

US rejects protections for greater sage grouse across West

By MATTHEW BROWN and MEAD GRUVER, Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — The Interior Department said Tuesday that the greater sage grouse, a ground-dwelling bird whose vast range spans 11 Western states, does not need federal protections following a costly effort to reverse the species' decline without reshaping the region's economy.

The fight over whether to list the bird as endangered or threatened recalled the battle over the spotted owl 25 years ago, where federal protection greatly impeded the logging economy. The Obama administration and affected states have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to saving the species without Endangered Species Act protections that many argued would threaten the oil and gas industry and agriculture.

Tuesday's announcement signaled that the Obama administration believes it has struck a delicate balance to save the birds from extinction without crippling the West's economy. It also could help defuse a potential political liability for Democrats heading into the 2016 election; federal protections could have brought much more sweeping restrictions on oil and gas drilling, grazing and other human activities from California to the Dakotas.

An aide to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said the administration is providing grouse habitat protections on 67 million acres of federal lands, including 12 million acres where strict limits on oil and gas limits will be enforced.

"It's the most complex, the largest land conservation effort in U.S. history," Jewell adviser Sarah Greenberger said. "This model of science-based, landscape-level conservation is truly the future of conservation."

Jewell and the governors of Wyoming, Montana, Colorado and Nevada were to make a formal announcement later Tuesday at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge just north of Denver.

Environmentalists who sued to force Tuesday's decision were certain to challenge it, while industry groups and some Western governors have argued that measures already enacted to prop up the bird's population go too far.

Greater sage grouse once numbered in the millions. Over the last century, the bird lost roughly half its habitat to development, livestock grazing and an invasive grass that's encouraging wildfires in the Great Basin of Nevada and adjoining states. An estimated 200,000 to 500,000 occupy sagebrush habitat spanning the 11 states.

The finding reverses a 2010 determination that the sage grouse were in precipitous decline. Under a federal court settlement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service faced a Sept. 30 deadline to decide the birds' status one way or the other.

Republicans cast the issue as evidence of endangered species laws run amok. Congress last year voted to block Fish and Wildlife from spending money on any proceedings to change the bird's legal status.

House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop said Tuesday's announcement was a "cynical ploy" intended to mask the fact that the Obama administration has imposed limits on development across the West. Bishop was referring to changes in government policies guiding lands controlled by the U.S. Forest Service and Interior's Bureau of Land Management.

"Do not be fooled," the Utah Republican said in a statement. "With the stroke of a pen, the Obama administration's oppressive land management plan is the same thing as a listing" under the Endangered Species Act.

The Obama administration has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into conservation measures in hopes of patching together enough sagebrush habitat to ensure the bird's long-term survival. The administration worked with state governments to adopt their own habitat protection plans, which included local restrictions on energy development and setting aside private and public lands as habitat.

The administration also is proposing to withdraw mining claims on 10 million acres considered key grouse habitat.

Under Tuesday's announcement, sales of oil and gas leases that were previously deferred on more than 8 million acres will undergo a 90-day review before a final decision is made.

At the center of the fracas has been Wyoming, home to roughly 40 percent of the bird's population and a hub of fossil fuel development, with huge potential for wind energy and uranium mines.

Efforts to avoid protections in Wyoming have resulted in a significant impact: No drilling may take place near vital sage grouse breeding grounds during nesting season. Oil and gas wells in areas deemed as core habitat for the birds must be clustered together and directionally drilled from well pads.

Other states have adopted similar plans.

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