



Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society
Box 4990
Edmonton, Alberta.
T6E 5G8
October 18, 2011

The Honourable Alison Redford
Premier of Alberta
Room 307, Legislature Building
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 2B6

Dear Ms. Redford:

The Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society (ACTWS), a 250 member group of professionals working in the field of wildlife conservation in Alberta, is greatly concerned about the lack of effective action to assure the protection of the Greater Sage Grouse and its habitat in southeastern Alberta. The Alberta government and other stakeholders have long been aware of the gradual, and more recently the dramatic, decline in sage grouse numbers and distribution to the current point of near extirpation in the province. Its current status of Endangered (as of 2004) under the federal Species-At-Risk Act (SARA) and Alberta's Wildlife Act surely warrants immediate and effective action to assure sage grouse remain a valuable part of Alberta's wild heritage.

ACTWS is aware that the sage grouse decline has received considerable attention over the past decade and that management efforts have been multifaceted, including: Ministerial approval in 2005 of the *Alberta Greater Sage Grouse Recovery Plan 2005 to 2010*; establishment of MULTISAR; and development of a sage grouse habitat model, complete with a zoned habitat map. The model and map were created in June 2009 to guide management efforts via a collaborative effort involving: Parks Canada, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, University of Calgary, Miistakis Institute for the Rockies, and Saskatchewan Environment.

One would think that the above should inspire confidence that the problem of sage grouse decline is being sufficiently addressed. However, it is very evident that grouse numbers are continuing to undergo a steep decline. This is evidenced by surveys that show a reduction from 66 males in 2009 to an abysmal low of 13 this past spring. In addition, sage grouse now occupy less than 10% of their original range.

The fact that effective measures are not resulting in adequate protection of sage grouse is very evident in the communique issued in early September by a large group of researchers and management agencies (*Communique from the Emergency Sage-grouse Summit, September 7 & 8, 2011, Calgary, Alberta, Canada*). This group indicated there was a loss in confidence in, and frustration with, government agencies. They also expressed concern that there appear to be unnecessary delays in protecting critical habitat even though there is unanimous agreement from industry and government that immediate action is required. The communique contains numerous recommendations for immediate

implementation that the group felt to be necessary to result in a recovery of grouse population and habitat suitability and quality. ACTWS shares much of the frustration expressed in the communique and strongly recommends that the following actions be undertaken.

- × The *Alberta Greater Sage Grouse Recovery Plan, 2005 to 2010* has now expired and ACTWS strongly encourages your government to proceed immediately to complete an updated plan and incorporate all the currently available information from all sources that would result in successful sage grouse recovery. This would include expansion of the habitat mapping effort to include historic range.
- × Review the relevant terms within the Enhanced Approvals Process that apply specifically to sage grouse habitat and assure they are effective and are being enforced in order to eliminate or minimize detrimental effects of industrial activity on sage grouse and/or their habitat. Factors to consider, specific to reducing disturbance to this very sensitive species are: a) burying of well site power lines to eliminate perches for golden eagles and other avian predators, b) minimizing staff presence by installing remote telemetry for well site monitoring, and c) scheduling maintenance activities on existing wells within critical habitat to avoid key sage grouse timing parameters as well as limit the number and size of service vehicles.
- × Adopt the 1900 meter setback of industrial activity from winter range that was recommended by Carpenter *et al.*, 2010, in their recent study of industrial effects on sage grouse, where it was determined that the decline is the result of disturbance during nesting, brooding and wintering. (***Jennifer Carpenter, Cameron Aldridge, and Mark S. Boyce, 2010. Sage-Grouse Habitat Selection During Winter in Alberta. Jour. Wild. Manag. 74 (8).***)
- × Expand the current efforts by MULTISAR to conserve additional habitat and expand habitat restoration through stewardship actions with land owners as well as encourage cooperating agencies such as Alberta Conservation Association, The Nature Conservancy, The Alberta Fish and Game Association, etc. to secure habitat through purchase within the critical zones.

ACTWS realizes that the above recommended actions would require considerably more staff and funding of the Species at Risk Program in Sustainable Resource Development. Staffing resources could partially be achieved by immediately filling the numerous positions left vacant in the prairie region after Sustainable Resource Development cutbacks over the past few years with staff specifically focused on species at risk. Additional funding must also be made available.

ACTWS fears that actions to safeguard sage grouse that are currently present may be too late to enable a population recovery. Therefore, attention must be focused on effective protection of critical habitat and habitat restoration. It is felt, though, that restocking at this point (the current initiative being undertaken by a cooperative group) may be premature if habitat is not first secured and disturbance is eliminated. On the

other hand, current industrial funding and assistance from United States conservation agencies in this endeavor should be considered as positive, helpful cooperation at this point that may result in birds occupying previously abandoned critical habitat that remains suitably protected.

ACTWS strongly urges your government to take the above recommended actions in order to give sage grouse at least an honest chance of remaining as part of our wildlife heritage.

Yours truly

Blair Rippin
Chair, Conservation Committee
Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society

cc: Hon. Frank Oberle, MLA, Minister, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
cc: Hon. Peter Kent, MP, Minister of Environment and Parks Canada
cc: Hon. Raj Sherman, MLA, Leader Alberta Liberal Party
cc: Hon. Brian Mason, MLA, Leader New Democrat Party
cc: Danielle Smith, Leader Wild Rose Alliance
cc: Hon. Leonard Mitzel, MLA, Cypress-Medicine Hat