

Ag secretary promises more sage grouse spending across West

By MATTHEW BROWN and GOSIA WOZNIACKA, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — The federal government plans to spend more than \$200 million over the next three years on programs to protect greater sage grouse in Western states — regardless of whether the bird receives federal protections, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said.

Vilsack told The Associated Press that he wants to almost double protected habitat for the elegant chicken-sized bird, to 8 million acres by 2018. He also promised more will be done to limit residential development in sage grouse habitat and to restore wetlands used by the birds.

Nearly half of the roughly \$211 million the government plans to invest over the next three years will go toward buying conservation easements, Vilsack said at a formal announcement of the program in Portland, Oregon. Land under easement can only be used for grazing, but can't be developed for other purposes.

Another \$93 million is slated for habitat restoration, he said, and \$18 million will pay for technical assistance to landowners.

"Landowners are stepping up, they're doing their part, and we're already seeing the benefits," Vilsack said. More than 1,100 private landowners have signed up thus far for the program across 11 states, he said.

The effort is part of an ongoing campaign by the Obama administration to demonstrate its commitment to staving off further declines in grouse populations and to avoid a proposal to list the bird as endangered.

The bird's fate has become a potential political liability heading into the 2016 election. Federal protections could prompt limits on energy drilling, grazing and other activities across the grouse's 11-state range.

Republicans have seized on the issue as supposed evidence of wildlife protection laws run amok. They say it underscores the urgent need to scale back the federal Endangered Species Act.

Sage grouse were proposed for protections under the act in 2010, but they were not put in place because of other priorities.

Estimates of number of sage grouse have varied widely, from 200,000 to 500,000 birds throughout the U.S. The birds once numbered in the millions.

Vilsack said the administration was seeking to balance concerns over the bird's future with economic reality.

"Diversity of wildlife is important. Diversity of economy is important as well," he said in an interview. "We want our working lands to be productive, and we also want to make sure we maintain what's unique to the value of that terrain."

Under a court settlement with environmentalists, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service faces a September 30 deadline to decide if protections are needed.

The future spending Vilsack described is in addition to more than \$400 million spent on sage grouse conservation since 2010. Future spending pledges — and additional money from states, conservation groups and others — would bump the overall tally to more than \$750 million for sage grouse through 2018, according to federal officials.

In Oregon, more than \$18 million has been spent on 178 sage grouse-related projects, officials said. Participating landowners have received assurances from the government that if they participate and invest in sage grouse conservation now, they won't have to face new restrictions if the bird is listed as endangered.

Roaring Springs Ranch in southeastern Oregon has gone a step further. The ranch hired a wildlife biologist and is conducting its own research to figure out which parts of the ranch provide good habitat for the sage grouse.

The ranch also cuts down juniper trees to improve habitat, and uses prescribed burns and fire breaks to stop wildfires that can be devastating to the birds, said biologist Andrew Shields. This year, the ranch saw a 25 percent increase in sage grouse on 250,000 acres of its private land.

"Doing these initiatives from the ground up is a lot more effective," Shields said. "This could be a new way of doing conservation."