

## AWA Hosts Emergency Sage-Grouse Summit

The charismatic greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) is recognized among naturalists for many reasons. But this prairie icon is perhaps best known for the spectacular courtship displays that occur on mating grounds (leks) each spring. Throughout the last decade, however, the reputation of the sage-grouse has grown for reasons besides being the Casanova of Alberta's grasslands; the greater sage-grouse is also the most endangered species in Alberta. The sage-grouse was designated an *At Risk* species in Alberta in 1996 and was downgraded to *Endangered* in 2000. The federal government recognized it as an *Endangered* species in 1998 yet both provincial and federal agencies have since failed to implement adequate protection or recovery measures. This year saw only 13 males recorded on leks in Alberta. This is a staggering, greater than 95 percent, decline in their recorded numbers since 1968.

It is clear that, as with most threatened and endangered species worldwide, habitat destruction and fragmentation have caused this rapid decline. Extensive energy development in southern Alberta has essentially impacted all remaining sage-grouse habitat. If we allow the sage-grouse 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." As sage-grouse are sentinels for the health of both the shrub-steppe and Great Plains ecosystems, measures taken to protect and restore sage-grouse habitat will assist with the conservation of some of the planet's most imperiled species. Seventy percent of the species at risk in Alberta are found in our dwindling native grasslands.

In response to the alarmingly low population counts and complete lack of meaningful government responses, AWA hosted an emergency sage-grouse summit in Calgary on September 7 and 8, 2011. Leading international sage-grouse scientists, southeast Alberta landowners, conservationists and members of environmental organizations came together to discuss the factors

contributing to this decline. The discussions developed a suite of actions necessary to prevent the extirpation of the sage-grouse and protect its habitat in Alberta and southwest Saskatchewan.

From these important conversations, a final communiqué was collaboratively developed and submitted to both provincial and federal government agencies. Above all, the summit recommended that no new development be allowed to take place within critical sage-grouse habitat, and that existing industrial infrastructure be removed. Action is urgently required at both the provincial and federal level to ensure the native grasslands of southern Alberta have not witnessed the sage-grouse's last dance.

- Madeline Wilson