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June 29, 2004

Dr. Pat Diebert  
Field Supervisor  
Wyoming Ecological Services Office  
US Fish and Wildlife Service  
4000 Airport Parkway  
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82001

Dear Dr. Deibert:

We understand that based on the receipt of recent petitions, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has issued a finding that listing of the sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act may be warranted and that the Service is currently accepting comment during a species status review. The two principal concerns noted in the petitions by the American Lands Alliance (ALA) and the Institute for Wildlife Protection (IWP) that provided the basis for the additional status review are the perceived lack of regulatory mechanism and lack of formal funding provisions for Local Working Group implementation of State Conservation Plans for Greater Sage Grouse. Those petitions assert that Working Group efforts are subject to bureaucratic inadequacies, that management plans developed by the Working Groups are only advisory and voluntary, and that the actions of the Working Groups defocus the efforts of agencies and harm rather than help sage grouse.

These comments from ALA and IWP wrongly prejudge the efforts of the Working Groups, presage failure and presume to predict the nature of future results of ongoing management plans for the species.

The regulatory mechanism issue and the funding option considerations are addressed in part by the numerous regulatory agency commitments to the goals and objectives of the Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana (Montana Plan) being implemented by the Local Working Groups. Existing regulatory programs and funding sources to assist in meeting those goals and objectives are detailed in discussions throughout Section II of the Montana Plan. Examples of those programs and funding options include:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

- **Habitat Montana Program**, including protection and enhancement of sage grouse habitat (in 1999-2000 this program generated \$5.6M funding)
- **Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program**, including grazing management agreements with private landowners and projects to reestablish native vegetation (more than \$5M in dedicated funds have been used in this program thus far)
- **Landowner Incentive Program**, including sagebrush habitat protection measures such as rest-rotation grazing systems on private lands to enhance nesting cover
- **Landowner Incentive Sagebrush-Grassland Habitat Program** (Sagebrush Initiative Program), including conservation easement agreements prohibiting sagebrush control measures and/or habitat conversion to croplands

Natural Resources Conservation Service

- **Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program**, including funding development of grazing systems intended to enhance biodiversity and to improve ground cover for ground-nesting birds such as sage grouse
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program**, including technical and financial assistance for development of grazing systems to improve native grasslands and shrublands
- **Grassland Reserve Program**, including protection of sagebrush-grasslands

Bureau of Land Management

- **Prairie/Sage Conservation Initiative**, including programs for sage grouse surveys and habitat evaluations

We would like to update you on the local working group efforts underway to implement the *Management Plan and Conservation Strategies for Sage Grouse in Montana* because we believe that these efforts will produce on-the-ground results that truly make a difference for sage grouse habitat and populations.

Under the guidance of an administrative committee of the Montana Sage Grouse Work Group, a contract was let in the fall of 2003 to establish and facilitate three Local Working Groups (LWGs) in the state. The LWGs were formed by identifying and contacting a large number of diverse interests including elected officials, state and federal

agencies, tribes, landowners, the energy industry, and conservation and agricultural organizations.

The groups convened in Dillon, Miles City, and Glasgow, starting in December 2003. These three locations were selected to represent the broad array of issues surrounding sage grouse conservation in Montana. Attendance and participation in each of the LWGs started out strong with a remarkable 40 to 50 people per meeting, and it has generally remained so over the course of the first three meetings in all locations. Key interests in each area are engaged in the process.

The meetings have been and will be structured to:

- provide information about sage grouse and sagebrush habitat to the participants, raising the collective level of understanding
- allow for the collection of observations and knowledge from landowners and other participants
- perhaps most important, to encourage discussion of the specific strategies in the plan and how to implement them on the ground. (Note that some landowners have already initiated conservation measures designed specifically for sage grouse.)

The goal of this first concentrated effort is to have all three groups address each of the twelve major issues identified in Montana's plan: fire management, grazing management, harvest management, noxious weed management, mining and energy development, outreach and education, power lines and generation facilities, predation, recreational disturbance, roads and motorized vehicles, vegetation, and managing other wildlife in sage grouse habitat.

In addition to the work of the groups themselves, there appear to be a number of ancillary benefits from the effort:

- 1) News releases and features related to the LWGs are making the general public more aware of issues surrounding sage grouse and sagebrush habitat.
- 2) A website with a variety of basic information about sage grouse and sagebrush habitat has been established and is available to the general public.
- 3) The process is facilitating communication between federal, state, and local agencies (including county government and county weed district boards), and between various federal agencies regarding sage grouse conservation.
- 4) Federal agencies are requesting and considering the recommendations and products of the LWGs in other related decisions, such as decisions on allotment management and land use planning.
- 5) Landowners are becoming more familiar with existing incentive programs and conservation actions for sage grouse, and we expect that this will result in more on-the-ground actions and positive results for sage grouse populations

We are confident that this effort is building understanding, momentum, and the capacity for changes that will help assure the continuation of sagebrush habitat and sage grouse populations in Montana over the long term. The agencies have already committed funding to the local working group effort, and they are also committing staff time and resources to participate in the local working groups. Landowners are driving long distances, sometimes 2 or 3 hours or more, to attend the local working group meetings at their own cost.

The agencies are working together on numerous ongoing studies of sage grouse and their related habitat needs across the state of Montana. These studies will provide information that will be used by the local working groups to better design and implement actions. A detailed list of relevant studies is included in the “Literature Cited” section of the state plan. We encourage you to include this and information from the ongoing studies in your evaluation. Also please refer to work of G.E. Gruell on sagebrush ecology in Montana.<sup>1</sup>

We believe that the support from the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, other agencies, and programs such as those listed above provide sufficient regulatory and funding mechanisms to allow the Local Working Groups to accomplish the goals and objectives of the Montana Plan. The Montana Plan provides a sound basis for management and conservation of the species within the State, to be implemented by those most knowledgeable about region-specific issues, the Local Working Groups. That plan and the Local Working Groups are best suited to address the unique considerations of Greater Sage Grouse in Montana. The Local Working Groups should be provided the latitude to move forward with their objectives to implement the plan without the unwarranted hindrance of a species listing. We encourage you to consider the unique situation of Montana in your evaluation and to make a final determination on a state-by-state basis.

Attached are summaries from each of the local working group meetings held to date.

Please contact me if you have any questions regarding the Montana Local Working Groups. This letter is being sent at the request of all three local working groups, for which I am providing coordination and facilitation.

Sincerely,

Anne Cossitt  
Montana Sage Grouse Local Working Group Coordinator

Attachments: Meeting summaries from each local working group meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Various publications by Gruell including: Gruell, G.E. 1982. “Fire’s Influence on vegetative succession: Wildlife Habitat Implications and Management Opportunities.” P. 43-50 in: C.D. Eustace, compiler, Proceedings. Mont. Chapt. The Wild. Soc. Billings.