United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region

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APR 30 2014

Mr. Mitch Staley
Citizens for Balanced Use
P.O. Box 1132
Dillon, Montana 59725

Dear Mr. Staley:

This letter is in response to your correspondence dated January 16, 2014, with a second submission March 12, 2014, received by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) on March 27, 2014. In your correspondence, pertaining to the 2013 Species Assessment and Listing Priority Assignment Form for the Greater Sage-Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) (Form), you requested, pursuant to the Department of Interior (DOI) Information Quality Guidelines, that the Service consider correction and subsequent removal of certain population data, that we correct a Point of Technical Error in data disbursement, and that we consider effects to human population. We respond to each of these requests below.

Greater sage-grouse population data

The Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*) (ESA), requires that we identify species of wildlife and plants that are endangered or threatened, based on the best scientific and commercial data available. We have been reviewing and will continue to review annually, the status of every candidate species as reported in the Candidate Notice of Review (CNOR). Thus, the CNOR and accompanying species assessment forms constitute the Service's system for reviewing the best available scientific and commercial data and making annual findings on the status of petitioned species under sections 4(b)(3)(C)(i) and 4(b)(3)(C)(iii) of the ESA. In this review and finding we rely on information from status surveys conducted for candidate species and on information from State Natural Heritage Programs, other State and Federal agencies, knowledgeable scientists, public and private natural resource interests, and comments received in response to previous notices of review.

With respect to your request regarding Greater sage-grouse population data, all state and provincial wildlife agencies monitor Greater sage-grouse breeding populations annually using male lek attendance data, but monitoring techniques vary among areas and years both within and among agencies. We recognize this variation and provide discussion in the Form on the difficulty of estimating population numbers.

However, annual counting of males on leks remain the primary approach to monitor long-term trends in Greater sage-grouse populations, as recognized in the scientific community and literature (WAFWA 2008, Stiver *et al.* 2006, Connelly *et al.* 2011). Therefore, we utilize this information as the best scientific and commercial data available with regard to Greater sage-grouse population trends.

Please be advised that our overall assessment of the species status under the ESA is also based on information regarding threats facing the species, not simply population numbers. Factors identified as threats to the species, such as habitat loss and fragmentation and insufficiency of regulatory mechanisms for Greater sage-grouse, are also tracked so that we can determine if those threats are being ameliorated. For the 2013 Form, the data collected and received from outside parties did not support that threats to the Greater sage-grouse are being sufficiently reduced; therefore we maintained the species status as a candidate.

For the reasons described above, no correction is needed to the Greater sage-grouse population data included in the Form.

Technical Error

We were aware of the technical error you mentioned regarding the exclusion of Figures and Tables from the Form in the downloadable version available at http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=B06W. The technical error has since been corrected and the Figures and Table are currently available in the Form.

Human Population

We are required to determine whether any species is threatened or endangered because of any of the following factors under section 4(a)(1) of the ESA:

(A) the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
(B) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes;
(C) disease or predation;
(D) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
(E) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

The ESA is specific in regards to the factors that we may consider in determining whether listing a species is warranted. Under the Act and its implementing regulations, we may consider only the best available scientific and commercial information about the species with respect to these five factors, and may not consider economic impacts or effects to the human population as part of this analysis in the Form. As a result, there is no need to correct the Form as you request.

Also, as you may be aware, the Service is responsible for determining whether the Greater sage-grouse is warranted for listing in Fiscal Year 2015, at which time we will either issue a proposal to list the species under the ESA or withdraw the species from candidate status. As described above, this determination will be based on the current status of the species based on the best available scientific and commercial information.

If we propose to list the species, this proposal will be subject to a public comment period, in which anyone can submit comments and information on that proposed rule and analysis for the Service's consideration before issuance of a final listing rule.

Should we decide to propose listing the species, we may also issue a proposed rule to designate critical habitat for the species. This proposed rule would include consideration of the economic impacts of designating critical habitat. A proposed rule to designate critical habitat would also be accompanied by a public comment period, where anyone can submit comments and information on that proposed determination and analysis before issuance of a final critical habitat designation.

Thank you for your correspondence. If you have any further concerns or comments, please contact Michael Thabault at (303) 236-4210 (michael_thabault@fws.gov).

Sincerely,

Regional Director

cc: Rick Coleman
Sarah Fierce
Lynn Gemlo