

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

June 2, 2009

Environment Week kicks off with sage-grouse court battle

Government has no excuse for ignoring habitat of well-studied Prairie bird, groups say

To stop the disappearance of one of the Prairie's most iconic species, six conservation groups are in federal court today arguing a lawsuit against the federal Minister of Environment, Jim Prentice, for refusing to identify critical habitat for the endangered greater sage-grouse.

The lawsuit was filed by Ecojustice in early 2008 on behalf of the Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, Grasslands Naturalists, Nature Saskatchewan and Wilderness Committee. It alleges the federal Minister of Environment failed to comply with Canada's *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) which requires the sage-grouse's critical habitat to be identified in its recovery strategy, so it can be protected.

"Our groups are sending an Environment Week message to Minister Prentice and Premier Ed Stelmach," said Cliff Wallis, Vice-President of the Alberta Wilderness Association. "Their refusal to protect critical habitat could mean that sage-grouse have little chance of survival."

The once widespread sage-grouse, known for its spectacular spring courtship displays, has been listed as endangered since 1998 and now survives in a remote area in the south-eastern corner of Alberta and south-western corner of Saskatchewan. In the past year, sage-grouse numbers have dropped an alarming 20 per cent with Alberta Fish and Wildlife counting 66 males on leks in the spring of 2009, down from 84 in 2008. At the current rate of decline, with oil and gas development continuing to fragment sage-grouse's grasslands habitat, the species is forecasted to disappear from Alberta within six years.

Not only are the sage-grouse's breeding locations, leks, extremely well known, but a peer-reviewed study by leading sage-grouse scientist Dr. Mark Boyce, published in a prestigious academic journal, clearly identifies critical habitat for nesting and brood-rearing. Yet despite referencing such studies, the federal government's recovery strategy failed to identify any critical habitat, stymieing future efforts to protect it.

"The Government of Canada seems to think excellent scientific studies are irrelevant to conservation of Canada's species at risk, preferring to rely on politics than on science," said Ecojustice Conservation Biologist Susan Pinkus. "The sage-grouse case is only one of four lawsuits currently in court because the federal government failed to identify and protect well-known critical habitat for endangered species - despite being required to do so by law."

The sage-grouse case will be heard June 2-4, 2009 in Federal Court, Pacific Centre 3rd Floor, 701 W Georgia St, 9:30 AM.

-30-

For more information and photos of grouse, visit www.ecojustice.ca or contact:

Susan Pinkus, Conservation Biologist, Ecojustice Canada: cell: (604) 537-6407

Gwen Barlee, National Policy Director, Wilderness Committee: cell: (604) 202-0322

Cliff Wallis, Vice-President, Alberta Wilderness Association: (403) 271 1408; cell: 607-1970

Dr. Mark Boyce, University of Alberta: office: (780)-492-0081

Philip Penner, Federation of Alberta Naturalists: (780)427-8124

Lorne Scott, Conservation Director, Nature Saskatchewan: home: (306)-695-2047; cell: (306)-695-7458