spokesman for the Western Governors' Association. "As

soon as this stuff gets listed, everybody steps away. This pretty much confirms that NRCS has experienced that."

Not everyone agrees with that assessment, however.

"I am always surprised to see this claim, that Endangered Species Act listing discourages continued state and local efforts to conserve imperiled species," Mark Salvo, director of federal land conservation for Defenders of Wildlife, said in an emailed statement.

"The Endangered Species Act does not in any way impede state and local efforts to conserve listed species. In fact, species listing is usually accompanied by increased funding for research, population monitoring and habitat restoration that supports state and local conservation actions," Salvo added. "The act also includes processes for recognizing existing scientifically viable, legally sufficient conservation plans as [complementary] conservation strategies for listed species."

He also said the SGI "is one example of a federally funded sage-grouse conservation program that I'd expect will continue to benefit private landowners and sage-grouse, regardless of the listing decision for the species."

But Weller, the NRCS chief, wrote in the report, "Predicting future landowner and partner participation if sage-grouse are listed is very hard."

What is clear, he wrote, is that SGI and other voluntary partnerships and efforts "have improved the outlook for sage-grouse and have implemented unsurpassed conservation on a watershed scale."

He added: "SGI is based on the belief that we can achieve wildlife conservation through sustainable ranching and adherence to this vision and voluntary framework has fostered an enthusiastic and unprecedented participation rate among diverse partners and landowners across the West. Coupled with the historic actions taken by the States and other Federal land management agencies, I sincerely hope this question will remain hypothetical and we will succeed by proactively conserving sage-grouse and avoiding ESA designation altogether."