

Sage-Grouse Population Hits Troubling Low; Bad News for Sagebrush Country

Long-term trend could mean species is at risk

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The greater sage-grouse population of eastern Oregon is the lowest it has been in nearly 15 years, signaling bad news for the arid sagebrush country of the Northwest, according to new research from Seattle-based think tank Sightline Institute.

Part of Sightline's Cascadia Scorecard project—a regional progress report on critical trends in the Pacific Northwest—the sage-grouse serves as an indicator species for the health of the “shrub steppe” ecosystem that covers great expanses of eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, and southeastern Washington. At the most recent count biologists estimated that roughly 22,000 of the birds remain in the state of Oregon, perhaps one-eighth of the species' estimated historical abundance.

Though sage-grouse populations fluctuate naturally, recent numbers may indicate an all-time low as the birds appear to be in a long-term decline. Because of uncertainty in population numbers, the sage-grouse may be in even worse shape than indicated by the estimates.

“Although most people aren't familiar with the sage-grouse, it's the canary in the coal mine for eastern Oregon and the West's sagebrush sea,” said Sightline senior researcher Eric de Place, “and right now, the bird is falling off its perch.”

Sage-grouse populations are affected by a range of human activities and natural events: “Fencing and transmission lines give predators the advantage, roads and related motorized vehicle use disrupt their breeding grounds, and livestock grazing destroys habitat for young birds and increases the spread of exotic weeds,” said Brent Fenty, Executive Director of Oregon Natural Desert Association.

The Bureau of Land Management has designated a portion of its federal stimulus money for sage-grouse habitat restoration and the bird is under consideration for listing as a federal endangered species this summer. If listed, it could mean a boost for conservation programs in Oregon's High Desert aimed at protecting the sagebrush landscapes the bird

depends on for its existence. “Low sage-grouse populations clearly indicate that the ecosystem is stressed, boding ill for a whole suite of other animals and plants. We need to take action now to turn the situation around,” said Fenty.

Trends in sage-grouse populations could be worsened by the effects of climate change. “Altered rainfall patterns could increase the spread of West Nile Virus, a disease carried by mosquitoes and fatal to infected sage-grouse,” said de Place.

Sightline Institute is an independent, Seattle-based nonprofit research and communications center that measures progress towards a sustainable economy and way of life in the Pacific Northwest. Information on sage-grouse and other wildlife indicator species, as well as information on six other Scorecard trends, are available online at <http://scorecard.sightline.org>.