

# **Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan**



Colorado Division of Wildlife, Kathleen Tadvick, April 2007

## **Parachute-Piceance-Roan (PPR)**

**Final – April 29, 2008**

**Prepared by Parachute-Piceance-Roan (PPR)  
Work Group**

# **Parachute-Piceance-Roan (PPR) Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan**

**April 29, 2008**

*Prepared by*

**Parachute-Piceance-Roan (PPR) Greater Sage-Grouse Work Group**

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*Literature citation should read as follows:*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Parachute-Piceance-Roan (PPR) Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan informs and guides the activities of participants of the local PPR Greater Sage-Grouse Work Group and others who care to use the Plan. The Work Group came together in response to perceived needs: 1) to learn more about this sage-grouse population for the purpose of maintaining and improving their habitat in the face of potential listing of the bird as a threatened or endangered species, and 2) to develop a framework to guide management efforts and maintain the sage-grouse population while integrating existing and potential land use activities on public and private lands in the area. The Plan was cooperatively developed over a period of nearly 3 years by the Work Group on the basis of listening to each other's interests and concerns and striving to achieve a balance of interests that will allow various activities to continue while being aware of potential effects on the grouse and "working around" the grouse where possible. The Plan and participation in its implementation is strictly voluntary on the part of any persons, agencies, or companies, though any are free to include portions of it within their internal policies or mandates as appropriate.

The Parachute-Piceance-Roan population of Greater Sage-Grouse occupies the mid-to high elevation (7000 to 9000 feet) areas of the three drainages in the descriptive name. The area occupied by the birds currently is smaller than 50 years ago, when adjacent lower elevation country in the Rifle, Silt, DeBeque and Plateau Creek areas had resident birds. The current three year running average for high male counts is 195, which is larger than some remaining populations in Colorado, but relatively small compared to the Northwest Colorado or North Park populations. Over the years, it appears that the PPR birds are increasingly isolated by distance from the nearest populations of birds north of the White River and in the Meeker and Rangely areas. Many factors are thought to be contributing to the decline of sage-grouse populations. Several factors (primarily human activities) are identified as contributing to impacts on sage-grouse populations and their habitat. A number of human factors and natural processes play a role in influencing grouse habitat from year to year and decade to decade. Compared to other areas in Colorado, the PPR area is beginning to experience unprecedented levels and intensity of natural gas well development within the range of a sage-grouse population. Addressing impacts from this activity on sage-grouse populations is one of the major focal points of this Plan, and Was perhaps the most time-consuming and heavily analyzed part of the Plan.

The Plan's Introduction contains the purpose and guiding principles and describes the process used to bring the Work Group together to develop the Plan. A Conservation Assessment describes the biology and life history, distribution, abundance, and genetics of the Greater Sage-Grouse with the best available information known from across its range, and also brings together information that is known about the local population. The Conservation Assessment is intended to be the "building block" providing the best available science for informing development of conservation strategies.

The section "Conservation Strategies" address the primary topics of interest and concern in the PPR area and outline specific conservation actions for each strategy. The strategies specify who is to perform them and establishes a timeline for doing so. Over one-hundred specific actions are identified in the Conservation Strategies. Ensuring the continuing existence of the PPR Greater Sage-Grouse population will be a challenge. The efforts of the Work Group participants to work



together for the grouse are encouraging. This Plan is intended to provide a basis for the group to go forward to manage and conserve grouse in the area while also continuing or expanding other activities that are the particular mission or livelihood of the landowners involved, be they public or private.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. Purpose

This document (the Plan) establishes a process and a framework that will guide management efforts directed at improving sage-grouse habitat and increasing numbers of Greater Sage-Grouse (sage-grouse) in the Parachute Creek/Piceance Creek/Roan Creek area. The Plan's components include the Work Group's guiding principles, descriptions of the environment in western Garfield and Rio Blanco counties, a section on the biology of Greater Sage-Grouse and their habitat requirements, the conservation strategies developed by the Work Group, an outline of conservation actions and an implementation schedule.

The purpose of the Plan is to provide for coordinated management across jurisdictional/ownership boundaries and to develop the wide community support that is necessary to assure survival and improve the sustainability/longevity/vigor of Greater Sage-Grouse in the Parachute-Piceance-Roan area. Designed to be dynamic, the Plan will be flexible enough to include new information and issues, as well as results from previous conservation efforts. It is also designed to answer questions and improve data collection necessary for future resource management decisions.

The possibility for listing of the Greater Sage-Grouse under the Endangered provided some of the PPR Work Group's impetus to develop this Plan. Four petitions that would have affected GrSG in Colorado were submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the species (or a subspecies) as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Three of these petitions were to list all GrSG as either endangered or threatened, and for all, listing the species was found "unwarranted" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005). A court complaint was filed on July 14, 2006, from Western Watersheds Project, alleging that the USFWS 12-month finding is incorrect, arbitrary, and unwarranted by the facts. In December, 2007, the court granted the motion by the plaintiff and the USFWS will be required to review its earlier decision to not list the species. The fourth petition requested to list the eastern subspecies (*Centrocercus urophasianus urophasianus*) as endangered. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found there was not substantial information that listing the subspecies was warranted, and specifically that there was insufficient evidence that the eastern sage-grouse is a valid subspecies or a "Distinct Population Segment" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2004). Regardless of the current status of GrSG petitions under the ESA, or of debate about the details of the species' status, sage-grouse conservation clearly deserves immediate attention by responsible conservation agencies.

## B. Guiding Principles

- Involve the public in the planning and decision process.
- Maintain an atmosphere of cooperation and participation among public land and wildlife managers, private landowners, and other participants while respecting individual views and values.

- Implement conservation actions in a way that meets the needs of Greater Sage-Grouse while also considering and encouraging the maintenance of a stable, productive, and profitable agricultural economic base in Garfield and Rio Blanco counties.
- Make every effort to seek efficiency and integration of efforts, especially between agencies, in the implementation of conservation actions.
- Encourage voluntary participation in Plan implementation and Work Group activities; participation by anyone is strictly voluntary.
- Review, revise and update the Plan as necessary through the Work Group process.

### **C. Process**

Agency and industry concern about the status of the GRSG in the PPR area was fueled by a pending ruling by the USFWS to list the GRSG as threatened or endangered. In November 2004, biologists from the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and consultants representing the natural gas energy companies met in Meeker, Colorado, to discuss data needs and issues affecting wildlife with the rapidly expanding energy industry in the Piceance Basin. It was agreed that there was a severe shortage of data for the Greater Sage-Grouse population. From December 2004 through March 2005, four additional meetings were held in Rifle to plan and schedule spring lek counts and other data collection projects. By March 2005 the group agreed that a working group should be formed by the CDOW to begin a conservation planning effort patterned after the successful work of completing the Northern Eagle/Southern Routt Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan. Conservation Plans have also been prepared for GrSG populations in Middle Park, North Park and Northwest Colorado (Moffat, western Routt and part of northwest Rio Blanco counties).

The CDOW took the lead, provided briefings in April 2005 on the process to county commissioners in Mesa, Garfield and Rio Blanco counties and held public information meetings in June, 2005 at the Rock School on Piceance Creek, the Cowboy Chapel on Roan Creek and in Rifle. The public meetings provided information about the need for a conservation plan and to recruit participants for the planning process. Special effort was made to invite landowners, county representatives and energy-related industry officials to participate in the process. Every effort was made to identify and invite all potential stakeholders to participate in the process. A mailing list was developed and meeting announcements distributed to inform interested parties of Work Group meetings.

Monthly Work Group meetings were held from July, 2005 through July, 2007. The Work Group established a list of issues affecting sage-grouse in the area and worked through consensus to develop a Conservation Strategy (a “map” to guide management of sage-grouse and to provide guidance for on-the ground activities that may affect sage-grouse). A facilitator was hired to conduct the meetings and to help build consensus. This person had no vested interest in the outcome of the Plan and was there to build trust among the stakeholders and insure that all stakeholders had equal input into the Plan. The process was based on the recognition of mutual benefits, which were expressed in the goals, objectives, and actions. The Work Group agreed to use a four step process in designing the Conservation Strategy: (1) Issues were discussed and Conservation Actions proposed at a monthly meeting of the Work Group. (2) At each meeting, the Work Group reviewed and modified draft Conservation Actions. (3) The modifications were

mailed out (in most cases, e-mail was used) with meeting notes to everyone on the mailing list for review. (4) At subsequent meetings the Conservation Actions were discussed, sometimes further modified, and adopted. A tentative schedule was developed to discuss the different issues and the Work Group made every effort to invite key stakeholders for specific issues of interest. For example, recreation groups were contacted prior to the meeting in which conservation actions relating to recreation were developed. The same was done for issues including data availability, habitat quality, grazing, predation, industrial development and water projects. Meeting notices and summaries were mailed to all interested parties throughout the process. Although every stakeholder who expressed an interest was included in the mailing list, many of the interested parties did not attend the meetings for a variety of reasons. However, many stakeholders consistently participated throughout the duration of the Plan's development.

The initial idea was to call this group of GrSG the "Roan Plateau population". This name was not used to avoid confusion with the area described in the BLM's Roan Plateau EIS for development of the natural gas resource on the east end of the plateau, which is currently under public scrutiny and the source of much controversy. The term PPR (short for Parachute, Piceance, and Roan Creeks) is more cumbersome, but adequately describes the area (drainages) in which the birds reside. Another source of confusion is the term "Piceance Basin". Geologists use the term to describe the 6000 square mile subsurface gas field that is found under portions of Moffat, Rio Blanco, Garfield Mesa, Delta, Gunnison and Pitkin counties (Toal 2005). Biologists use the same label for the smaller hydrologic unit, i.e. all the terrain that drains into Piceance Creek and Yellow Creek in Garfield and Rio Blanco counties. In this report, we will attempt to clarify which term, biological or geological, applies to the point under discussion.

The draft Plan was issued in February, 2008 for public review and comment. Seventy-four comments were received, summarized by the DOW and all realistic and appropriate comments were incorporated into the Plan by agreement of the Work Group. A follow up draft was issued in March, 2008. Ten comments were received, reviewed by a "Comment Review Committee" and appropriate comments were again incorporated into the Plan. The final Plan was signed and became official April 29, 2008.

The Plan outlines future monitoring and evaluation efforts. Monitoring and evaluation are necessary to assess sage-grouse population and habitat trends in the area, assist in planning cooperative efforts to improve sage-grouse habitats, continually inform affected parties and USFWS and review additional issues as the landscape context changes. As such, this Plan should be viewed as flexible and dynamic, subject to review and revision by the Work Group as situations change and new information becomes available. As this is written, an "Annual Work Group Meeting" is anticipated for June each year, coinciding with the availability of the latest lek count data from April and May.

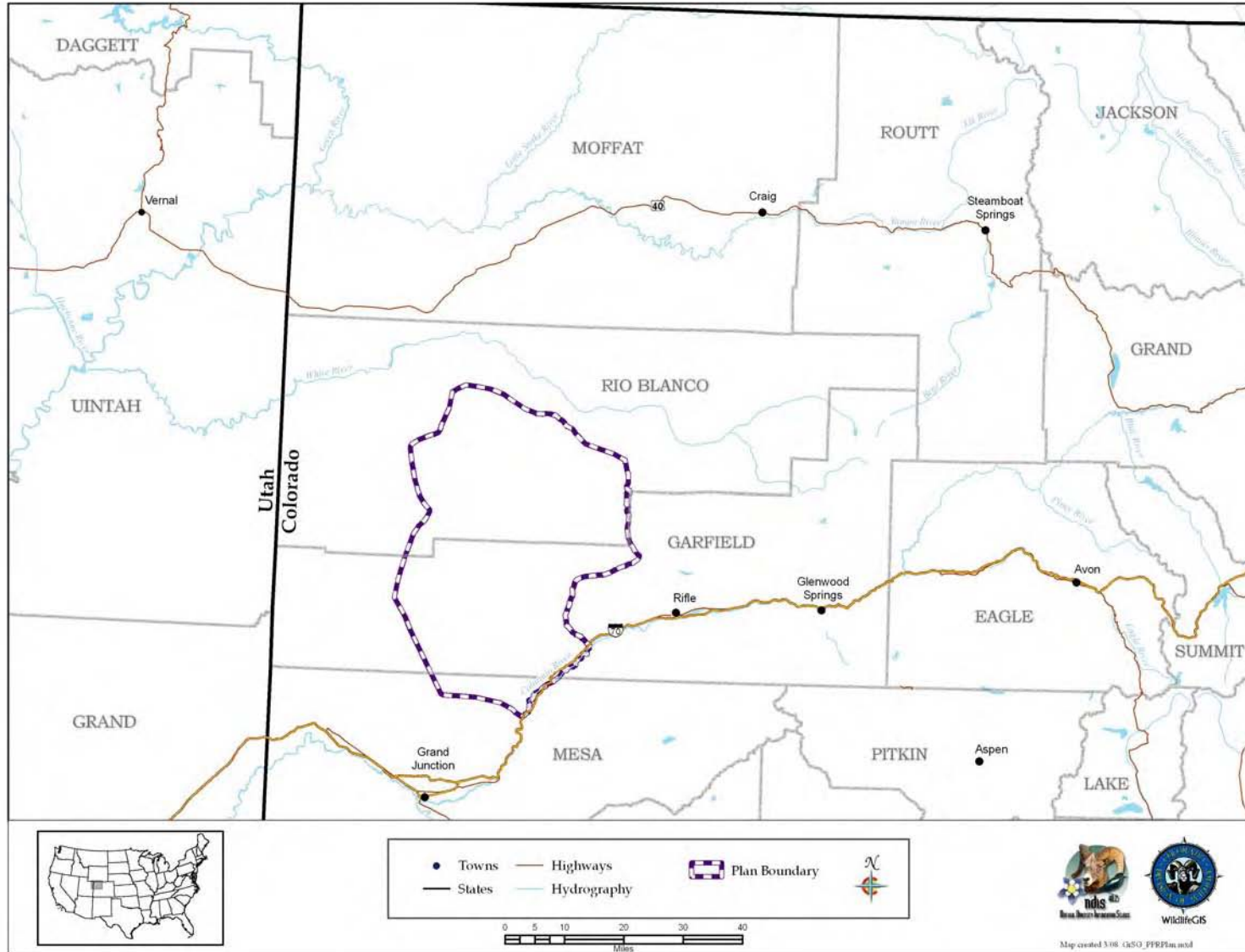


Figure 1. Location Map, Parachute-Piceance-Roan Area