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David Moreno, with USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services, talks about predator management during Tuesday's session.

STATE COMMITTED TO SAGE-GROUSE FIGHT

CPW director to landowners: 'Don't give up'

BY KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG
DAILY PRESS SENIOR WRITER

The state wants landowners to know two things concerning the Gunnison sage-grouse: Colorado stands behind local conservation efforts — and no one should give up on those just because the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has listed the bird as threatened.

"We're protecting our approach to those issues, which has been partnerships. We're defending an approach," said John Swartout, senior advisor to Gov. John Hickenlooper on sage-grouse matters. Without partnerships between the state, local governments and landowners, the situation would be adversarial, and that would not help any species, Swartout said.

State agencies have invested millions in protecting grouse habitat, providing landowner incentives, producing top-notch science, establishing policy, and in legal strategy, Swartout and Colorado Parks and Wildlife Director Bob Broscheid said.

The men were in Montrose Tuesday as part of CPW's presentation, "Ranching for Gunnison Sage-grouse." The day-long event featured information on the listing status; biology and habitat use; predator management; habitat management; grazing; cost-sharing opportunities and policy discussion. The presentation was aimed at keeping interested parties on the same page, with the most recent information on the issue, said CPW's Dean Riggs.

The Gunnison sage-grouse's largest

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Colorado Parks and Wildlife Director Bob Broscheid welcomes area landowners to a day-long session on ranching for Gunnison sage-grouse on Tuesday.

County acts on notice of intent for possible grouse suit

BY KATHARHYN HEIDELBERG
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Montrose County commissioners are taking a step toward legal action over the Gunnison sage-grouse listing decision.

Tuesday, they unanimously voted to issue a notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which last year listed the bird as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The listing prompted widespread outcry in the region and the state, the latter of which filed suit last week, alleging poor science and violations of applicable laws.

Gunnison County, where the bird is also found, filed a notice of intent late last year; Montrose County's NOI is offered in part to support Gunnison County, commissioners said previously. (See Tuesday's Daily Press.) The counties and the state contend a grouse listing is not warranted.

WildEarth Guardians, conversely, sued on the basis that the "threatened" designation wasn't protection enough.

GROUSE: State, regional partnerships the right approach, adviser says

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population is in Gunnison County. Smaller numbers of the bird are found in limited parts of Montrose and several other counties, as well as in southeastern Utah. The Gunnison sage-grouse is declining due to habitat fragmentation and other issues, the USFWS said in its November decision to list the bird as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The move provoked anger from many fronts, with the state of Colorado last week filing suit against the USFWS, its director and U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell. The state contends the agency didn't use the best available science and violated the National Environmental Policy Act.

Gunnison County late

last year filed notice of intent to sue. And on Tuesday, Montrose County commissioners voted unanimously to approve their own notice of intent to sue over the grouse listing. Both counties are part of a grouse conservation group, which maintains that local and regional efforts are sufficient to protect the bird.

Conversely, WildEarth Guardians has sued USFWS contending the "threatened" listing doesn't afford adequate protections for the Gunnison sage-grouse.

"Not a day goes by" that the Gunnison sage-grouse doesn't come up, Broscheid said Tuesday.

While the USFWS previously indicated that the bird could be de-listed once the habitat and numbers are deemed sufficient, Broscheid said he has yet to see a species come off the ESA's list through regulation. Nor has he seen a state take the USFWS to court over a listing decision allegedly based on bad science.

"The CPW has the best science, the best data, the best scientists in the country" when it comes to the grouse, he said.

Even a court loss won't end the state's efforts, he



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Area landowners and other participants in a day-long session on ranching for Gunnison sage-grouse listen to a presentation on predators Tuesday.

added: it will continue working toward a de-listing.

"Don't give up. ... We will make sure we have your backs on this," Broscheid said.

Jewell appears to be of the opinion that the bird can be quickly taken to the point of de-listing, Swartout later told the Daily Press. "We think it's a little harder than that," he said.

The CPW will continue working with other agencies and landowners and continue establishing sound science. "There's no question we have the best available science," Swartout said.

Some organizations don't have what's best for the sage-grouse in mind, he alleged.

"If you listen to WildEarth Guardians, it's real clear that they want to use the ESA to get rid of what they don't like. The No. 1 of that is grazing," said Swartout.

The state is on the grouse's side, with a 25-year track record of meaningful actions, he said, while "extreme" environmental groups "haven't put one penny on the ground to improve habitat for the grouse."

Grouse populations

have reached the point where they don't need ESA protections, Broscheid said. "We can manage it from our approach," he said.

WildEarth does not have the money or workforce to engage in on-the-ground habitat improvements, Erik Molvar, the group's Sagebrush Sea Campaign director, said.

"WildEarth Guardians achieves far broader gains for wildlife conservation with our efforts to require federal agencies to follow their own wildlife protection laws, and to improve land management plans to incorporate science-based wildlife protections," he told the Daily Press.

While listing opponents maintain that the grouse population is strong, Clait Braun, the scientist who discovered that the Gunnison sage-grouse is a distinct species, previously said he has watched satellite populations "blink out" in just a decade.

Land managers need to stop permitting the activities that cause habitat loss and degradation, and change the way business is done in key grouse habitats so that human activity is com-

patible with maintaining or recovery the sage-grouse, Molvar said.

"Once we stop the bleeding, the next order of business will be to repair some of the damage that we've collectively caused to sage-grouse habitats, so that numbers of these birds can expand to health and secure population levels," he said.

Listing an animal won't save it; what counts is on-the-ground landowner support, Swartout said. Efforts in Gunnison and Montrose County, which include additional permitting requirements for development in grouse-occupied areas, are "unprecedented," he added.

"We couldn't ask for more than what these counties have done," Swartout said.

If anything, listing the bird can derail such steps by local governments and organizations, which might reason that there's no point in continuing efforts the federal government has ignored, he said.

"We're going to fight this. ... We're on the right course. (Giving up), that's the worst outcome."