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## **EDITORIAL: Stop grouching, Norton, about protecting bird**

The Rio Grande has its silvery minnow. The Pacific Northwest has its spotted owl. And now the Western prairie - including New Mexico - might have its sage grouse.

Last month, during the Western Governors' Association meeting in Santa Fe, Interior Secretary Gale Norton warned the bird's numbers have dwindled to a point the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's hand is being forced - again.

It might need to protect the once-abundant game bird under federal law, specifically the Endangered Species Act.

Oh, my!

Imagine, the Bush administration might have to go against all those well-to-do special energy interests, those it has been so good at protecting, to preserve a bird in danger of going the way of the passenger pigeon and other once plentiful birds. Namely, extinction.

No way, not if Norton can help it. Instead, she figures the federal agencies that, to date, have done such a splendid job of protecting America's endangered wildlife can adopt extinction-avoidance "best management practices." These, she reasons, will keep the endangered species list from growing by at least one nagging species, the intimidating sage grouse.

She complained to the governors that the grouse is no spotted owl. It's worse.

"Some say the grouse could become the spotted owl of the intermountain West," she said, and then drove home the critical point with: "But the sage grouse occupies nearly 12 times as much land as the northern spotted owl."

She warned that coal mining, natural gas production, electric transmission corridors and cattle grazing are all conducted in prime sage grouse habitat.

Because listing the sage grouse as endangered would have serious ramifications for all of those activities, she urged those engaged in these economic pursuits to adopt grouse-friendly management practices.

Heartwarming. But a tad late and most likely completely ineffective.

Already, several different conservation organizations have petitioned Fish and Wildlife to list the sage grouse as endangered based on studies, including the agency's own, that suggest the sage grouse indeed is "teetering on the edge or too late," as one science journal article reported last year.

New Mexico energy industry advocates already are aware of the threat and have voiced strong opposition, insisting the industry can manage its drilling responsibly to protect the grouse and other wildlife.

But as some New Mexico ranchers - who now are allies with environmentalists - have found, the energy industry talks a good game of reform but doesn't seem to walk it very well.

Even Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal didn't place much stock in Norton's plan to avoid listing the grouse.

Encouraging voluntary "best management" energy extraction practices "works for maybe half the companies," depending on their attitude, Freudenthal said at the governors' meeting. Instead, he recommended the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Interior Department agency that has authority over most of the prime public grouse habitat, mandate requirements for protecting the bird.

Not on Norton's watch. "What works on one site doesn't work on another site," she said. "We have to do site-specific work."

Not surprisingly, she didn't have much use either for the governors' progressive endorsement of renewable energy, insisting alternative energy "is not the silver bullet" and the nation must increase production of traditional fossil fuels.

Norton should just stop grousing and do her job. If the science supports listing the sage grouse as endangered, it should be listed and protected - by all federal agencies, in particular those specifically under her direct authority at Fish and Wildlife and the BLM.