

Idaho officials approve plan to protect sage grouse habitat

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho officials approved a plan Tuesday to protect habitat for greater sage grouse on state endowment lands as part of an effort to avoid a federal listing of the bird under the Endangered Species Act.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter and four other statewide elected officials on the Idaho Land Board voted 5-0 to adopt the 82-page Greater Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan that details measures developed by the Idaho Department of Lands.

The plan aims to protect habitat by creating enforceable stipulations in state leases, permits and easements. On private lands, the plan contains voluntary practices.

"In an ideal world for me they would choose not to list" the birds as endangered, Otter said after the meeting. Such a listing could limit ranching, oil and gas development and other activities in 11 Western states.

Otter also expressed concerns about collaborative efforts with federal authorities, saying, "I know other governors are as frustrated as I am."

The state document will be considered Thursday for approval by the Idaho Oil and Gas Conservation Commission.

Federal authorities will then analyze Idaho's conservation efforts as part of a process leading to a Sept. 30 deadline to decide whether to propose greater sage grouse as needing protections.

The Idaho Land Board makes decisions concerning 2.4 million acres of land and is obligated by law to see that the land generates the most amount of money possible over time.

That means trying to find a way to meet the constitutional mandate while protecting sage grouse habitat.

In Idaho, about 10.5 million acres are designated as either core or important sage grouse habitat. Idaho endowment land comprises about 620,000 surface acres, or about 6 percent of that land.

"State lands is a small player," said Dustin Miller, administrator of the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation. "But it's important that we deliver that suite of conservation actions."

The amount nonetheless represents more than 40 percent of endowment rangeland in Idaho. So a sage grouse listing could decrease how much money the state can see from its endowment rangelands.

"I think Gov. Otter is serious," John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert, said after reviewing the document. "And the state is serious."

He said Otter and other officials see listing the bird as endangered as a bad thing.

John Robison of the Idaho Conservation League said the state's plan is an important step forward, and he liked that it contained trading endowment land that contained sage grouse habitat for federal land not considered key habitat.

But he also had concerns that it did not stop or delay energy leasing on the land, he said in an email to The Associated Press.

Along with Otter, members of the Idaho Land Board include Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, State Controller Brandon Woolf, Secretary of State Lawrence Denney and Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra.

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