

Interior chief focuses in Vegas on cooperation with states

By KEN RITTER, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell says everyone has a stake in issues facing the West — from drought to wildfires to species protection to abandoned mines.

She's urging states to continue working with federal officials to address them.

Jewell told the Western Governors Association on Friday in Las Vegas that adopting rules this year to protect habitat for the greater sage grouse, rather than declare the chicken-sized bird an endangered species, was one example of cooperation.

She also notes the move is keeping lawyers busy fighting over restrictions on mining, ranching and development. Some say it hurts rural economies.

Jewell got a warm reception during her keynote speech.

Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead credited Jewell with never missing a twice-yearly conference with governors of the 19 states in the association.

Mead, association chairman, called security the No. 1 priority for governors of every state, not just the 19 members of the association. "You can't think of security of any individual state without thinking of the security of the country as a whole," Mead said.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval offered prayers and condolences to people affected by the Wednesday shooting that killed 14 people and wounded 21 at a holiday event at a government office in San Bernardino.

"A massacre of that magnitude is something none of us can conceive of or understand," Sandoval said.

The Republican Nevada governor pointed to preparations for New Year's Eve events including fireworks expected to draw up to 350,000 people to the Las

Vegas Strip. He said 1,500 law enforcement officials and the National Guard will be involved.

"We have to be extremely vigilant how we protect our visitors (and) how we protect our residents," Sandoval said.

The governors also talked wildfire. "With the devastation we saw in so many of our Western states last summer, it's important for us to take some time to evaluate how states and the federal government responded to these crises, and apply lessons learned," said Montana Gov. Steve Bullock.

Officials say the cost of fighting wildfires has exploded from about 16 percent of the U.S. Forest Service budget in the mid-1990s, to more than half the agency budget in recent drought-stricken years. Fires this year in Washington state and California were among the worst on record.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter noted the so-called Soda Fire burned nearly 450 square miles this year in the southwest of his state.

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