

Feds: Giant burned area in SW Idaho can be rehabilitated

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The U.S. Bureau of Land Management has the ability to reseed and rehabilitate a giant burned area on the Idaho-Oregon border where a wildfire scorched primary sage grouse habitat and grasslands needed by ranchers, the agency's director says.

"We're going to stay after it and make sure we have a success in Idaho," Neil Kornze said Wednesday in Boise, noting the effort could take years.

The fire earlier this month charred a 443-square-mile area, often fueled by invasive cheatgrass and burning up to 125 square miles in a day. It easily leapt fire lines put down by retardant bombers, officials have said.

Kornze's visit to Idaho comes about a month before the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is scheduled to decide whether sage grouse require federal protections under the Endangered Species Act.

Showing that rangeland fires can be stopped and that burned areas can be rehabilitated to keep out invasive species such as cheatgrass will likely factor into a listing decision. Kornze said his trip to Idaho was partly to show the BLM's seriousness in tackling those problems.

"This is a national priority for us," he said, speaking at the agency's Boise District Greater Sage-Grouse Native Plant Garden. "Our strong preference is to keep the sage grouse off the Endangered Species List."

John Freemuth, a Boise State University professor and public lands expert, said the agency director making a trip to Idaho to discuss the fire and rehabilitation raised the level of awareness.

"Obviously it sends a signal," Freemuth said. "Between the urgency of it and the fact that a lot of the Great Basin or sagebrush steppe is in a deteriorating state right now."

Giant rangeland fires have in general been an increasing problem in the last decade. Experts blame hotter and dryer summers combined with fire-prone cheatgrass that outcompetes native species. Local ire is often directed at federal land managers after the fires.

Kornze on Wednesday defended the BLM, noting that the wildfire on the Idaho-Oregon border that burned earlier this month was as destructive on private and state land as it was on federal land, and that witnesses said it "even the dirt burned."

Kornze's visit follows a visit last week by Steve Ellis, the BLM's deputy director, who announced a plan by the U.S. Department of the Interior to produce massive quantities of seeds from native plants that can be quickly planted to help land recover from natural disasters such as wildfires.

Whether visits by the top two officials in the BLM to Idaho to discuss landscape restoration will influence the sage grouse listing decision by Dan Ashe, the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is unclear.

Kornze said he didn't know what his counterpart at Fish and Wildlife might decide.

"When you find out, let me know," he said.

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