Communiqué from the Emergency Sage-grouse Summit, September 7, 8 2011, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

In 2011, just 13 male greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) were recorded on "leks" in Alberta, and 35 in Saskatchewan: the represents a greater than 95 percent decline since 1968. Although the greater sage-grouse was designated an *At Risk* species in Alberta in 1996 (endangered in 2000), a *Threatened* species in Saskatchewan in 1987 (endangered in 1999) and a federally *Endangered* species in 1998, this decline has continued unchecked in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. Populations in neighbouring jurisdictions have undergone similar declines, leading to listing under the U.S. *Endangered Species Act*. Federal and provincial governments are aware of the causes of greater sage-grouse population declines, and what would need to be done to reverse the declines. Not enough has been done to eliminate human disturbance in critical habitat. A recent Alberta government report notes that, within a 3.2 km radius of lek sites the province has allowed the construction of 4.6 wells/km^2, and 1.7 of these are active producing wells (Boyce, 2011). If the greater sage-grouse is allowed to disappear, it will be what University of Alberta professor Dr. Mark Boyce describes as "the first case where the oil and gas industry has caused the extirpation of a species in Canada."

Two things are clear: 1) current efforts are failing to prevent the extirpation of the greater sage-grouse and protect its habitat, and 2) there is an urgent need for immediate action and substantive measures if the imminent extirpation of the greater sage-grouse from Canada is to be prevented.

Protection of Greater Sage-grouse in Canada

A panel of scientists and conservation organizations held an emergency summit on the future of greater sage-grouse in Canada on September 7 and 8 2011 in Calgary. We committed to establishing effective, proactive management actions, long-term habitat protections and funding mechanisms that will bolster greater sage-grouse populations in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

We are alarmed by unnecessary delays in the designation and protection of critical habitat when there is unanimous agreement from industry and government that immediate action is required.

Actions Required to Protect Greater Sage-grouse

- Designate additional critical habitat as identified on proposed critical habitat maps produced in 2010.
- No new developments in critical greater sage-grouse habitat. Major concerns are regarding prolonged or expanded industrial development and associated activities in and around critical habitat.
- Restore existing critical habitat, including removal of industrial infrastructure.
- To allow for future recovery, previously occupied range outside current critical habitat must be restored to functionality suitable for greater sage-grouse.
- Any new development outside of critical habitat but within the identified zone of influence (15 kilometres) must not contribute to the disturbance of the species or destruction of critical habitat.

Landowners in southeastern Alberta greater sage-grouse range have expressed their frustration at the lack of oversight and regulation of oil and gas activities in greater sage-grouse habitat. Many are committed to protecting the habitat of these endangered species, but do not see a similar commitment from governments or the oil and gas industry. Habitat fragmentation and lack of attention to protecting biodiversity is frustrating their efforts to protect these species. There must be a shift in attitude from the current emphasis on development with mitigation, to full protection of critical habitat.

More follow-up monitoring and basic research is required in keeping with commitments made in recovery plans. This must be coupled with adequate resourcing of the recovery efforts as well as education and cooperative programs for industry and landowners.

Greater sage-grouse occur in an area with some of the richest concentrations of species-at-risk in Canada, and measures to protect and restore greater sage-grouse habitat will assist with the conservation of some of the planet's most imperiled species. Greater sage-grouse are sentinels for the health of both the shrub-steppe and Great Plains ecosystems.

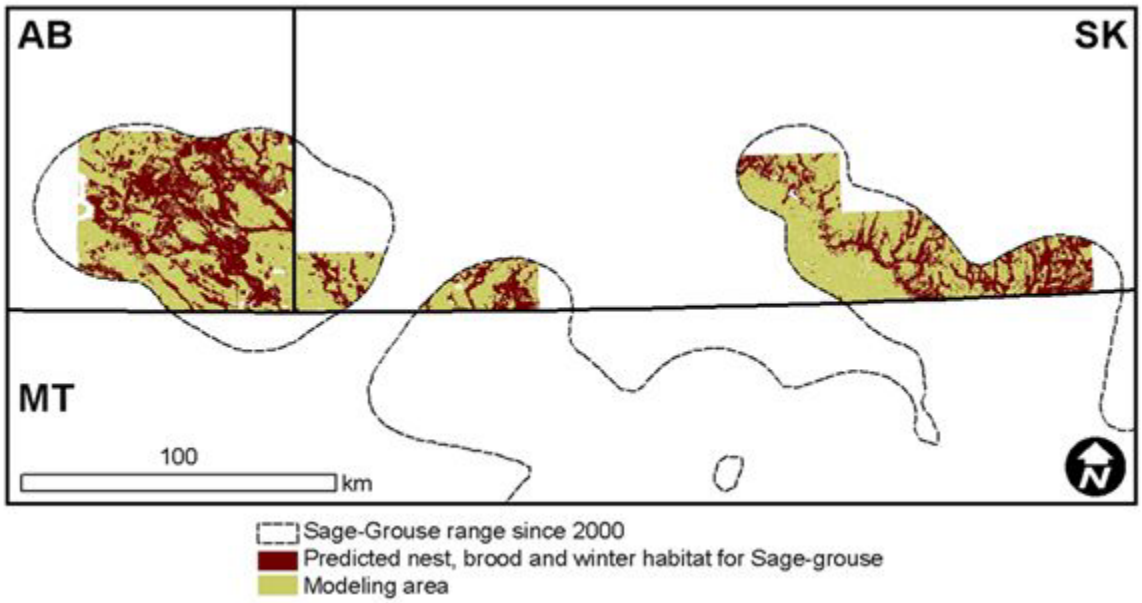
ENGOs at the summit are investigating legal options under the federal *Species at Risk Act*, so that they are prepared to take legal action should governments fail to act.

The following are what we consider priority actions/guidance concerning management of the sagebrush habitat and greater sage-grouse:

Habitat

- Federal government to designate critical habitat as identified based on proposed critical habitat maps produced in 2010 (see map below) plus an additional 1900 m zone of influence. These maps were collectively developed and supported by Environment Canada, Parks Canada, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Saskatchewan Environment, Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, Alberta Conservation Association and international sage-grouse scientists, and presented at the Society of Conservation Biology meeting, July 2010, Edmonton, AB.
- Retain all remaining natural prairie and silver sagebrush habitat within a 15 km radius around 2011 proposed critical habitat, and introduce a moratorium on development in this area until we can precisely identify impacts of development (precautionary approach).
- Provinces to implement legal protection (e.g. wildlife sanctuaries, ecological reserves, land-use zones) with associated regulations to protect critical greater sage-grouse habitat.
- No new development (roads, transmission lines, well sites, buildings, fences, etc.) allowed in critical habitat.
- Map and manage all historical greater sage-grouse habitat that remains in native vegetation as if it might one day be used again by the species.
- Identify and protect important seasonal habitat and recognize the value of connectivity to maintain genetic viability.

Proposed Critical Habitat for Greater Sage-Grouse in Canada



Source: Aldridge, C.L., and D.L. Gummer, 2010. Lessons learned in the application of habitat models to identify critical habitat for Greater Sage-grouse. Society for Conservation Biology's 24th International Congress for Conservation Biology, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Invited Special Presentation, presented July 4th, 2010, for a Symposium: "Bridging the Science-Policy Gap in Implementation of Critical Habitat under the ESA and SARA".

Energy and Other Industrial Uses

- For environmental effects analysis, greater sage-grouse habitat impact evaluation shall extend out to a minimum of 15 km from 2011 proposed critical habitat from all proposed developments.
- Plan for the removal of industrial infrastructure in critical habitat.
- Apply timing restrictions to existing activity.

Roads/Vehicle Use

- Enforce prohibition of motorized activity in critical habitat.
- Restrict/eliminate traffic on roads within 15 km of greater sage-grouse leks during breeding and nesting (early March to the end of June).
- Restrict traffic speeds on roads within 15 km of a greater sage-grouse lek.
- No new construction of roads and trails within 15 km of a greater sage-grouse lek.

Man-made Structures

- Remove man-made structures from greater sage-grouse habitat that may serve as artificial roosts for avian predators, e.g. fences, buildings, telephone or power poles.

Grazing

- Graze lightly to moderately (utilization rates of 25 to 40% of current annual production) using extensive techniques that produce a patchy mosaic of good cover and bare ground, and adjust grazing pressures in times of drought.
- Avoid concentrated grazing or supplemental feeding in sagebrush communities in winter.
- Avoid placing salt, minerals, supplements or fences within 0.8 km of lek sites.

Recreation/Tourism

- No new ecotourism activities in greater sage-grouse habitat until population has recovered to a viable level.
- No hunting of greater sage-grouse.

- No falconry in greater sage-grouse range.

Translocation

- Translocation of birds from healthy populations to augment declining populations may only occur if habitat is secured to support populations. Translocation is currently being misused as a substitute for the more pressing issue of habitat protection.

Predator Management

- Reduce or eliminate habitat features that attract or enhance populations of greater sage-grouse predators, including dumps/waste disposal sites, dead livestock, and structures that provide roosting and nesting habitat for ravens and crows.

Legislation/Policies/Stewardship

- Federally and provincially legislated protection on all critical habitat for greater sage-grouse.
- Provincial wildlife legislation needs reform to better protect wildlife habitat.

Monitoring/Science

- Restore funding to allow complete annual lek surveys and achieve research and monitoring objectives identified in recovery plans.
- Environment Canada should provide a report and assessment of monitoring activities since October 2009 to assess effectiveness of protection of the 2009 designated critical habitat.
- We request that information on all disturbances in greater sage-grouse range in Canada be provided by provincial organizations, such as updates on road development, oil and gas wells, etc., through to 2011.

Coordination of Protection and Recovery Efforts

- Establish an effective coordinating mechanism amongst all agencies, scientists and stakeholders interested in greater sage-grouse conservation.

Signed by:

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Bird Studies Canada
Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (Southern Alberta Chapter)
Nature Canada
Nature Alberta
Nature Saskatchewan
Society of Grasslands Naturalists
The Pembina Institute
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