

Sage grouse plan aims for balance between industry, wildlife

By MATTHEW BROWN and MEAD GRUVER, Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — A cooperative effort to save a ground-dwelling bird has diverted it from possible extinction, federal officials declared Tuesday, as they sought to safeguard the habitat of a declining species while maintaining key pieces of the American West's economy — oil and gas drilling and ranching.

The Obama administration said the greater sage grouse does not require Endangered Species Act protections, walking a fine line with its assertion that economic development and preservation can coexist across the bird's 11-state range.

But critics from each side of the political spectrum quickly denounced the move, concentrating on new plans signed in conjunction with the decision that will guide the use of 67 million acres of public lands.

Industry representatives and some Republicans claim the plans would unnecessarily lock up land from drilling, mining and other uses. Wildlife advocates countered that loopholes in those plans still would allow drilling, further threatening the chicken-sized grouse.

Tuesday's announcement reversed a 2010 finding that the bird was headed toward possible extinction as development cut into its vast but shrinking sagebrush habitat ranging from California to the Dakotas.

Flanked by the governors of Wyoming, Montana, Nevada and Colorado, Interior Secretary Sally Jewell said at an event near Denver that a massive five-year effort to keep the bird off the endangered and threatened species list had paid off. That includes commitments of more than \$750 million from government and outside interest groups to buy up conservation easements and restore the bird's range.

Jewell called it "the largest, most complex land conservation effort" in U.S. history.

"It does mean a brighter future for one amazing, scrappy bird," Jewell said at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

The government will provide some level of habitat protections on most federal lands in the grouse's range, including 12 million acres where strict limits on oil and gas limits will be enforced, Jewell said. The federal holdings make up more than a third of the animal's total range and do not include millions of acres of private land that will be restored or protected, agency officials said.

The species once numbered an estimated 16 million birds. Over the last century, they lost roughly half their 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 birds now occupy sagebrush habitat spanning 11 states.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2010 declared the species to be in precipitous decline. Under a court settlement with the group WildEarth Guardians, Fish and Wildlife faced a Sept. 30 deadline to decide the bird's status.

Criticism of the administration had been brewing for months, as the deadline approached and drafts of the land-use plans emerged.

Erik Molvar with WildEarth Guardians said Interior Department officials had turned an opportunity to help the grouse into "an epic conservation failure." He said exceptions, modifications and waivers within the land-use plans mean protections could evaporate with the stroke of a pen.

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 efforts to change the bird's legal status.

House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop said the decision on grouse was a "cynical ploy" intended to mask the fact that the Obama administration was imposing limits on development across the West.

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

Jewell said the strictest development rules don't apply to 90 percent of lands with "medium or high potential" to produce oil and gas.

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 there have resulted in a significant impact: No drilling may take place near vital sage grouse breeding grounds during nesting season and oil and gas wells in core habitat must be clustered together. Other states have adopted similar plans.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture also has worked with ranchers to improve habitat by removing fences, uprooting invasive trees and buying conservation easements to keep the land from being altered.

Nevada rancher Duane Coombs said a more trustful relationship between residents of Western states and Washington helped make those measures possible.

He said during Tuesday's event that although he inherited his father's distrust of the federal government, he raised his daughter to help him tie markers on ranch fences to keep sage grouse from flying into them and getting killed.

"The sage grouse was going to be the spotted owl for the livestock grazing industry," he said, referring to federal wildlife protections approved 25 years ago that greatly impeded the logging industry. "You know, we saw the way the spotted owl, the impact that that had on the timber industry in the 80s. And that was the fear."

Gruver reported from Cheyenne, Wyoming. Associated Press writers Dan Elliott and P. Solomon Banda in Commerce City, Colorado, and Colleen Slevin in Denver contributed to this report.

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