

MEDIA RELEASE

Immediate Release

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Landmark court victory forces government to protect endangered species habitat Precedent-setting decision gives Canada's endangered sage-grouse and other species at risk a chance at recovery

Vancouver, BC – Environmentalists are celebrating the first decisive victory for endangered species since the unveiling of Canada's Species at Risk Act in 2003. On Thursday (July 9) a federal court judge in Vancouver ruled that the federal Minister of the Environment, Jim Prentice, broke the law by refusing to identify critical habitat in a recovery plan for the endangered greater sage-grouse.

"This decision confirms our view that the Minister of the Environment is routinely breaking the law by refusing to identify the habitat of species on the brink of extinction," said Ecojustice executive director Devon Page who brought the case. "This is only one in a series of endangered species cases we've had to bring to force the government to do its duty. We won't go away - if they continue to ignore the law, we will continue to hammer them in the courts and this case will be a powerful tool for the protection all of Canada's species at risk, including caribou, killer whales and polar bears."

The greater sage-grouse 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. The court decision offers hope the iconic sage-grouse, known for its spectacular mating dance, may recover from decimated numbers.

"We are ecstatic to know sage-grouse will finally receive the habitat protection it needs," said Lorne Scott, President of Nature Saskatchewan. "We refused to accept that the government couldn't locate critical habitat when people flock to sage-grouse breeding grounds each year to witness their unique dance."

The judge expressed a similar sentiment, stating it was "unreasonable" for the government to claim it couldn't identify breeding grounds, known as leks, when knowledge of their locations was "notorious."

Greater sage-grouse were once wide-spread across the Prairies' but have been listed as endangered since 1998. The Prairie bird 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.

Without habitat protection, the species was forecast to disappear from Alberta within six years, partly as a result of oil and gas developments, which fragment the bird's grasslands habitat.

"The sage-grouse case will put an end to years of government inaction. There is reason to believe endangered species across Canada will finally receive protection with federal courts forcing the government to obey its own laws," said Alberta Wilderness Association Vice-President Cliff Wallis.

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

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