

Partnership Plus An Emergency Protection Order:

A Potion to Save Greater Sage-Grouse?

By AWA Staff

Without emergency action, greater sage-grouse will disappear in Canada in three to five years. Gone... totally. This forecast, based on scientific data and current population trends, was delivered on January 17, 2014 at a workshop of experts hosted by the Calgary Zoo and facilitated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN's) Conservation Specialist Breeding Group. The magnitude of our sage-grouse crisis precipitated the gathering of experts to identify and prioritize emergency measures.

Greater sage-grouse and the sagebrush habitat on which they depend have been in decline for decades. More than 80 percent of the natural habitat thought to have once supported sage-grouse in Canada is gone, swept aside by industrialization and agriculture. Canada's current population of sage-grouse is estimat-

ed to be fewer than 100 individuals and these survivors occupy less than 10 percent of their historic range.

Long term monitoring of greater sage-grouse and their habitat has provided clear evidence of long term decline but actions to conserve habitat and recover the species have been slow in coming. The federal government produced the first recovery strategy for greater sage-grouse under the *Species at Risk Act* in 2008; however, the associated identification of critical habitat addressed only federal lands. Recognizing that the identified critical habitat was woefully inadequate, AWA and several other environmental organizations joined forces with Ecojustice to use the courts to try to force the federal government to comply with the *Species at Risk Act* and produce a meaningful strategy that might realistically recover sage-grouse. We won that round in

2009, more than four years ago now, when there were still over 100 sage-grouse in Alberta. After that ruling federal government staff went to work identifying additional critical habitat outside of federal lands and updating the recovery strategy.

In September 2011, AWA hosted the Emergency Sage-grouse Summit in Calgary. The Emergency Summit brought together leading international scientists, local landowners, and environmental organizations dedicated to ensuring greater sage-grouse remains on Canada's prairie landscape. Recommendations from the Emergency Sage-grouse Summit included: restoring the functionality of critical habitat and previously occupied range, severely limiting new development in and around critical habitat, and designating additional critical habitat as identified on proposed critical habitat maps made in 2010.

Again, action to recover the species lagged dismally behind the planning, mapping, and monitoring that was occurring. In 2011, with only 30 sage-grouse left in Alberta, an international coalition of conservation groups including AWA sent a petition to then Environment Minister Peter Kent demanding he issue an emergency protection order and take other action. When the deadline passed for the Minister to respond to the petition, Ecojustice filed an application in federal court to force his hand. We won again and the emergency order was finally released in December 2013. The emergency protection order restricts the construction of new roads, tall or noisy objects, and fencing that is not "grouse-friendly." It also restricts loud noises at certain times of year. However, it is widely recognized that the emergency order restrictions alone will not



Dr. Mark Boyce (l), from the University of Alberta, and Dr. Cam Aldridge, from Colorado State University, at the September 2011 Sage-Grouse Summit convened by AWA PHOTO: AWA



June 2013 Sage-Grouse Partnership meeting in Manyberries Alberta PHOTO: © C. OLSON

recover greater sage-grouse.

Frustrated by the lack of action and collaboration, AWA set out to work with the local community in southeastern Alberta to establish a partnership that would be capable of moving action forward. Recognizing that the support of local ranchers and local industry was vital to accomplishing success, a series of community meetings was held in 2013. Out of those meetings a core group of dedicated individuals emerged and the Sage Grouse Partnership (SGP) was formed.

The SGP is co-chaired by Cliff Wallis from AWA and David Heydlauff, a local rancher whose land supports some of the few remaining sage-grouse in Alberta. Much time was spent learning what the Alberta and Canadian governments and other jurisdictions were doing to conserve and recover greater sage-grouse. Dr. Dave Naugle, one of North America's leading grouse experts, attended one meeting to discuss the U.S.-based Sage Grouse Initiative and to provide advice.

The SGP proceeded to prioritize actions that should be taken to address the decline of greater sage-grouse. They then identified the actions that could be advanced by the partnership without overlapping with activities already being undertaken. Currently, the SGP is focussing on minimizing the impact of recreational access, ranch planning to improve hiding cover and forb availability, and encouraging the removal of older industrial, agricultural, and residential structures on the landscape. All of these activities have the potential to increase sage-grouse survival and productivity. Other actions were also deemed critical and the SGP will either support the implementation of these actions by others or undertake them directly. For example,

management of predator populations within sage-grouse critical habitat is considered a high priority, short term strategy which may be undertaken by the provincial government.

Alberta Environment and Sustainable Resource Development (ESRD) also recognized the need for emergency measures. The first Alberta Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan was published, if not acted on, in 2005. When sage-grouse numbers declined by 50 percent in Alberta in 2010 and by a further 50 percent in 2011, they worked to update the plan. The five-year updated recovery plan was released in September 2013. Coinciding with the preparation of the recovery plan, ESRD implemented numerous reclamation and conservation actions and identified land use standards for industry to further sage-grouse protection. They also negotiated the translocation of sage-grouse from Montana in 2011 and 2012 to supplement the Alberta population. A total of 41 birds were translocated to Alberta. They were fitted with transmitters, which have allowed biologists to track them. Many died, primarily due to predation by avian and mammalian predators, but at least two of the translocated hens nested in 2013. Greater sage-grouse numbers didn't fall any further in Alberta between 2012 and 2013, likely due to the translocations, which are seen as a temporary stop-gap measure.

The amended version of the proposed federal sage-grouse recovery strategy was posted on the Species at Risk Public Registry in December, 2013 and the public can provide comments until February 18, 2014. AWA submitted an extensive review of the amended strategy; the bottom line is it simply doesn't go far enough, fast enough.

It might have seemed a bit like déjà vu

to the participants of the Emergency Sage-Grouse Summit who also attended the Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) Workshop hosted by the Calgary Zoo in January 2014. The issues and threats associated with the decline of greater sage-grouse in Canada have not changed, but the situation has become more critical. Participants at the PHVA workshop recommended several critical measures needed to recover sage-grouse in Canada. Three of those were considered essential and urgent. The first urges implementing a captive rearing program to create an assurance population that conserves the potentially unique genetics of greater sage-grouse north of the Milk River and that may contribute to future reintroductions. Second, restoring, rehabilitating, and enhancing sagebrush habitat – a very broad measure encompassing numerous actions from predator reduction to ranch planning. Third, increasing the capacity for and effectiveness of actions by establishing an interprovincial working group to facilitate collaboration between various stakeholders as well as between jurisdictions. This third measure is critical to enhancing the success of the first two measures.

Meanwhile, the SGP will support these measures and will forge ahead with sharing information and implementing actions to optimize the remaining greater sage-grouse sagebrush habitat. Two goals are paramount here. First, retain at least some of the extant Canadian birds so their genetics and behavioral knowledge will contribute to at least some part of a future recovered population. Second, conserve, enhance, and restore sagebrush habitat in Alberta – not just for the recovery of greater sage-grouse but also to avoid similar crises from afflicting other species dependent on this ecosystem. The path forward is fraught with risks and challenges; therefore, it is essential that there is well-resourced, concerted, and immediate action from land managers, government, industry, and conservationists. This is critical if we are to retain this magnificent species in the northern sagebrush steppe ecosystem. ▲